

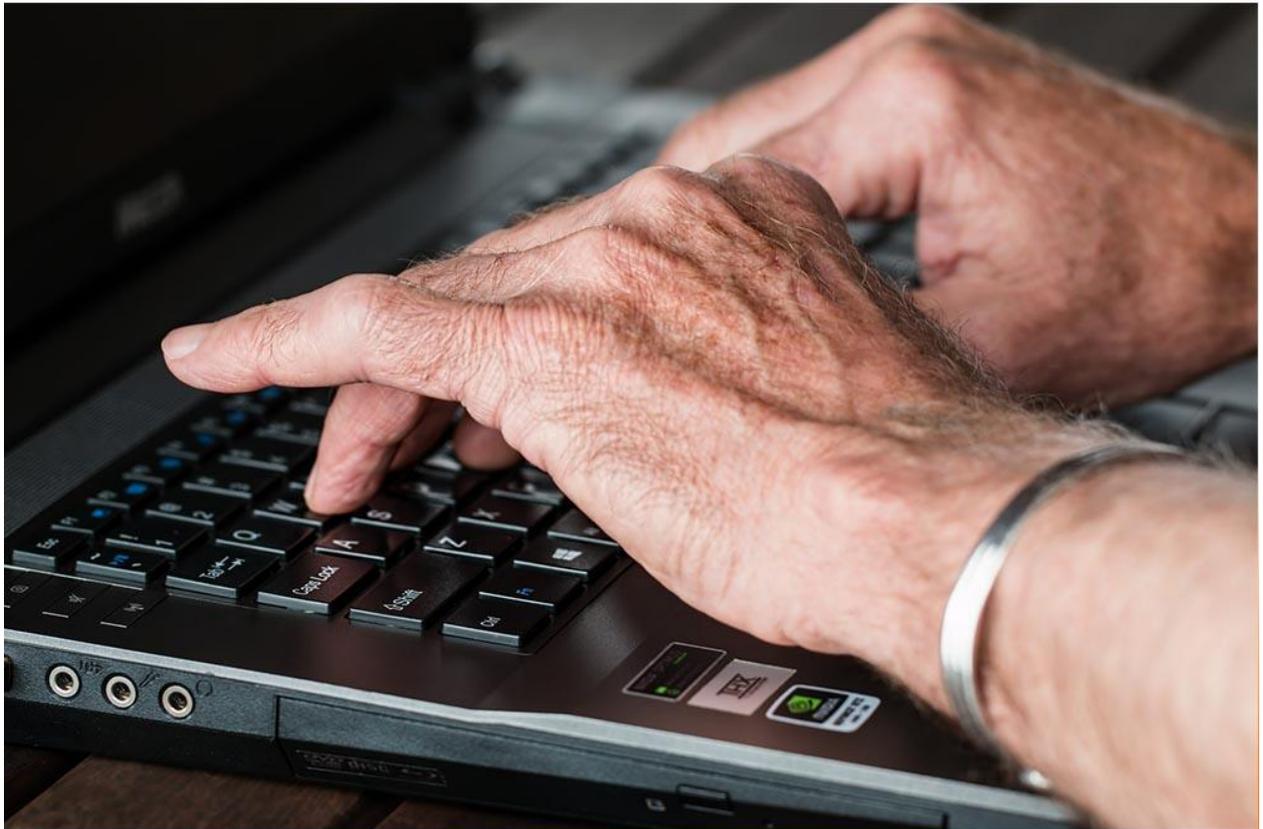
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K M Shahnaz

Post Graduate

Farook College, University of Calicut

Calicut, Kerala, India

Shahnazkm96@gmail.com

A Bakhtinian Reading of Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children*

Abstract

Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* has been universally acclaimed as one of the best anti-war plays of all times. It is his treatment of war and its consequences that makes the play all the more noteworthy. He takes a subject of a very serious concern and trivializes it in the carnival square of the text, subverting all forms of authority and thereby very effectively conveying to the audience the futility and meaninglessness of war at any point in history. In terms of form, characters and language, Brecht goes against conventions and subverts the classical. Brecht, thus dexterously uses a mode of carnivalization under the banner of his epic theatre to undermine all kinds of hegemonic powers and the so called high ideals and art forms.

Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* has been universally acclaimed as one of the best anti-war plays of all times. It is his treatment of war and its consequences that makes the play all the more noteworthy. He takes a subject of a very serious concern and trivializes it in the carnival square of the text, subverting all forms of authority and thereby very effectively conveying to the audience the futility and meaninglessness of war at any point in history. Reading the play from a Bakhtinian perspective unleashes the carnivalesque power that governs the play.

In *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin proposed his concept of carnivalesque or folk-humour. This particular literary mode aims at flouting of authority and temporary inversion of social hierarchies, which in many cultures, are permitted during a season of carnival. This is achieved by introducing a mingling of voices from different social levels that are free to mock and subvert authority, to flout social norms by ribaldry and to exhibit ways of profaning what is ordinarily regarded as sacrosanct (Abrams 88).

War time was usually a period when the higher officials had their power over the common citizens and the fellow soldiers. The Thirty Years War or the war scenario mentioned in the Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* can be viewed as a form of carnival, in which the voices of people from different social levels can be viewed and the power relations are totally shattered and subverted. The play begins by discussing the commencement of war in an ironic manner. In the first scene of the play, a Sergeant and Recruiter roam around in search of soldiers to fight in the war. A sort of resistance can be observed from the very start on behalf of the common citizens. The Recruiter says, "...S'pose I get hold of some bloke and shut my eye to his pigeon chest and varicose veins, I get him proper drunk, he signs on the line, I'm just setting up, he goes for a piss...he's off like a flea with the itch. No notion of word of honour, loyalty, faith, sense of duty..." (Brecht 727). The Sergeant in a helpless manner says, "...it's a job to get a war going..." (Brecht 727).

A period when the voice of officials like Sergeant was considered final and authoritative, the voice of common people like Mother Courage is clearly registered in the play. Thus, the war which becomes a Carnival, celebrates the voice of many as opposed to the celebration of the monotonous voice of those in power. When the Sergeant and the Recruiter makes an attempt to take away Eilif, Mother Courage says, "...Nowt doing, Sergeant. Yours is no trade for my kids." (Brecht 728). War was held in a romanticized notion, where the soldiers who died in the war were considered as brave heroes, who gave up

their lives for the nation. The sergeant asks Mother Courage, "...What you got against military service? Wasn't his own father a soldier? Died a soldier's death too?" (Brecht 729). But in a mocking manner, Mother Courage replies that she does not want to send her son to a "slaughterhouse" (Brecht 729).

Through the character of Mother Courage, a total subversion of Aristotelian concept of tragic hero can be observed. She is not a woman with a noble background, or a person who believes in sacrifice for others. She is a business minded woman, and each of her children was begotten from a different man. War is usually considered a time of destruction and chaos, but Mother Courage celebrates it and makes money out of the plunder. She says, "...let's move on now. 'Tain't every day we have a war, I got to get stirring" (Brecht 729). War is also presented as something which creates starvation and famine. And it becomes so severe that people become ready to commit any crime. Mother courage says, "...In Pomerania villages are supposed to have started eating the younger kids, and nuns have been caught sticking folk up" (Brecht 747). The humour and irony in the line clearly presents the mocking of war and the consistent starvation and destruction it brings forth, which urges the people to commit the hideous of crimes. Moreover, the language of the characters borders on the carnivalesque:

At other times, this carnivalesque impulse takes the form of a mockery of "intellectual" prose and criticism. In such cases, the language of the writer strives to overcome literariness and to get away from outmoded styles and 24 period-bound language by fusing this very literariness with street talk, creating a dialogue between the canonical literary system and the generic languages of various subcultures, making language parody itself. (Brottman 43)

The soldiers who are supposed to be guarding ones citizens seem to be looting from the people. In scene five of the play, we find a soldier saying: "...That double crossing

general only allowed an hour's looting in the town" (Brecht 740). The business minded notion of those in power, who creates war, is again ridiculed by the character of Mother Courage. She becomes a character who wants the war to go on, so that she might yield profit through it. She says, "Peace'll wring my neck..." (Brecht 744). Chaplain even calls her "a hyena of the battlefield" (Brecht 745).

Again, there are scenes that speak about the death of the commander in chief like the Imperial commander Tilly. When the commander is shot dead, the fellow army men, dodges the funeral instead of paying their respects to their superior. They go to the bar and relax. Mother Courage says to the soldiers, "...You scrimshankers, dodging your commander in chief's funeral, scandal I call it" (Brecht 741). Similarly, Mother Courage's son Eilif is punished or executed when he showcased his 'bravery' by attacking an innocent peasant family and leading to the death of a woman. He was praised for the same thing, when he did it during the war period. When the commander in chief dies, Mother Courage is worried that the war might come to an end. But the Chaplain reassures her by saying, "What, because the commander in chief's gone? Don't be childish. They're two a penny, no shortage of heroes" (Brecht 741). Through the dialogue of Chaplain, one can find a mockery of those in power, including the great kings, emperors and even an institution like church. He says, "...A perfect war, the sort you might say couldn't be improved on, that's something we shall probably never see. It can suddenly come to a standstill... But emperor and kings and popes will come to its rescue. So on the whole it has nothing serious to worry about, and will live to a ripe old age" (Brecht 741).

Brecht does not glorify them as war heroes. But he 'decrowns' them through their not so romantic depiction of their death. According to Bakhtin, "under this ritual act of decrowning a king lies the very core of the carnival sense of the world— the pathos of shifts and changes, of death and renewal. Carnival is the festival of all-annihilating and all-

renewing time” (*Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* 124-125). The shifting paradigms of power during wartime are also clearly elicited by Brecht.

The character of Mother Courage allows for one’s idealized notions of motherhood to change. Even when she is disturbed when her daughter gets raped, her cursing of the war was only a flicker in her mind. After a while, once again it is business in her mind. Towards the end of the play, Mother Courage loses all her children and is left alone in the play. But even then, she acts as a typical business woman, whose mind is rooted in business and profits. She once again hopes to make profit from war. She says, “Hope I can pull cart all right by myself...got to get back in business again” (Brecht 751). It is to be noted that all sublime notions are subverted in the carnival square of the text.

The power of the Church as an institution is also subverted through the character of Chaplain. Brecht in criticizing religion follows the dictum of Marx ‘all criticism start from the criticism of religion’. Through the mockery and irony proposed in Brecht’s play, how religion becomes an art of making men drunk in ecstasy in order to divert their attention from the evils heaped upon them by those in power is analysed. The Chaplain says in the play, “...to fall in battle is a blessing, not an inconvenience, and why? It is a war of faith. None of your common wars but a special one, fought for the faith and therefore pleasing to God” (Brecht 733). Chaplain is a representation of the higher power like Church. But diverse voices from different social levels can also be seen in the play, which mocks the power of religion and church. In contrast to the opinion of the Chaplain, the cook believes that the war is like any other war, in which one can find all the cheating, plunder and rape. The situation presented by Brecht is ironical, for the God for whom the war is fought, seems to be not around to help the participants. The religion becomes opium of the people and this is registered through the dialogue of Chaplain: “...God has given me the gift of speech. I can preach so you’ll lose all sense of sight and hearing” (Brecht 742). Brecht ridicules this

statement through the materialistic figure of Mother Courage. She says, “I don’t wish to lose my sense of sight and hearing. Where’d that leave me?” (Brecht 742).

Towards the end of the last scene, when a catholic lieutenant and some soldiers arrive at a peasant’s home, the family seems to be worried about their grandchildren in the town. However, they are not ready to risk their lives to send warning signals to the town. Instead, they start praying. The scene where Katrin climbs up the roof and beats the drum, to make the people aware of the approaching danger is a clear gesture, contrasted to the prayer of the peasants, which can be considered the most intimate expression of religion as a substitute for inaction. The peasant couple in the play symbolizes the incapacity of the religion to find a solution for any critical situations in human life. The mute and arguably weak person Katrin is the one who voices a clear dissent against the harmful system of power and war. Being part of any faith itself makes it dangerous for people. The Chaplain says, “But my faith makes it particularly dangerous for me” (Brecht 734). The system of Church and its power is mocked and subverted through the character of Chaplain and Katrin. The notion of how religion works as an opium and makes people do mindless things becomes evident through the play. The war becomes a carnival, where every single powerful institution and notion is subverted and totally different perspectives are created about each of them.

In the play, by keeping the Thirty years War in the background, Brecht presents the voices of different classes through different characters. Through the character of Mother Courage, the writer subverts the whole notion of tragic hero. Instead of losing her life in the end, she emerges as a woman, who is strong enough to overcome her grieves and move on with her life. Brecht’s very idea of the Epic Theatre is to challenge the conventional theatre that catered to the upper class. Bakhtin explains the nature of carnival by stating that the carnival does not belong to the sphere of art: “[i]t belongs to the borderline between art and life. In reality, it is life itself, but it is shaped according to a certain pattern of play” (Bakhtin,

Rabelais and His World 7). The disruption of the fourth wall in Brecht is actually similar to the blurring of the line between life and art as seen in the carnivalesque.

In terms of form, characters and language, Brecht goes against conventions and subverts the classical. Brecht, thus dexterously uses a mode of carnivalization under the banner of his epic theatre to undermine all kinds of hegemonic powers and the so called high ideals and art forms.

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