

Critiquing Brecht's Epic Theatre Theory with Reference to *Mother Courage and Her Children*

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ABSTRACT: : Bertolt Brecht's '*Mother Courage and Her Children*' is undoubtedly a tragic play but it deviates markedly from the classical norms of Aristotelian concept of tragedy. Brecht wrote this play in accordance with certain principles of drama which were formulated and evolved to suit his concept of the epic theatre. Ervin Piscator initiated the concept of epic theatre. Brecht took this concept of epic theatre and developed it into a full-fledged theory. In order to create the 'alienation' or 'distancing' or estrangement in his audience Brecht deviated from the generic tradition of tragic drama. This paper is an attempt to discuss the epic theatre and to analyse the action and contemplation of the play to highlight the success and the pitfalls of the theory.

Key Words: Episode, Alienation, Plot, Action

I Introduction

Bertolt Brecht is one of the renowned English playwrights, who is known as the untraditional and a totally different dramatist. Brecht's writings show the sound presentation of story, theme and characters. He is known for introducing his new techniques of writing plays in untraditional way. The 'alienation effect' was introduced by Bertolt Brecht and because of this effect broke his play away from the dominant Aristotelian dramaturgy in many ways. This 'alienation effect' was used by Brecht in order to distance the audience from the action of the play. From the Aristotelian point of view the tragedy attaches the audience to see the further action and it enables people to think about the upcoming actions of the play. While Bertolt Brecht tries to detach the audience from what is going to happen. This 'alienation effect' has been achieved by Bertolt Brecht through the unity of narrative structure and unnatural representation of characters, betraying Aristotle's unity of action.

II Alienation and Epic Theatre

The play *Mother Courage and Her Children* is considered a fine example of alienation effect. Here Bertolt Brecht rejects the traditional understanding of drama, Brecht disagrees with the traditional concept and says, "The function of theatre was to provide escapist entertainment" to those with the assumed "ideological belief that the world is fixed, given and unchangeable" (Eagleton 60). In *Mother Courage and Her Children*, we find that the assumption of readers is always wrong. Whatever incident takes place it goes beyond the previous assumption of the readers and audience. Through this technique Brecht wants his audience/readers to watch/read the events of the play in impersonal way.

Aristotle in his *Poetics* dealt with tragedy at length and enumerated six major elements of a tragedy namely- plot, character, thought, diction, song and spectacle. It would be fruitful to evaluate '*Mother Courage and Her Children*' on the basis of some of these elements of tragedy and epic theatre.

Aristotle talks of Epic poetry, Tragedy, Comedy and Dithyrambic in *Poetics* and says that all the four are modes of imitation but all differ from each other in three respects i.e. medium, objects and manner of imitation. For Aristotle tragedy is the best of all as it represents men as better than in actual life, he rejects comedies as they represent men as worse. When it comes to choose between Epic and Tragedy, Aristotle again points out that mode of imitation of tragedy is better than epic poetry and also tragedy can possess all the elements of epic and has unity of action which is actually missing in epic. "Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and whole, and of certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions" (Aristotle 8). Tragedy must have a beginning (it should not follow anything but further action should come out of it), middle (it follows something and something else follows it) and end (it itself comes out of or follows

something for sure but nothing in return follows it). Tragedy is like an organism of an appropriate magnitude i.e. neither too short nor too long and where every part is connected to every other part in coordination and has a role to play.

Aristotle talks of six elements that should be present in a tragedy and if all elements are present, it turns out to be an ideal tragedy like we have *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles. The six important and necessary elements of tragedy are: Plot, Character, Diction, Thought, Spectacle and Song.

Plot is the structure of incidents and is the most important element of tragedy, a tragedy can exist without character but not without plot because it is imitation of action and not men. "But most important of all is the structure of the incidents. For tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality" (Aristotle 9). Plot of a tragedy must possess a certain magnitude i.e. it should be of a proper length and capable to make its place in memory of audience. Aristotle talks of two types of plots: simple and complex. He rejects simple plot as change in fortune of character does not take place and supports complex plot which has either peripeteia (reversal of situation), Anagnorisis (recognition) or both. Episodic plots are considered as worst of all by Aristotle as episodes in it succeed each other without any link or connection. According to Aristotle, a plot should have unity of action (there should be beginning, middle and an end), unity of time (a play should end within twenty four hours) and unity of place (a play should take place at a single place because it's not possible to change the setting on the stage).

When we analyse the play *Mother Courage and Her Children*, we find that the Brecht doesn't follow the unity of action, place and time. The theory of plot given by Aristotle has been rejected because in the plot of the play, there is no beginning, no middle and no end. He has written an episodic plot which for Aristotle was the worst ever kind of plot created by any playwright. The unity of action has not been followed at all because there is no connectivity between episodes. The unity of time has not been followed because the play *Mother Courage and Her Children* doesn't end within 24 hours but takes place till long time. As far as the unity of place is concerned we find that in this play it has not been followed because setting of the place changes from episode to episode.

Character is another element of tragedy and "refers to men's qualities" (Aristotle 9). Since tragedy is an imitation of actions of a good person so a character must be morally good and must belong to upper strata of society because a person cannot relate himself with tragedy of a slave. Character according to Aristotle must have four things:

This rule is relative to each class. Even a woman may be good, and also a slave; though the woman may be said to be an inferior being, and the slave quite worthless. The second thing to aim at is propriety Thirdly, character must be true to life The fourth point is consistency: for though the subject of the imitation, who suggested the type, be inconsistent, still he must be consistently inconsistent. (Aristotle 17)

Hamartia is something which Aristotle relates to character, it is basically a tragic flaw or error which brings misfortune to character but character should neither be too good as it would disgust the audience nor too bad as it won't arise the feelings of terror, pity or fear. Chorus for Aristotle must also be included in the category of character and the songs they present must form a link with plot and should not be ambiguous. It is also important to say that Aristotle believed that tragedy must revolve around a central character: the "tragic hero", on whom the plot is focused and this tragic hero has some certain characteristics. The role of this type of character plays an important role to show a play as a tragedy. In *Mother Courage and Her Children* it seems unclear that whether the Kattrin is the main character or mother courage herself because the qualities of a tragic hero are also found in the daughter of Mother Courage Kattrin. Mother Courage loses first child then also she continues her work for making money and even after losing all three children she remains the same. There is no tragic flaw in this play of Bertolt Brecht. On other hand the Mother Courage in this play doesn't learn from her experiences. As in the opinion of Aristotle, "A man cannot become a hero until he can see the root of his downfall". Here it is important to mention that Bertolt seems partially successful in portraying such a character who doesn't undergo a reversal of fortune because although she loses all three children in the play but she doesn't lose her courage and she decides to start her business once again.

Thought "Thought includes all the effects that have to be produced by means of language; among these are proof and refutation, the awakening of emotions such as pity, fear, anger, and the like, and also exaggeration and depreciation" (Aristotle 21). Thought is basically the speech acts which itself are part of plot and not of character.

When we come to analyse the Bertolt's *Mother Courage and Her Children*, we come to know that while reading readers are not able to emotionally attached with the characters or the story. Thus they don't have

element of pity and fear but from the point of view of Aristotelian concept, the element like pity, fear, anger should be there in a tragedy for awakening the emotions.

Song is peripheral element of tragedy and includes music and lyrical composition. Song is basically an ornament which fulfils the purpose of decoration and a poet must be careful while framing the plot as plot exists independent to song. In *Mother Courage and Her Children* Bertolt Brecht has put seven songs but his purpose is not embellishment neither to give the audience some time to contemplate on the action.

III Conclusion

Undoubtedly Bertolt Brecht introduced the ‘non-Aristotelian’ drama in order to show the new dramaturgical dimensions of his own work. He wanted to show newness in the theatre and believed that dynamics of technical change is essential part of writing. And this is the reason that he himself called his theatre ‘total theatre’. Brecht in his writing develops the techniques and principles of future. He broke the traditional rules of writing play and introduced his new way of writing. The alienation effect which was introduced by him emitted the big impact in the field of drama. In *Mother Courage and Her Children* he not only depicts the alienation effect but also introduces his own ways of writing tragedy. Aristotle emphasizes on emotions and according to him a tragedy must be emotions provoking while when we analyse the Bertolt Brecht’s *Mother Courage and Her Children* we find that he focuses on thoughts rather than emotions. Even we find his non-Aristotelian dramaturgies in Plot, Characters, thoughts and songs. But at some places he doesn’t succeed to maintain a distance with the Aristotelian elements of tragedy. He partially succeeds to go beyond and break the Aristotelian concept of tragedy and its elements.

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