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WOMAN AND WAR IN BERTHOLT BRECHT'S *MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN*

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ABSTRACT—

Women all over the world in all climes and times have suffered both in love and war on account of the negative and stereotypical attitude of man. In both love and war, she is subjected to exploitation. In *Mother Courage and Her Children*, Bertholt Brecht reverses it by projecting Anna Fierling in the new role typical of man. In the play, *Mother Courage* warns them beforehand through songs but as they typical product of male-made society ignores her concerns. Through the character of *Mother Courage*, the playwright highlights the changed role of a woman to wage war against the war.



is exploited by soldiers and commanders alike during the war in the name of religion. Losing all the qualities which are deemed fit for a woman; she adopts masculine characteristics of ruthlessness, aggression and deceit to survive amidst the life-denying forces but she loses all her children one by one on account of the so-called virtues of bravery, wisdom and honesty though she

KEY WORDS: Gender Stereotypes, Exploitation, Feminine Attributes, Aggression, Role Reversal.

INTRODUCTION :

There is no denying the fact that woman has been victims of male domination in all cultures throughout history all over the world. Socially, she is made unequal with man economically dependent on him, biologically she is considered as a symbol of sex, religiously, a source of temptation, physically, weaker and mentally inferior. The anatomists and biologists hold the view that woman is less logical and less intelligent than man is. She is said to be swayed more by emotions than intellect. She is considered incapable of making decisions as and when it is required. It is assumed that men possess the capacity for “reason, action, aggression, independence and self-interest” On the other hand, women are considered “suitable for... passivity, submission and dependence” (Kent 30). She is considered fit for breeding and bringing up children and maintaining the stability of home. These negative stereotypes towards woman have led to disregard her contribution to social development through her productive, nurturing and physical functions.

The present paper attempts to analyze the gender role in Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children*. The play written in 1938 on the background of the Thirty Years War of Europe (1618-1648) foregrounds how women suffer in all climes and times in the field of both love and war due to the negative and derogatory male attitude. In the play, the central protagonist, Anna Fierling, popularly known as *Mother Courage* in the course of war, suffers in various ways at the hands of soldiers and civilians but she never loses courage and hope for life even after she loses all her children one by one to the war. She negates the

gender stereotypical roles by emerging as a strong-willed woman in the face of highly frightening circumstances. J.L. Styn underlines Brecht's double vision and sees Mother courage "at once the image of human endurance and the hyena of the battlefield" (179).

Woman is treated as sex commodity or machine for bearing and rearing children. If she remains unmarried and does not bear children, she is considered unwomanly. If she bears children outside wedlock, she is considered a loose or bad woman. In the play, Mother Courage is sexually exploited by soldiers and is left alone to bear and rear three children—two sons and one daughter. For producing children outside wedlock, she finds no dignified place in the eyes of public as woman's dignity is attached to the institution of marriage.

As The Mother Courage bears three children outside wedlock, she is considered a loose or bad woman whereas the identity of the soldiers who rape her is not revealed except their nationalities. The Swedish Recruiting officer questions the paternity of her children when he approaches her to enlist them in the army. She is not considered competent to give name or identity to her children. Only father is competent to give name and status to children whereas woman's role is limited to producing children. In her life journey, though she suffers a lot owing to negative attitude of the male-dominated system, she succeeds in deconstructing the image of mother, emerging as unconventional woman.

The male-made world forces her to join the war but to satiate the debased manly needs of the soldiers and producing male children to meet the needs of war. For them, she is nothing but a sex object. As a product of the war, she is left with no option to escape the war except that of running a canteen in the war-ravaged area to earn livelihood for her family. Ups and downs in the war illustrate the ups and downs in her life. Her survival is closely associated with the war. War is the only means of her livelihood and safety. The way she earns her livelihood, she is considered dishonest, insensitive, greedy and crafty woman but the fact is that she is paying back the war in the same coin.

The man-made system considers woman as irrational, delicate and timid sentimental against the rationality, toughness, boldness and aggression of man. The Mother Courage subverts the view that woman is weak, dull, indecisive, insensitive and selfish by emerging as a strong-willed woman and warrior who wages a war against the war itself. She is criticized for becoming harsh to her sons as well as soldiers in general. But the critics fail to forget that she is the product of the callous system. To survive against the oppressive system, it is imperative for her to become tough. She is said to be lacking in motherly instincts and concerns but the fact is that she is a caring mother and carries out her familial responsibilities like a true human being.

In the male-dominated society, woman is considered inferior in terms of body and mind. She is considered irrational and incapable of making decisions. In the play, Mother Courage, as a wise and experienced woman, warns her sons and soldiers against the dangers of war, but they laugh off her warning. The way they look at her warning leads them to meet tragic ends. She takes prompt and rational decisions as and when it is required. If she fails to take quick decisions at times, it is not her fault, but it owes to uncertainty of the war times. She is shown hesitant and reluctant to pay ransom to release her younger son, Swiss Cheese from the death clutches of the enemy army but the fact is that she has no sufficient means and money to pay the ransom for his life. Mother courage's character shows all the virtues and weakness of a human being trapped in the existential situation.

Mother Courage is a wise and experienced lady, and is not swayed by emotions. It does not mean that she is lacking in emotions, but she keeps them under control to project herself as a strong lady as per the requirements of the ongoing war. Her concern for her children is revealed several times in the play. When the Recruiting Office wants to enlist her sons in the army, she bluntly tells him, "A soldier's life is not for the sons of mine" (*Mother Courage and HerChildren* 7). When her younger son Swiss Cheese joins the army as paymaster, she tells her elder son Eliff "Happy as ducks in pond. Swiss Cheese is a paymaster with the second regiment, so at least he's not fighting" (Brecht19). She is also very much concerned about her invalid daughter. She tells Yvette, "She's twenty five and still no husband. I have to think of" (Brecht38). She further says, "I promised her she'll get a husband when it is peace" (Brecht50).

Mother courage is a virtuous woman which is reflected in the words of Brecht, "With her oldest son she is afraid of his bravery, but counts in his cleverness, with second son, she is afraid of his stupidity, but counts in honesty, with her daughter, she is afraid of her pity but counts on her dumbness." Brecht 17). Her fear proves right later in the play. In conversation with the Cook, she makes the point that a good army commander is the man who gets victory in the war by virtue of his strategy and not by means of the bravery of his soldiers: "All virtues which a well-regulated country with a good king or a good general would not need. In a good country virtues would not be necessary. Everybody could be quite ordinary, middling, and, for all I care, cowards" (Brecht 17). It means that an efficient commander needs brain to win the war, not brave soldiers.

Mother Courage has gone through the prolonged war and has learnt how a woman body and emotions are exploited in the war and war-like situations. She has no illusion about love and sex. After the death of her second son, the Cook offers her to take her to his native place without Katrin with the promise of life of plenty and comfort. She rejects the cook in favour of her daughter, "There's nothing to think over. I'm not leaving her here" (Brecht 71). She sacrifices her own comfort for the sake of her daughter. In the end, when she finds Katrin lying dead, her motherly instinct becomes evident in the lullaby song.

Mother Courage is termed as the hyena of the battlefield for earning livelihood out of the war and, at the same time, dissuading her sons from joining the army. She is considered unfair, callous and dishonest. She is also presented as insensitive to humanity for not parting with her linen to bandage the wounds of civilians. She is presented to make the most of the situation. She refuses to part with her linen because she needs money to pay the suppliers of the goods. She is also called selfish for thinking of her business, rejecting human values. Not only she is but all other characters become more selfish to meet their needs in the war.

The play is significant both thematically and technically. The sole purpose of Mother Courage is to keep herself and her family safe and alive amidst the-denying forces. As the product of the war, she employs the tactics and strategies like ruthlessness, charm, bribery and guile as adopted in the war. She is "a victim of war, but she is also an instrument of the war and the embodiment of evils" (Brustein 230). The playwright rejects the traditional image by endowing her with masculine traits like callousness and toughness. With these characteristics she emerges more powerful than her counterpart males. But it does not mean that she loses feminine qualities; rather she retains womanly attributes along with new role to survive in the hard times of the war.

The foregoing discussion brings out the view that women are inferior, selfish, inconsistent, sex object, greedy and dull, but all these are social constructs. As Simone De Beauvoir comments: "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (295). It is the man-made society that presents her weak, insensitive, greedy and selfish to establish male dominance over her. Mother Courage like a warrior fights against the oppressive system, and does lose courage though she loses her children one by one. Like a bold mother, she brings up them on her own in absence of their fathers. Her daughter really does a heroic deed by sacrificing her life while protecting the innocent villages from butchery at the hands of the enemy army

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