

**Influence on Bertolt Brecht and the Evolution of his
Epic Theatre Through a Critical Reading of *Mother
Courage and her Children***

Dissertation

**Submitted to the
Department of English, School of Languages
Doon university, Dehradun**

**in partial fulfilment of the
requirements
for the award of the degree of**

**Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in
English**

by

Smriti Rawat



**Department of English
School of Languages
Doon University, Dehradun
Uttarakhand (India)**

2022

Declaration

I hereby declare that the dissertation entitled “Marxist Influence on Bertolt Brecht and the Evolution of his Epic Theatre through a Critical Reading of *Mother Courage and Her Children*” being submitted to the Department of English of School of Languages, Doon University, Dehradun for the award of Bachelors in English, has been composed by me and is my original research work.

This dissertation embodies the results of observations made by me and, has not previously, in any way, formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma or any other similar title.

Signature

SMRITI RAWAT

SLE-1065

Date:

Certificate

This is to certify that the Dissertation entitled “Marxist Influence on Bertolt Brecht and the Evolution of his Epic Theatre through a Critical Reading of *Mother Courage and Her Children*”

submitted by Smriti Rawat has been done under my supervision. It is also certified that the work in this Dissertation embodies original research and hard work of the candidate.

The assistance and support received during the course of investigation and all the sources of literature have been fully acknowledged.

Dr Gazala Khan
(Supervisor)
Department of English
Doon University
Acknowledgement

Dr Chetana Pokhriyal
(Head Of Department)
Department of English
Doon University

Writing this dissertation, has been an intellectually enriching and a challenging process at the same time. This rigorous course of learning gave me a wonderful opportunity of gaining new insights into the topic of my research and further strengthened my affinity for literature as a discipline. This dissertation is the first work of academic research undertaken by me and has trained me to develop original opinions and perspectives related to any theme or topic. This research project has also honed my critical thinking skills.

I would like to extend heartfelt gratitude to my supervisor Dr Gazala Khan for being a guiding light throughout this journey and providing me with this golden opportunity to undertake this research. Words are not enough to thank respected HOD ma'am Dr. Chetana Pokhriyal for her excellent mentorship. I would also like to thank my parents and classmates for their constant emotional support and motivation.

Abstract

Marxism as an ideology and social philosophy has been an actively debated topic around the world since time immemorial. Marx and Engels considered literature an opaque medium which voiced the socio-economic concerns of the proletariat, unlike the other disciplines which were appropriated by the bourgeois and presented a biased picture of an era. This dissertation aims to critically evaluate the genesis and progression of this symbiosis between literature and Marxism.

The purpose of this dissertation is to discuss in detail and explore the practical and on ground implementation of this Marxist literary perspective by German playwright and poet Bertolt Brecht, a pioneer and visionary who fashioned a revolutionary theatre by amalgamating his literary genius and Marxist worldview. Brecht was a radical Marxist himself, and was one of the first dramatists to implement Marxist techniques of alienation or the V-effect, which involved things like actors summarizing the events of upcoming scenes, bringing the audience members on stage to interrupt the play and holding anti-bourgeois debates with them on stage. This was done to alienate the audience from the aesthetic pleasure of the play, so that they focus on the social commentary underlining the play. Other significant features of the epic theatre and techniques of how alienation was achieved in Brechtian theatre have been analysed at length.

A critical Marxist overview of his anti-war play “Mother Courage and Her Children”, has been presented to further consolidate Brecht’s Marxist worldview, and to closely inspect the application of Marxist proponents in his works.

To sum up, the conclusion contemplates on the contemporary relevance of not only Brechtian theatre but even Marxism, as we observe Russia an erstwhile communist country embroiled in a war with Ukraine, and how present media and theatre can take inspiration from Brecht’s epic theatre to spread Marxist ideals which promote an egalitarian and classless society envisioned on the anvils of equality, peace and social justice.

Department of English (Doon University)

Table of Contents

Declaration

Certificate

Acknowledgement

Abstract

Chapter 1: Introduction..... 1 - 4

Chapter 2 : Influence of Marxism on Bertolt Brecht and Evolution

Of his Epic Theatre..... 5 - 29

Chapter 3 : Conclusion..... 30 - 33

Bibliography..... 34 - 35

Department of English (Doon University)

Chapter 1

Introduction

“Brecht succeeded in altering the functional relations between stage and audience, text and producer, producer and actor. Dismantling the traditional naturalistic theatre, with its illusion of reality, Brecht produced a new kind of drama based on a critique of the ideological assumptions of bourgeois theatre” (Eagleton 59).

The year was 1917 and the students of Augsburg Grammar School, in Germany, were asked to write an essay on the famous line of Horace *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* – which translates to : It is a sweet and honourable thing to die for one’s country. The teacher wanted the students to showcase their patriotism, by glorifying the first world war generation, who was dying in French trenches. A young but rather stubborn pupil, had different views and called war a propaganda, and took a dismissive stand. This pupil was none other than Bertolt Brecht, who was later expelled from the school. It was early on in life that Brecht had shown his anti-radical and anti-fundamentalist leanings, as he believed in a critical examination of the concepts of war, heroism, patriotism and nationalism.

Brecht was a Marxist visionary from a very young age, as he struggled to find answers for social conflicts, inequalities, class stratification and the oppression of the lower classes by the power elite. In the 1920s he began exploring the realm of Marxist theories under the guidance of his teacher and mentor Karl Korsch. Brecht’s interpretation of Marxism has been highly influenced by Korsch, which explains Brecht’s primary interest in dialectical materialism of Marx. As influenced by his teacher, he was also a critique of radical-Marxism, and condemned the dictatorial implementation of Marxism in USSR by Stalin. Marxist critic Terry Eagleton in, *Marxism and Literary Theory*, chalks out the evolution of relationship between literature and Marxism, and eventually the development of Marxist literary criticism Chapter 1

of this dissertation deals with an overview of the views, that Marx and Engels originally had about literature. They believed that literature is a prominent medium of understanding history and society, as it is opaque and contains the least amount of bias, as compared to the other social sciences like political science, which is formulated from the perspective of the power elite, and fails to capture the perspectives of the marginalized.

It is only the all-encompassing quality of literature, which deftly captures the ugly realities of any particular historical epoch. As Ernst Fisher has explained, this is only possible because the writer cannot fashion everything out of his imagination, and therefore literary works are bound to be influenced by the prominent ideological currents of the time.

Brecht is known for combining theatre and his political worldview, in the famous *Epic Theatre*, which was a break from the Aristotelian drama and involved Marxian techniques of alienation or the Verfermdungs-effekt, in which Brecht used various theatrical techniques to alienate the audience from the stage. He was of the view that when theatre can be used as a tool for social-mobilization of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie, then why should a writer limit it to merely cater the aesthetic needs of the audience. It for this very intent of his, that his plays are also called revolutionary-theatre. He used alienation, so that the viewers could picture the underlying social commentary that is plays made, and could connect and relate themselves to the scenes on stage.

This dissertation also supplements this implementation of Brecht's Marxist perspective, by giving an overview of the Marxist elements, in his anti-war play: *Mother Courage and Her Children*. American director Oskar Eustis remarked that he considers it to be one of the greatest plays ever written. Critic Brett Johnson has also called the play one of the best anti-war plays ever written. However *Mother Courage and her Children* was scarcely ever performed in America.

This was primarily done due to capitalist America's hostility towards Marxist USSR. Even Brecht was under critical supervision by American authorities, during his stay in Los Angeles during his exile years. In 1947 he appeared before the National House Committee, formed to investigate Anti-American Activities. Brecht proves himself a master of ambiguity when cross examined about his communist sympathies.

This dissertation explores the historical background of the play which is the thirty years war, because Brecht wanted to draw indirect inferences of anti-war sentiments amidst the wake of the Second World war. The characters have been analysed from a Marxist perspective, and the layers of Brecht's Marxist psyche (in his exile years), have been dismantled by observing his worldview while writing the play.

The objective of this dissertation would be to explore the complex yet enigmatic synthesis of Marxism and Theatre, brought about by the genius of Brecht in the form of epic theatre. This formulation of Marxist perspective, happened throughout his lifetime and was experienced and matured by various upheavals like the era of Hitler, the excessive oppression of the proletariat, his exile from Germany and his worldwide travel from Britain to America.

His plays are without a doubt heavily influenced by his Marxist leanings, but nowhere we find the aesthetic appeal being sacrificed to political propaganda. The unconventional beauty and rational envisioning of his epic theatre, has been discussed.

Works Cited:

Brecht, Bertolt "A Short Organum for the Theatre". John Willet. Ed. & Trans. Brecht on Ltd Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic. London: Eyre Methuen., 1978. Print.

Eagleton, Terry. *Marxism and Literary Criticism*. Routledge, 1989.

Horace. ...Horace: the Odes, Epodes and Carmen Saeculare. New York ; Cincinnati [etc.] :American book company, 1902.

Johnson, Brett D. "Mother Courage and Her Children (Review)." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 59, no. 2, May 2007, pp. 281–282., <https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2007.0092>.

Chapter 2

Influence of Marxism on Bertolt Brecht and Evolution of his Epic Theatre

Dominant literary perspectives teach us that great art is to be defined by its sublime character and the ability to transcend all historical conditions. Marxist criticism challenges this outlook and enriches literature with novel perspectives and philosophies of historical materialism, base and superstructure, modes of production, class struggle, multidimensional alienation, and the various ramifications of capitalism.

"In contemporary times if Karl Marx and Frederick Engels are renowned for their contributions to politics and economics rather than literary texts, it was mainly because they had more important tasks at hand than the formulation of a novel aesthetic theory" (Eagleton

1). Therefore, their primary contribution to literature has been in the form of social and political philosophies and discourses that were implemented by authors, novelists, and dramatists worldwide to embody the revolutionary spirit of Marxism.

Marxism and Literature

A young Marx was seen penning down lyric poetry, a verse-drama titled “Scenes from Oulanem” and an unfinished comic novel that is said to be influenced by Laurence Sterne. He often went to the theatre, composed a manuscript on subjects like art and religion, planned a study on Balzac and also a comprehensive treatise on aesthetics. “The originality of Marxist criticism, then, lies not in its historical approach to literature, but in its revolutionary understanding of history itself” (Eagleton 3). This change has been called social praxis by Marx which unfolds according to his materialistic interpretation of history.

According to Marx “social relations between men, in other words, are bound up with the way they produce their material life.” (Eagleton 4). This served as the agent of change or conflict here, propagating the change or praxis. Eventually, at a later date, the “the development of new modes of productive organisation is based on a changed set of social relations – this time between the capitalist class who owns those means of production, and the proletarian class. Taken together, these ‘forces’ and ‘relations’ of production form what Marx calls the economic structure of society” (Eagleton 5). Society never really attains an equilibrium due to the continuous conflict between the forces and relations of production which eventually lead to structural changes in the society. This leads to the eventual transformation of society, for example the evolution from feudalistic to capitalistic as explained above. Marx is vocal in his criticism of capitalism which leads to surplus generation and eventually this economic base impacts the social superstructure by splitting the society into classes, this is the ultimate

breaking point which leads to exploitation of the weaker classes who do not own the forces of production and are left at the mercy of the upper echelons.

Marx has also attacked the institutions of religion and state. He terms the dominant intellectual ideas or the bulk of social, moral, philosophical, ethical, and political ideas prevalent in a particular historical epoch as ideology which is succinctly surmised as follows:

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness.

This constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political, and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness (Bottomore 178).

He accounts that the upper classes who own the modes and forces of production in a capitalistic society are the ones who control the state and bureaucracy to propagate self-promoting agendas and further aggravate the inequality which leads to 'alienation' of the weaker class in multidimensional aspects. Even religion becomes a tool of control and exploitation that preaches what the upper classes want the weaker ones to believe. This can be called a part of the superstructure, which serves the primary function of legitimizing the "n ideology is never a simple reflection of a ruling class's ideas; on the contrary, it is always a

complex phenomenon, which may incorporate conflicting, even contradictory, views of the world. To understand an ideology, we must analyse the precise relations between different classes in a society; and to do that means grasping where those classes stand in relation to the mode of production” (Eagleton 6).

These very aspects of complicated interplays between society and the ideology of a particular period are explored by Marxist criticism within the purview of literature. “Marxist criticism has traditionally opposed all kinds of literary formalism, attacking that inbred attention to sheerly technical properties which robs literature of historical significance and reduces it to an aesthetic game” (Eagleton 19). Literature can serve as the best avenue for exposing the radical agendas and forced ideological biases that were instilled in our minds till now. A summary of the perspectives of Marx and Engels on the relationship between Marxist theories and literature proves that they considered “It would be a mistake to imply that Marxist criticism moves mechanically from ‘text’ to ‘ideology’ to ‘social relations’ to productive forces. It is concerned, rather, with the unity of these ‘levels’ of society. Literature may be part of the superstructure, but it is not merely the passive reflection of the economic base” (Eagleton 8). Even this view has had its fair share of criticism by critics like Ernst Fischer who condemn the idea of literature being free of ideological biases and currents, as the writer cannot fashion work in complete detachment from the social and economic forces of the age in which he lived.

Eagleton tries to state the greater significance of Marxist literary criticism for political and other social sciences, by uniting the social and the individual in the tumultuous backdrops of respective historical ideologies. Marxist criticism encourages one to take up a mediated path wherein one tries to analyze a text from both the above-mentioned contesting viewpoint and arrive at a well-formed conclusion. It is only literature out of the other social sciences that present ideology realistically without losing its central aesthetic nature.

He supports this argument by discussing another concept of 'sociology of literature and adds that:

sociology of literature which concerns itself primarily with the means of literary production, distribution and exchange in a particular society – how books are published, the social composition of their authors and audiences, levels of literacy, the social determinants of taste. It also examines literary works for their sociological relevance, raiding literary works to abstract from them themes of interest to the social historian. (Eagleton 3).

A prominent German Marxist, and a close friend of Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin discussed that it was Brecht who with his Epic Theatre implemented this sociology of literature and revolutionized it. Brecht introduced a gripping genre of drama that was a direct attack upon the hypocrisy of the privileged bourgeois class, he achieved this by employing tools like the alienation effect. A detailed discussion on these tools and epic theatre follows in the upcoming subsections.

Evolution of Marxist Influence on Brecht

“Eugene Berthold Friedrich Brecht was born on 10 February 1898 at Augsburg where his father was an employee and later director of the Haindl paper mill. His life falls into three distinct phases as demarcated by his forced exile from his native Germany during the Hitler years” (Brecht, i). In 1908, Brecht is sent to Augsburg Grammar school where he is an indifferent pupil and a rebel in his quiet way, he was almost expelled for taking a dismissive, anti-patriotic stand when setting an essay with the title -It is a rather sweet and honorable thing to die for your country.

In 1917 at Munich University, Brecht develops interest for theatre, and samples the bohemian literary life of the city. In 1918 he is conscripted and serves as a medical orderly, though he still lives at home. He writes *Baal*, which is an outrageous, anti-bourgeois and flamboyant dramatic tribute to natural drives and anarchic sexuality, and does theatre reviews for the local newspaper. In 1919 Brecht writes *Drums in the Night*, a play that explored dimensions like class struggle and the disillusionment that haunted millions after World War I.

Brecht visits Berlin in mid-1920 and gets himself acquainted with known literary circles, comprising of well-known Marxists of the time like Fritz Sternberg, Alfred Doblin, Hans Eisler and Erwin Piscator with whom he had planned a Marxist play. “The unfinished play *Wheat* required knowledge about the supply and sales of wheat, which he could not fathom from the brokers” (Kellner). who were not able to comprehend the economic and commercial workings of the grain market. This inspired him to get familiar with the economic discourses of class distributions, which led him to read up on Marx. However, it was Karl Korsch who was one of the first Marxists to profoundly impact Brecht’s Marxist worldview. Brecht called him my Marxist teacher, whose anti-Leninist and anti-Stalinist version of Marxism was also appreciated and propagated by Brecht.

The primary influences on Brecht’s Marxist worldview are Walter Benjamin and more importantly Karl Korsch. Benjamin was more involved with the implementation of Marxist theories in Brecht’s experimental epic theatre, and was a constant critic and guide to him. While Korsch was involved with the initial days of Brecht’s Marxist discovery, Benjamin was a contributor in his mature phases.

In the late 1920s, Korsch was a prominent German Marxist and one of the most active fighters in the movement. In 1918, after Germany was defeated in “World War I”, Kaiser fled Germany and the “Social Democratic Party was asked to form a government. They set up a

socialization committee to study the socialization of the industry, the Social Democratic Party soon lost power and its work was abandoned, but Korsch established a committee to socialize the coal industry. Tired of the ineffective reformism of the Social Democratic Party, Korsch joined the Independent Socialist Party in 1919 and the Communist Party in 1920.

He was the Minister of Justice of the short-lived Left Union in Thuringia in 1923, became the editor of the Communist Magazine Internationale, served on the central committee of the German Communist Party, and represented the Communist Party in the Reichstag. Korsch was one of the first victims of Stalinism in 1926 and was expelled from the movement to which he was deeply committed and faithfully served throughout his youth. Thereafter he led the leftist opposition against Stalinism, developing one of the toughest criticisms of the Soviet Union. He worked with various left-wing opposition groups to teach Marxism at the Karl Marx School and a small research group in Berlin. Brecht participated in these courses and Korsch's research group, establishing his lifelong friendship with Korsch" (Kellner).

Critics have observed that the Korschian version of Marxist theories finds expression in the works of Brecht, and by this we can gauge the depth of impression that Korsch had on Brecht. For Korsch, the Marxist dialectic theory is a rather critical dialectic that critiques and seeks to transform the existing bourgeoisie order. "The Marxian dialectic sees reality as a process of continuous social flux" (Kellner). It is particularly focused on the conflicts that would bring about a radical transformation of the working class and emancipate them. It is for this reason that Korsch and Brecht attacked Stalin for his radical and anti-socialist methodology of implementing Marxism in USSR.

Brecht as a Self-Proclaimed Marxist

In 1924 Brecht directs Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*, and partially uses techniques of his renowned 'Alienation-effect'- which involved revealing plot summaries before scenes were enacted and a jarring full white face make-up which indicated fear. All these efforts were made to critically detach the audience as well as the actors from the aesthetic quality of the play. In 1927 he works with Piscator, who is the pioneer of communist political theatre in Germany, on a dramatization of Hasek's novel *The Good Soldier Schweik*

In 1928 his play *The Threepenny Opera*, opens at the theatre and becomes the hit of the season. It is a socialist critique of the capitalist world, wherein Brecht provocatively transferred bourgeois manners to a Soho criminal setting. In his notes Brecht states that he accords primacy to theatre over dramatic literature because theatre and its apparatus takes upon the difficult role of dissociating audience from the aesthetic quality of the literature, and forces the audience to isolate themselves from this enjoyable experience and jolts them to the reality of capitalistic exploitation and inequality.

In 1930 his learning/didactic play, *The Measures Taken*, is given first performance in Berlin. It created stirs as the bureaucracy and other authority figures felt threatened by the technique employed by Brecht. The play involves revolutionaries who are compelled to sacrifice a comrade to the bludgeoning revolution, at this junction the actors are to discuss this scene with the audience, directly involve them into the action of the play and indirectly into the revolution. It is imperative to note that at a radical Hitler dominated time period, this move to subtly make people question the blind extreme nationalism, that operated as a kill machine for the working classes while profited the bourgeoisie class. Brecht introduced the Marxist concept of Democratic Socialism, and made people realize the power of having a say in the decision making and ultimately of having a choice. He wanted people to learn that there was no correct or incorrect proposition here, rather the power which communism gave the masses by

integrating them into policy and governance issues, was the actual purpose of Brecht. He also brings in the futility of wars and mocks the fake bravado of common men ready to lay their lives for their country, by doing so he attacks the ideology of the present Hitler time that made people feel indebted to the supreme leader and legitimized his oppressive dictatorial tactics.

The premiere of "The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahogany" causes a turmoil as the Nazis expressed criticism at Leipzig. In his notes for the play he tabulates the differences between the traditional dramatics and the new Epic theatre at which he was aiming. In 1935 he is stripped of his German citizenship, and he attends the International Writer's Conference in London. His poetry is strongly anti-fascist. In 1939 he finishes writing "*Life of Galileo*" and "*Mother Courage and Her Children*". In 1941 he completes "*Mr. Puntilla*", "*The Good Person of Schezwan*" and "*The Resistable Rise of Arturo Ui*". He moves to Santa Monica with his family. In 1949 *Mother Courage* opens at the Deutsch's Theatre with his wife Helen Weigel in the title role. The Berliner Ensemble, Brecht's own company is formed. In 1956 Brecht died of a heart attack on 14 August 1953.

When Engels stated that literature is probably the only source of historical materialism which lends voice to the most marginalized subsections, who only find pity and exclusion in other social sciences. Brecht's portrayal of the character of Courage is an excellent example of this, as he focuses only on the working class microcosm throughout the play. The funeral of General Tilly is also presented from the rather petty looking perspectives of the regular characters haggling for things like wood. Towards the end of the scene Courage says that the moment of her daughter's disfigurement and not Tilly's death, is the historical event that matters, as her daughter might never find a husband. This literary technique makes the bourgeoisie look petty, and reminds us how the most basic and universal wants of the proletariat especially women are overlooked and ridiculed, in a bourgeoisie imposed capitalistic setup, the

backdrop of war in reference to the play in particular. The war is a capitalist killing machine according to Brecht that dehumanizes virtues in humans and makes them fallacies, and how it only ever benefits the rich, that is the bourgeoisie.

Brecht's works are essentially political and even pessimistic at times, owing to their brutal realistic nature. His plays never sound like Marxist propaganda pieces and in their entirety are more like social, political and philosophical lessons enthused with sublime literary aesthetics that explore the lives of individual characters limited and constrained by social conditions. He forces the reader to think about the underlying social conflict, and tries to inspire a revolution by his epic and didactic theatre.

“After the rulers have spoken, the ruled will speak”. - Brecht

Brecht's Epic Theatre

For a Marxist, things are of value and depth only when they are considered in their wider ranging social context. It was also true for Brecht who could not separate political philosophy from its social discourse. Being a dramatist, he utilized his craft to express a highly charged version of social communism through a new experimental form of theatre called the- Epic theatre, which he later preferred to call Dialectic Theatre. From the very beginning of his career Brecht had been vocal about his distaste for the 'culinary' theatre, which was based on the rules of Aristotelian drama. Culinary theatre served the sole purpose of delighting the senses and pleasing the aesthetic cravings of the audience. However, Brecht wanted theatre to impinge on the minds of the society and coerce them into critical thinking about the events happening on the stage. He wanted to transform theatre from a palace to allusions to a homely and inviting mansion of insights.

“Brecht’s experimental theatre changed not merely the political content of art, but its very productive apparatus. Dismantling the traditional naturalistic theatre, with its illusion of reality, Brecht produced a new kind of drama based on a critique of the ideological assumptions of bourgeois theatre” (Eagleton 59).

When Brecht became engrossed in Marxist dispositions, his aim was to transform the society with his plays and inspire the revolution, that was even envisioned by Marx, among the proletariat. He could not be direct in his anti-capitalist and anti-bourgeois sentiments, as he remained a constant target of Hitler’s Nazi force for his anti-war and anti-dictatorship agenda. Therefore, he took up theatre as the revolutionary medium and produced the concept of Epic Theatre. “He first tabulated his ideas on epic theatre in his book *Notes on the Opera The Rise and Fall of City of Mahogany* where he differentiates between the dramatic theatre and epic theatre in a list” (Brecht xxix). The table given below was formulated by Brecht himself in his essay “*The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre*” which can be found in a treatise on Brecht’s theatrical perspectives, that has been translated by John Willett.

Table 1: Differences between dramatic and epic theatre as created by Bertolt Brecht

DRAMATIC THEATRE	EPIC THEATRE
• Emphasis on “plot”	• Emphasis on the “Narrative”
• Audience merely spectates	• audience observers
• audience is not motivated for social action	• audience motivated for social action
• produces sensory experience	• forces him to take decisions

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • spectator is only passively involved 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • he is actively made to picture the real world
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • vaguely suggests the motives of the writer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • clearly presents the motives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • feelings of the audience are numbed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feelings deliberately ignited
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • spectator personally and spiritually draws in the experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • audience is detached and observes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • individuality of human is mostly ignored 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • individuality and identity is central
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “unalterable” humans with their follies are exposed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • human is alterable and has the power to alter the world
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • connected scenes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each scene is standalone and complete in itself
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simplistic “growth” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More like a mosaic of events
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vertical and horizontal progression 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Progression is undulated

Source: “Brecht, Bertolt. *Mother Courage and her Children*, xxix”

The dichotomy between these two theatres is brought to life by, Brecht’s revolutionary Marxist stance as he uses the ‘Alienation-effect’ to create a narrative that utilized the Marxist theory of alienation, to bring the spectators intellectually closer to the discourse of the social conflict and contradictions caused by capitalism and class divides. “to alienate the audience from the performance, to prevent it from emotionally identifying with the play in a way which paralyses its powers of critical judgement” (Eagleton 61).

Although this may sound paradoxical and far-fetched, it was efficiently achieved by Brecht through the staging of his plays in varying magnitudes. His aim was to alienate audiences from the seemingly less important aesthetic part of the plays, for doing these various theatrical techniques were applied, which have been discussed at length in the latter part of this chapter.

A prominent example of these can be the banners in the auditorium for the production of *Drums in the Night*, which told the audience not to gawp so romantically.

However, Brecht never wanted to subjugate emotions that a play makes the audience experience to their rational faculties, he only wanted to prioritize appealing to their critical worldviews, so that they can question status quo:

The play itself, far from forming an organic unity which carries an audience hypnotically through from beginning to end, is formally uneven, interrupted, discontinuous, juxtaposing its scenes in ways which disrupt conventional expectations and force the audience into critical speculation on the dialectical relations between the episodes. Organic unity is also disrupted by the use of different art-forms – which refuse to blend smoothly with one another. (Eagleton 61)

When Epic Theatre was implemented in Germany certain fundamental changes were observed in the surroundings and very aesthetic of theatre itself

Firstly, theatre was becoming didactic and instructive. In his essay “On Experimental Theatre” Brecht asked, “How can theatre be entertaining and at the same time instructive? How can it be taken out of traffic in intellectual drugs and transformed to a place of insight”. He believed that traditional theatre was merely supplying comforting illusions to the spectators by portraying the world in a caricatured version. He wanted to change this by making theatre didactic.

Secondly, contemporary issues found mention without being romanticized. Themes of war, unemployment, inflation, class struggles, political tussles, family, womanhood, motherhood, futility of religion in crisis, the capitalistic decay of Germany, disguised exploitation of the proletariat etc. found crude and unromanticized mentions in the plays of epic theatre.

Thirdly, theatre became a melting pot of various disciplines, since epic theatre dealt with themes that impacted and directly involved the proletariat, it was imperative for Brecht to include insights from disciplines like history, economics, sociology, political science and even psychology. Characters contained depth and a certain complexity to them, and could be observed from a psychoanalytical lens. Similarly themes like war were dealt in complete totality as Brecht explains in his plays how the capitalistic economics play out and the bourgeoisie masters profit from the misery of the proletariat.

Fourthly, the use of music in epic theatre further alienated audiences by jolting them out of any aesthetic stupor. The music and lyrics cook up a sort of dark and sinister paradox, that makes the spectator feel out of place and slams him back to grim reality. For example, the song 'Mack the Knife', by Kurt Weill and Brecht, from *The Threepenny Opera*, has really sinister and dark lyrics but a jubilant and upbeat musical score.

Anti-Illusionistic Devices in Epic Theatre

By using various anti-illusionistic devices Brecht keeps the audience on their metaphorical toes, from being mere passive watchers they become active participants (Brecht on Theatre).

First is the use of chapter headings that informed the reader what was going to happen next. Brecht was familiar with this kind of a thing from the inter-shot titles in silent films of the 20s era, and he had been using scene summaries in a random manner from way before. For *Mother Courage and Her Children*, he devised a consistent title set consisting of a series of summaries projected on the screen or displayed on the banner before each scene. These summaries did not just show the content, but also identified the date and place of the scene and associated them with the story, that is, to the great events which Brecht chose not to show but wanted his characters carry the weight of, on their backs.

Secondly, while the audience at a Brecht production were reading the projected summaries on to screens between the scenes, they were kept “deliberately aware of the tops of the properties moving behind the eight feet high Brechtian half-curtain-causing commotion which ran across the stage on a wire, as the stage crew set up the next scene. Above that they saw the lights hanging from a grid above the stage, and all this notoriously reminded them that they were being exposed to the techniques of Brechtian theatrical presentation, so that they would apply their critical faculties to the events they were seeing” (Brecht xxxii). Illusionism in theatre had concealed all the unappealing mechanical backstage working and chaos from the audience to give them a perfect escapist experience. On the contrary “Brecht’s bare grey stage had merely enough scenery and properties to show where the scene was taking place” (Brecht xxxii). These techniques were effective because they came as a shock to the spectators who expected a realistic imitation of the outside world, as they had seen in traditional theatres.

The blinding bright white light was used for every scene, irrespective of whether it was daytime or morning, drilled in the anti-illusionist realism more.

Thirdly, Brecht used slide and film projections, technology, advanced sound and lighting etc. to establish a scientific theatre and further bridge the gap between the critical perspectives of the audience and his Marxist dispositions.

Actors in Brechtian Epic Theatre

Brecht believed that a good actor must not get carried away with his role or carry the audience to an illusion which makes them believe that they are watching a real event. The actors of Brecht’s plays realised that, their characters were the part of a larger system that the play wanted to expose, also epic theatre plays always had a social function and were instructive in

nature. For this the actors were told by Brecht to not immerse themselves completely into their roles, because otherwise the V-effect would not function and the play would serve a mere aesthetic purpose. Brecht asked his actors to add he said or she said before speaking their lines, to achieve even more detachment. Another noteworthy point is the renunciation of empathy. Neither the actor nor the audience should empathize with the characters.

“Marx and Engels were themselves alive to this mystification of art, in their comments on Eugène Sue in *The Holy Family*: they see that to divorce the literary work from the writer as living historical human subject is to enthuse over the miracle-working power of the pen” (Eagleton 64). Brecht wrote the story(fable) as an interconnected train of various nodal points of action, known as ‘gestus’ which allowed the actors to demonstrate the social integration and attitudes of a character rather than displaying their emotional or psychological disposition. It also helps in clearly putting across the author’s point of view and breaks down the fourth wall, between the actor and the audience.

Brecht has used various names for his epic theatre and has employed various concepts to execute it, however in a nutshell we can conclude that Brecht’s intent was always to make his audience active participants and the foremost critics of not only the aesthetic quality of his plays, but more importantly of the social realities in which they lived. These complex social and physical mechanisms Brecht set in motion on stage for the spectators to be transformed individuals not just intellectually but also critically.

A Marxist Overview of Brecht’s Play: *Mother Courage and Her Children*

Brecht has given expression to the Marxist idea of historical materialism, through this anti-war play which condemned the idea of Hegelian idealism and eventually propagated that it is

ultimately history and not mere philosophical realm of ideas that leads to the conception of economic/material base of the society, and goes on to influence the ideological superstructure. This play is also a bulwark of Brecht's Epic theatre philosophy, which in itself a revolutionary social product, "firstly which gives a new meaning to the idea of form; secondly is redefinition of the author, and the third is a redefinition of the artistic product itself" (Eagleton 62).

In selecting his subject, with respect to the historical background of the play, Brecht was highly influenced by the destruction and exploitation of the weaker classes caused by the bloodshed of the first world war, which was still relatively fresh in people's memories as he wrote, but chose to set the play in the Thirty years war. His choice of a distant historical period is a technique towards a more detached and indirect presentation of Marxist ideals on the stage. This is in opposition from his earlier style which mirrored the propagandist directness of Piscator.

While a majorly Christian Europe was divided into Catholic and Protestant states by the Reformation. This period was full of political upheavals and the chaos eventually led to the thirty years war (1618-1648). In the play, Brecht has used the Swedes as a representation of Protestants, while Catholicism is being presented by the Imperial Army. The pretext of religion has been used to highlight the futility of war, through the character of the Chaplain.

In 1629, Gustavus Adolphus took up the cause of protecting Protestantism in Germany, as Mother Courage remarks in scene 3:

"He set out by just trying to protect Poland against the bad people, then it started to become a habit till he ended up protecting the whole of Germany" (Brecht 23).

This tries to denote that how Brecht is mocking the course of action followed by the bigger officials in the war, who stretched the war to infinity, just to make it function like a capitalist machinery and exploit the proletariat. The war started to save the cause of religion, and as Marx had said that religion is a part of the superstructure which institutionalizes the ideological currents of a particular historical epoch. This leads to an opium like effect and laypeople are led to support the war, without realising that it was eventually killing them off.

Only shrewd capitalists like Mother Courage are able to grasp the paradoxical situation, as she lends much more priority to the economic base rather than the currents of ideology of the superstructure, she remarks:

"Who's been defeated? Look victory and defeat ain't bound to be same for the big shots up top as for them below, not by no means. As a rule you can say that victory and defeat come expensive to us ordinary folk. Best thing for us is when politics get bogged down solid"
(Brecht 33).

It is critical to note that Brecht has given voice to the lower classes, the proletariat in the play, and has completely centred the plot and the action around them. Influential figures like the Kaiser or General Tilly are only given passing references. Even the details of the war course are not given much priority because Brecht is not interested in how they run the war, but in rather the way the war affects the people at the bottom rung, the peasants, the soldiers, the villagers etc. "Minor characters in the play are given only a profession or a generalist description rather than a proper name: we have peasants, numerous soldiers, generals, clerks, captains, officers, and even chaplains" (Brecht xxvi). In the very beginning of the play we see the Sergeant and the Recruiting officer freezing in the dreary fields, complaining about how the

people were not honourable any more since they were not ready to enlist in the war and die for their country or religion.

“Recruiter: No notion of word of honour, loyalty, faith, sense of duty. This place has shattered my confidence in the human race, sergeant.

Sergeant: It’s too long since they had a war. Peace that’s just a mess, takes a war to restore order” (Brecht 4).

A central theme of the play is Brecht trying to portray war as a capitalist system from which Mother Courage tries to benefit. However she forgets that, she herself is a part of the proletariat, and therefore the war will never give her profits without taking something away from her. It is her children, who can be seen as her social capital, which is spent throughout the play. She tells the cook, that is for her children that she is working, but in a paradox, she has to eventually move on with life, even after loosing them.

“Like the war to nourish you?

Have to feed it something too” (Brecht 13).

This also shows how the economic base affects the familial relations in a capitalist society, as we see how Mother Courage is alienated from her children, as she pursues gains in the economic rat race. Her qualities of motherhood are dehumanized by the war, which is indirectly a capitalist setup. Virtues become fatal flaws in this unjust system, as Eilif is killed for his bravery, Swiss Cheese pays the price for his honesty while Katrin is slain by the soldiers for her compassion. Surprisingly, Mother Courage who comes off as unnaturally selfish survives the war, and moves on with her life. Her capitalist ambitions of making money off of the war, destroyed everything for her and unfortunately, she still has to continue to feed this war, to go on in life.

After watching the portrayal of Mother Courage's character by the extraordinary Therese Giehse, Bernhard Diebold remarked, "she stood with her great Mother's heart outside the confines of history, indeed in eternity" Brecht was taken aback by this positive portrayal of Mother Courage, as he did not want the audience to empathize with or glorify Courage in any way. For this he made revisions to the play so that his intent of a portraying her sense of womanhood being destroyed by her commercial interests. This bitter truth lies bare when we notice the pattern of the deaths of all her children. When Eilif is taken away by the Recruiter, she is haggling for the price of the belt buckle, she tries to bargain with the soldiers for Swiss Cheese's life who ends up dead owing to her petty bourgeois tactics. Even during Kattrin's death she is away for business, and the audience is stripped off any pity for Courage when she bargains with the villagers who were digging Kattrin's grave. However, if we observe her from a critical and detached perspective, we notice how each of the above anomalies in her character can be justified under the pretext of capitalist, as we can conclude that she gives priority to money making and business dealings instead of being there for her children in the harsh conditions. This conflict between the bourgeois and the proletariat perspective in viewing Mother Courage's character has led to many open-ended debates between critics. Feminist critics like Tennessee Williams support Mother Courage and call her the most inspiring character in all of theatre, due to her indomitable will. While Marxist critics like Benjamin Walter called Courage an imitative petty bourgeois, who even after knowing about the ills of the capitalist system, plunge into it by sacrificing social solidarity.

In Scene 4, Courage sings the song of Capitulation, where she advises the young angry soldier to not stick his neck out, and take things as they come his way, especially from the upper officials. This is a direct attack on the society by Brecht. Individual protest is the very engine of social conflict, when supported by the masses it becomes a revolution. In diverting the young

soldier from calling out the upper official she dissuades and smother the stimulus of social change.

“That’s why I reckon you should stay there with your sword drawn if you’re truly set on it and your anger’s big enough, because you got grounds, I agree, but if your anger’s a short one best leave right away” (Brecht 47).

No one in the play actually tries to challenge *status quo*, except the mute Katrin. Her muteness is actually metaphorical of the society’s muteness against the oppression of the bourgeoisie. Katrin’s is the only strong and resilient proletariat voice that is heard throughout the play raised in defiance of the war and war-mongering. However, Katrin’s death is not any transcendental incident in the play, it is pessimistic and comes with no hope for the future. Brecht tries to convey that such sacrifices seem to be sacrifices because of the background of war, and in peace times such sacrifices are totally worthless. The character of Chaplain represents the role of religion in a war plagued state. He is a passive, hypocritical and highlights how institutions like religion become futile, as people are guided by their most primitive selfish desires in dire circumstances. Religion here is shown as a mere tool of the bourgeois in brainwashing the proletariat into believing the war for religion is for a great cause and is worth dying for.

Works Cited:

Brecht, Bertolt. et al. *Mother Courage and Her Children*. Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, an Imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2014.

Bottomore, T. B. *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*. Blackwell Reference, 1991.

Eagleton, Terry. *Marxism and Literary Criticism*. Routledge, 1989.

Johnson, Brett D. "Mother Courage and Her Children (Review)." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 59, no. 2, May 2007, pp. 281–282., <https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2007.0092>.

Kellner, Douglas. "Brecht's Marxist Aesthetic." *Brecht's Marxist Aesthetic by Douglas Kellner*, Graduate School of Education & Information Studies, UCLA, <https://pages.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/Illumina%20Folder/kell3.html>

Lyon, James K. "Brecht and Money." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 39, no. 4, 1987, pp. 487–97. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3208250>. Accessed 11 Jul. 2022.

Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels; Selected Works in One Volume*. International Publishers, 1968.

Shaw, William H. "'The Handmill Gives You the Feudal Lord': Marx's Technological Determinism." *History and Theory*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1979, pp. 155–76. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2504754>. Accessed 11 Jul. 2022.

Chapter 3

Conclusion

This dissertation has systematically tried to explore Brecht on multi-dimensional levels, because compartmentalizing Brecht within a designated paradigm does injustice to his contributions to theatre and the social Marxism. Although his works are highly charged with his Marxist worldview, we do not feel at any particular junction that they are mere political propaganda pieces. His works are enthused with passion, scientific approaches, rationality, interactionist approaches, didactic tones, high aesthetic appeal and are like social commentaries in action. His life was dedicated to not just Marxism or theatre in silos, but is a rare gem who combined both of these to produce the ‘epic theatre’, which has been discussed and analysed above. Brecht was a contemporary of Hitler, and was highly critical of his dictatorship and policies that plunged Germany into the second world war. When he was exiled from Germany, he produced his seminal work: “*Mother Courage and her Children*”.

The play is an anti-war and anti-bourgeois play, which still remains relevant in the contemporary geopolitical turmoil, as we witness current circumstances of war between Russia and Ukraine (2022). Marxism and Brecht’s epic theatre can serve as didactic pieces for the society, as the play *Mother Courage* holds the universal and timeless message which is summarised in a song by Mother Courage herself:

“As a rule you can say victory and defeat both come expensive to us ordinary folk. Best thing for us is when politics get bogged down solid” (Brecht 31).

Even after having progressed exponentially in multiple spheres of life, humans can’t seem to let go of their primitive and base aspirations like violence and war.

Today we boast of acquiring a spot for ourselves on the moon, we rule the seas and even reign supreme in the jungles. But it is unfortunate and a disgrace for human kind that we

still prefer wars to settle disputes over peaceful and mutual cooperative dialogues. Taking inspiration from Brecht, we can promote a new kind of theatre and a whole new genre of performing arts, which would not limit itself to mere aesthetic fulfilment, and would rather focus on delivering a socio-political commentary about the contemporary scenario, educating the people about stratification and polarization of the society into classes. This polarization leads to a power imbalance in the society which inevitably leads to war, as the dominant side tries to assert its strength multidimensionally.

Both Brecht and Marx inspire us to question capitalism and other conventions of the society that put a certain on a pedestal of privilege while the others have to suffer. Today we all have become to complacent with the idea of capitalism, that we cannot imagine any other system for the convention of our societies. In the play also, it is Mother Courage, the shrewd capitalist who realises that it is insignificant people like them, who have to feed the war. If they don't, they inevitably perish. Courage persists does the same, she feeds the war with her social capital being a woman, that is her children, and eventually it is Courage who survives. Brecht's play also exposes a harsh reality, that the proletariat do not have the luxury of choosing, even today it is very difficult to climb up the ladder of social mobility.

The relevance of Marxist ideals also comes into play, as we go back in history to realise the very flawed and almost totalitarian interpretation of Marxism by Russian leaders. While Marx envisioned a classless society based on egalitarian and communism, world leaders have eventually twisted and abused his philosophies according to their own whims. This has led to the continuation of the exploitation of the proletariat or the weaker sections, be it under Marxist governments or capitalist ones.

Brecht always took a balanced perspective, as he always wanted the emancipation of the poor and voiceless. He was critical of Stalin as well, who eventually turned a dictator under the garb of Marxism.

Brecht tried to amalgamate politics and literature, and was successful in doing so without making the aesthetic quality of his works suffer, which are considered classics today. His tone although remains pessimistic throughout, he forces us to question and critique the status quo. This is what made Brecht and his epic theatre revolutionary in both letter and spirit.

Brecht's mission with respect to his revolutionary theatre has been summarized by him, in the words below:

“The task of theatre is not to reflect a fixed reality, but to demonstrate how character and action are historically produced, and so how they could have been, and still can be, different.”

(Eagleton 60)

Works Cited:

Brecht, Bertolt “A Short Organum for the Theatre”. John Willet. Ed. & Trans. Brecht on Ltd Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic. London: Eyre Methuen., 1978. Print.

Brecht, Bertolt. et al. *Mother Courage and Her Children*. Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, an Imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2014.

Eagleton, Terry. *Marxism and Literary Criticism*. Routledge, 1989.

Bibliography

Primary Source:

Brecht, Bertolt. et al. *Mother Courage and Her Children*. Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, an Imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2014.

Secondary Sources:

Brecht, Bertolt “A Short Organum for the Theatre”. John Willet. Ed. & Trans. Brecht on Ltd Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic. London: Eyre Methuen., 1978. Print.

Benjamin, Walter. *Understanding Brecht*. Verso, 1998,
https://monoskop.org/images/1/17/Benjamin_Walter_Understanding_Brecht.pdf,
 Accessed 11 July 2022.

Bottomore, T. B. *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*. Blackwell Reference, 1991.

Eagleton, Terry. *Marxism and Literary Criticism*. Routledge, 1989.

Horace. ...*Horace: the Odes, Epodes and Carmen Saeculare*. New York ; Cincinnati [etc.] :American book company, 1902.

Johnson, Brett D. “Mother Courage and Her Children (Review).” *Theatre Journal*, vol. 59, no. 2, May 2007, pp. 281–282., <https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2007.0092>.

Kellner, Douglas. “Brecht's Marxist Aesthetic.” *Brecht's Marxist Aesthetic by Douglas Kellner*, Graduate School of Education & Information Studies, UCLA,
<https://pages.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/Illumina%20Folder/kell3.htm>.

Lyon, James K. "Brecht and Money." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 39, no. 4, 1987, pp. 487–97. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3208250>. Accessed 11 Jul. 2022.

Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels; Selected Works in One Volume*. International Publishers, 1968.

Shaw, William H. "'The Handmill Gives You the Feudal Lord': Marx's Technological Determinism." *History and Theory*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1979, pp. 155–76. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2504754>. Accessed 11 Jul. 2022.

Department of English (Doon University)