



PROJECTION OF 'STRUGGLE' AS A REVOLUTIONARY SPIRIT FOR SURVIVAL AS PICTURED IN BERTOLT BRECHT'S PLAYS *LIFE OF GALILEO* AND *MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN*: A STUDY.

Dr. S. Chelliah

Professor, Head & Chairperson, School of English & Foreign Languages & School of Indian Languages, Department of English & Comparative Literature, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai.

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to understand the literary and dramatic art and achievement of the foremost and leading young dramatist Bertolt Brecht, who has portrayed his characters as fighters struggling for survival in the society by combining patience and impatience, courage and cowardice, pride and servility, sobriety and enthusiasm, sensuality and asceticism, commitment and cynicism, betrayal and love of truth. This article is designed on the basis of two plays, *Life of Galileo* and *Mother Courage and Her Children* where Galileo is portrayed as a man who is right in fighting to sweep away all obstacles and struggle for survival while in *Mother Courage and Her Children*, the dramatist portrays the protagonist as the woman who experiences the class struggle within herself by suffering both as a mother and a business woman. Ordinary human beings' will and struggle for survival are carefully scrutinized and studied to some extent.

Bertolt Brecht, the foremost and leading young dramatist, won an international stature among the well-known dramatists and directors of the twentieth Century. He struggled to survive and survived to struggle and through continuous struggle for survival, he became a success in the Weimar Republic. No doubt, he was a revolutionary in every sense of the term in spirit, attitude and action in the field of Theatre Arts. Brecht was a man of indomitable will both in his writings and his life. Born on Feb 18, 1898, he was christened in the protestant Church influenced by his mother. In the words of Esslin; "He was a sensitive and taciturn child, non-conformist and rebellious in a quiet, negative way" (P5).

Brecht had his school education from the Augsburg school and he developed his taste for literary pursuits even in his school days. Even though his protestant upbringing accounted for the strong influence of his vocabulary use and style of writing and speaking, the language style of Luther's Bible exerted a tremendous influence on him and writing career. Despite the fact that he enrolled himself as a medical student at Munich University, he was not committed to medical profession at all. On the contrary, he was inspired very much by Arthur Kutscher's drama seminars/workshops. Even during his school days, he took to writing plays. During his period of study at the Munich University, he completed two plays namely *Drums in the Night*(1922) and *In the Jungle*. After the publication of these plays, he was recognised as a dramatist from all literary circles. He was influenced by Napoleon, Nietzsche and Hauptmann. Though he travelled to many places, Brecht found his feet gradually in Denmark with his family. Ruth Berlau, a Danish actress helped Brecht successfully stage his plays in Denmark. Eventually he reached the United States in 1941 and lived there till 1947. Some of plays like *The Life of Galileo*, *Mother Courage and her Children*, *The Good Person of Szechwan* and *Mr. Puntilla and his man Matti* came to be considered as 'Classics' of Brecht pieces.

Being a committed writer, Brecht sought to create a socialist theatre and thereby conveyed his message rather clearly though his theory of detachment or alienation. The drama recommended by him is the Epic theatre projecting the spectator as "observer" and presenting a world view in which the spectator confronts something and is made to reflect and then act. The drama he recommends makes each sense exist for itself as a thing to be looked at and develops by sudden leaps and shows man producing himself in the course of the action subjected to strange criticism.

Bertolt Brecht was the first dramatist in the modern theatre to comprehend fully the effects of industrialism and collectivism upon our social structures having rejected traditional drama with a definite beginning, a middle and an end, he believed in the dramatic process of the stream which does not end but moves on to the next episode. He wanted to translate this episodic nature of the stream into dramatic theatre. So his Epic form is a way of expressing a complexity, multiplicity, variety and even the contraction of the collective world.

What is generally understood that the protagonists of Brecht's plays are found to be characters of universal vitality struggling hard for survival at all stages in a society governed by neither justice nor intelligence. Even if human interest becomes out and out prominent and human life is pictured as something placed in its baffling and absurd complexity, the characters portrayed as protagonists in his plays are projected as heroes being defeated by the overwhelming and ruthless power of war, prejudice and selfishness in the society with which they have to compromise for survival. They are not of heroic impulses and dimensions but of human dimension whose sole purpose is to enjoy some sort of simple and sensuous happiness.



Life of Galileo was the first major play by Brecht conceived and written in exile during the year 1937-39 in which Galileo was pictured as a positive anti-hero. “Brecht’s musical collaborator Hanns Eisler saw him as the incarnation of low cunning for survival” (Pxxv). In the words of Raymond Furness, “Brecht’s initial concern was to show Galileo as a man determined to live and whose conning recantation enables the truth to be heard inspite of the strictures of the church” (P279). **Life of Galileo** depicts more than thirty years of Galileo’s life in a dispassionate studiously undramatic way, conforming to Brecht’s idea of ‘epic’ drama. Charles R.Lyons writes:

“The primary ambiguity of the play **Life of Galileo** finds its source in the fact that Galileo indulges in life’s pleasures generates the appetite for knowledge and hence the knowledge itself, and for life. Like all other human beings, Galileo, simultaneously generates the human weakness which makes him unable to say no to the threat of pain. His submission to appetite is both his strength and his weakness” (P127)

The typical Brechtian hero is distinctly different from the protagonists of classical drama. Here the character changes as the milieu changes. The didactic at work is one of reciprocal influence. The play shows Galileo outwitting the inquisition by recanting only to continue his research clandestinely and smuggle the results abroad. Through this play, the dramatist has implied that scientific research always took precedence over social responsibility. This play has great relevance to Brecht’s own plight and pain when he first heard of nuclear fission in 1939.

In the play, **Life of Galileo**, Galileo is projected as a positive figure with his role in the opening scene as a lucid and passionate teacher. He is showing as one who expounds not only the principles of the Copernican system but also its social implications. The play begins with Galileo explaining the wooden model of the ptolemaic system. He explains to Andrea with a chair and with an apple and a splinter, the theory that ‘everything is in motion’. Galileo admits a rich young man Ludovico Marseilli, as his student who announces the arrival of tube lenses to Italy from Holland. Galileo presents the Venetian Republic with his great invention, the ‘telescope’. Using his telescope, Galileo discovered celestial phenomena confirming the Copernican system and wanted the whole world to know his discovery. Despite all warnings from Sagredo that the truth might bring death to Galileo, he believed in humanity and human reason. In scene four, Galileo is portrayed as moving to the court of Florence from the Venetian Republic. His discovery that the earth turns round the sun fails to convince the court scholars, The University Professors are the only scholars who are really amazed by his remarkable instrument. Galileo has a formal dispute with the mathematician over the reliability of his invention. But Galileo feels Truth is born of the times and not of authority” and emphasizes that his discovery is one of the questionable truths.

Things take a wondrous turn when the Vatican Research Institute the Collegium Romanum confirms Galileo’s findings and this approval does not hold hope for long. The church’s greatest astronomer Christopher Clavius and other monks question the credibility of his inventions with that of scriptures. Eminent Cardinals Barberini and Bellermin, during the inquisition disapprove Galileo’s doctrines since they find it heretical and contrary to the faith. In scene eight, Galileo explains the status quo of his doctrines to the Little Monk. He resumes his research after a silence of eight years, with the accession of a new hope. Galileo challenges expressed with his outburst to Ludovico. In the next decade, Galileo’s theories are popularized by balled singers and pamphleteers. Even Italian cities choose astronomy as the theme for their carnival. This propaganda results in Galileo facing the Inquisition in Roma. Vanni in scene two, offers Galileo a lift to join the bourgeois for the benefit of humanity. But Galileo refuses to join hands with him. When age of reason begins, Galileo is made to recant his doctrine of the motion of the earth. Andrea, Federyani and his pupils remain awestruck when they hear the bell of st. Marks. From 1636-42, Galileo lives a prisoner of the Inquisition till his death. His repentance earns him enough credit to work with his scientific studies on a modest scale. Andrea, in order to pursue his research, decides to leave Italy for Holland. Galileo lectures to Andrea his justification towards his incantation. To him, smaller things are much stronger than the bigger one and he is not enough to challenge the church. Galileo ends up almost a blind as the play closes. In 1637, Galileo’s book ‘The Discorsi’ attaches at the Italian towns something to kindle and guard the light of science forever. With this brief outline of the story, the play should be studied in the light of the study – the struggle for survival. The entire story of the play is based on man’s struggle for survival and Galileo is projected as one who was “inherently on the side of reason and social progress” (Ronald 118).

Galileo’s public recantation was simply a denial of a particular scientific truth, whereas his innerself felt the duty to fight for the right to pursue and publish the truth to the community of science. As a result, he made the ‘Discorsi’ get published at the



end of his life. Brecht uses Ludovico to represent Galileo's real enemy, the moneyed aristocracy. Galileo stands between the wealthy Ludovico and the intelligent Andrea but chooses Ludovico, the wealthy one only to make his own life a little more comfortable. Galileo is forced to choose between his indulgence in life's pleasures and the retreat from pain and abstract ideas. His life's pleasures generate the appetite for knowledge and hence the knowledge itself generates the human weakness which makes him unable to say 'no' to the threat of pain. In order to satisfy his appetite for knowledge to gain time for research and for the survival itself – he trades his intellectual freedom. He submits to the church, the authority. Brecht has created Galileo as a man with an incessant hunger for life. As a man of forty six, his lust for life is evident in his pleasure in the physical, intellectual and social aspects of life. It is also supported by the enthusiastic belief that he is living in a 'new age' – the age of reason. At the end of the play, some thirty years later, he becomes much more greedy, cynical and a bitter person. By then, he has finished his 'Discorsi'. Now Galileo does not feel guilty for his recantation because he has paved the way for the younger hero-scientist to pursue the scientific experiments. Brecht acknowledges the same that Galileo's life reveals history to be a process where an individual is subject to the effects of nature and circumstance, hence one cannot take a life to moral judgement.

Galileo's age is "an age of discovery, expansion and innovation" and so he shares the pleasures of man's mastery over the world of nature. But this proclamation of the scientific advances and his inventions laid his life at stake in the hands of the church. So neglecting the ideal of knowledge governing his behaviour, Galileo turns vice-versa, looks for a life without torture and pain and recants to let his knowledge grow in silence for ever. The very struggle for survival is embedded strongly in his mind. So the novelty of his perception towards life and world is not the same as his contemporaries.

Galileo, as the critic Jane Lyman put it, combines "patience and impatience, courage and cowardice, pride and servility, sobriety and enthusiasm, acumen and narrow mindedness, affability and lacklessness, gentle humour and aerobic irony, sensuality and asceticism, commitment and cynicism, democratic ways and kowtowing to the nobles, love of truth and betrayal of truth. Because of the valid contradictions present in his character, Galileo chooses to recant and live his life. This ends up intellectual irresponsibility towards mankind on the part of Galileo for the sake of guarding his own life.

One can find the struggle for survival not only in Galileo but also in other characters like Virginia, Ludovico and the little monk. Virginia, the only daughter of Galileo, is a prime example of the conflict of new science and an old faith. Galileo exists for the whole world but not to his daughter. He expands science and intelligence to every corner of the world while keeping her away from it. The conflict is that while he is against the church to pursue his scientific experiments, Virginia is totally under the case of church. Ludovico's struggle for survival is in no way similar to Galileo. For Galileo, the conflict is between life and death whereas for Ludovico, the conflict is with the society. Ludovico succumbs to the pressures of the church and its faith in order to survive in the society and that is why he even breaks the engagement with Virginia. The little monk is not only a priest but also an astronomer. The little monk confirms Galileo's faith in the gentle power of reason. His passionate craving to reveal the truth from all contradictions is irresistible. He sees with his own eyes that Galileo's inventions and phenomena are very true. At the end of the play, he has abandoned research and rests in peace in the church. His life too shows consistent inner struggle and lives a life in the church which is sheer farce – indeed a struggle for survival. In *Mother Courage and Her Children*, Brecht portrays the protagonist as the woman who experiences the class-struggle within herself. Whenever she utilizes the opportunity for her benefits, she invariably ruins her interest not only as a member of the exploited class but also a mother to that group. The play revolves around the theme of contradiction, where mother courage is presented as a dialectically conceived figure. She suffers class distinction both in her role as a mother and in her business. As Brecht puts it, "The trader mother became a great living contradiction" (Ronald 93) In the words of H.F. Garten,

"The central figure is a camp-follower and sutler-woman who pulls here ramshackle cart through the wreckage and horror of the Thirty years' war. With her are her children, two sons and a dumb daughter, whom she loses one by one despite her frantic efforts to serve them. With her blend of cunning, impudence, common sense and maternal instinct, mother Courage is perhaps the most real character Brecht has created" (P213)

Brecht presents himself to be a staunch critic of war and places himself squarely on the side of the exploited class through the character of Mother courage. Mother Courage is one of the common people who have to struggle for survival somehow in the social and economic system of their time. On the other hand, mother courage and her children belong to the ordinary people whose physical, moral, economic or social status are ruined by power politics thereby making these folks suffer and struggle



for their survival. In this play, one can see how mother courage struggles to bring up her children in the war. Even though mother courage is defeated in her struggle to hold on to her children, she continues her business by pulling the wagon her son. After all that has happened to mother courage, the indomitable woman marches on to make her very symbol of human resilience.

In *Mother Courage and Her Children* one can see man's potentials being exploited by man himself in order to make one's life easy. Mother Courage the subtler woman who lives by selling things to the soldiers, actually cannot do anything and hence loses her three children in the war. Charles R. Lyons rightly remarks:

“There's no loyalty left in the world, no trust, no faith, no sense of honor. It is demonstrated with some clarity that both mother courage and the soldiers are motivated by necessity, committed to the logic of exploitation in order to survive” (P91)

Mother courage's self-confidence makes her believe that she can bring her family safely through the war. But to add to her sufferings, she loses all her children to the war. Here in this play, fierling can be aptly called as the “human-fighting-machine” (Garten 204). She has the will to survive in this world. In order to survive, she has to run her business. In the human will, there is a conscious factor which operates continuously and that is ‘to survive’. In order to survive, one has to struggle all the way. In this play, Katrin, the daughter of Mother Courage suffers and eventually is killed by the rationalist. One can understand in this struggle whoever manipulates or exploits, he survives. It is not the best or the brightest ones that survive but the opportunitis survive, the exploitation continues and the struggle goes on. Courage lives like any other human being but with an iron heart, she serves with army thereby earning for her family to live. There are failings too in her life but she is a victim of circumstances. She has made up her mind to live a life which has in turn, destroyed all her happiness by sacrificing her children to the war.

To conclude, it may be said that Mother Courage embodying as ‘business woman and mother’ is an energetic capable human being who desperately tries to save her family by following the rules of survival current in her society, experiences the conflict inherent in that society between human productivity on the one hand and the social exploitation of productivity on the other. Mother Courage is the symbol of perseverance and indomitable will and a deeply suffering viction of circumstances and machinations of the power. In the words of Ronal Speirs, “Mother Courage stands out as a memorable and impressive figure because of her intelligence, alertness and immense vitality. She is an indefatigable, hard working, unflappable and has the strength to carry on where others would have given up long ago”. The play *Mother Courage and Her Children* does portray an overreaching image of a down-to-earth and earthly woman struggling for survival in the society.

Thus, Bertolt Brecht, with his dramatic skill, has portrayed his characters as fighters struggling for survival in the society. In *Life of Galileo*, Galileo is portrayed as a man who is right in fighting to sweep away all obstacles and struggle for survival, while in *Mother Courage and Her Children*, Brecht the dramatist portrays the protagonist as the woman who experiences the class-struggle within herself and suffers both as a mother and a business woman. Mother Courage is shown as one of the common people who have to survive somehow in the social and the economic system. She may be taken as an apt example for the ordinary human being's will and capacity to survive.

References

1. Brecht, Bertolt. **Plays: Three Life of Galileo** trans. John Willett London: Matheun, 1987
2. Esslin, Brecht, “Verjagt mit gutern Grund” Berlin: Hundert Gedichte, 1951 P.298
3. Furness, Raymond. **The Twentieth Century 1890-1945** New York: Barnes and Noble, 1978.
4. Garten, H.F. **Modern German Drama** London: Matheun, 1964
5. Lyons, R. Charles. **Bertolt Brecht The Despair and the Polemic** London: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968.
6. Speirs, Ronald **Bertolt Brecht** London: Macmillan, 1987.