

## Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage And Her Children* in the Light of *Rasa* Theory

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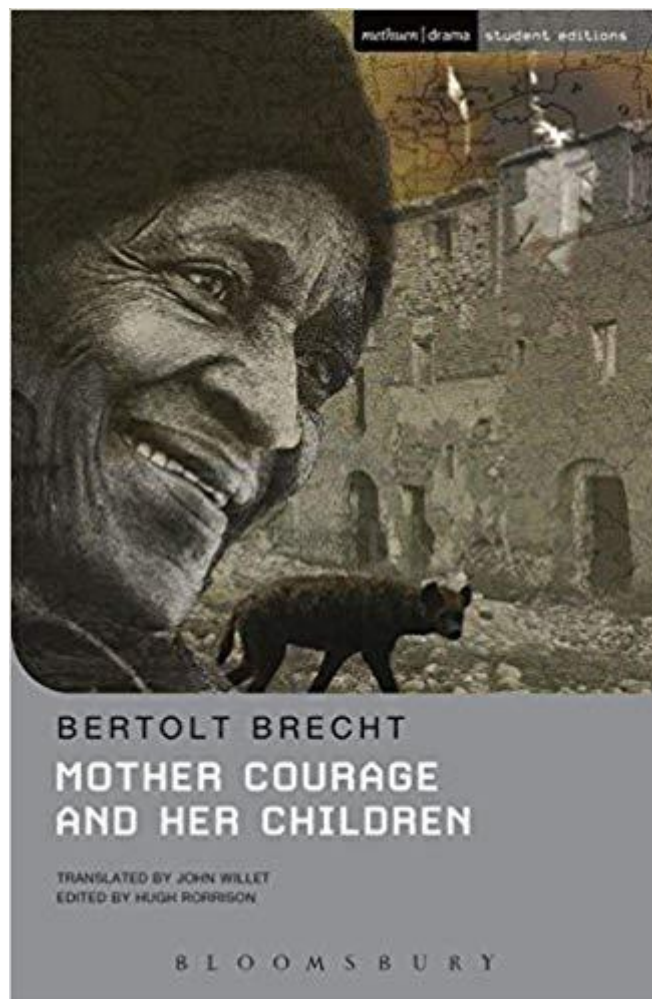
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## Abstract

Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her children* (1939) has been accepted universally as one of the significant plays of the 20th century. Though a few critics considered the play for its optimistic ending, a social document, in the west people treated the play as a traditional tragedy. *Courage and Her children* is an antiwar play which had a topical urgency in its time and has subsequently acquired universal human appeal. *Courage and Her children* is a tale of a business woman struggling to survive in wartime. Brecht pioneered an unconventional experimental theatre movement called 'epic theatre.' He wanted to make the spectator an observer detaching him from 'make believe' involvement. This paper attempts to study the play in the light of *Rasa* theory of Bharatamuni. The overall pitiable picture of the play arouses our sentiments of grief. The play portrays the story dominantly with *Karuna rasa*. The sympathetic responses the situation evokes in the spectators make *Karuna* as the main *rasa* of the play.

**Keywords:** drama, emotions, *rasa* theory, *karunarasa*

## Brecht's Birth and Life

Bertolt Brecht was born on February 10, 1898, in Augsburg, Germany. Brecht grew up in a middle-class household and was precociously intelligent in school. Brecht's upbringing and his experiences in the military profoundly affected his writing. The wartime horrors that Brecht experienced firsthand in the military hospital led to his life-long pacifist views. He expressed these beliefs in his depiction of the horrific Thirty Years' War in *Mother Courage and Her Children*. The play was originally written in German in 1939. When the National Socialist Party (the Nazis) came to power in Germany in the early 1930s, Brecht and his works were essentially banned. Brecht's plays had become highly political; espousing his belief that communism would solve many of the world's social inequalities and political problems. He and his family fled the increasingly hostile environment in 1933; the playwright essentially went into exile for the next fifteen years. He produced numerous plays that were specifically critical of the Nazi regime and, in general, the world's political situation. Of these plays, the anti-war *Mother Courage and Her Children* became one of his best-known and critically acclaimed works.

## The Role of the Audience in Theatre

The theatre depends more than most arts upon audience response. If the house is not full, not only does the performance lose money but it also loses force. It is unusual—but not impossible—for new ideas, even for new ways of expressing old ideas, to achieve wide commercial success. With few exceptions, people apparently do not go to the theatre to receive new ideas; they want the thrilling, amusing, or moving expression of old ones. If a performance is going well, the members of its audience tend to engage in collective behaviour that subordinates their separate identities to that of the crowd. This phenomenon can be observed not only at the theatre but also at concerts, bullfights, and prize fights. The crowd personality is never as rational as the sum of its members' intelligence, and it is much more emotional. Members of an audience lose their powers of independent thought; unexpected reserves of passion come into play.

## **Rasa Theory**

*Rasa* is a kind of delight endowed by arts such as literature, drama, dance, painting, music, cinema etc. That is to say that *Rasa* is the pleasure that everyone receives from experience of arts. The term 'rasa' literally means extract, taste, relish or flavor. Bharatamuni, the Indian performance theorist and philosopher, is credited with the formulation of the ultimate text of performing arts as well the *Rasa* theory and is celebrated as the father of Indian performing arts. Bharatamuni strongly argues in *Natyashashtra* that ultimate aim of performing arts is sensations and it depends upon the emotions felt by the audience. He talks about eight rasas such as sringara, hasya, karuna, raudra, veer, bhayanaka, bibhatsa and adbhut. Shanta rasa is included thereafter. Drama is mimetic representation of life combining in it the real and the fictional, art and reality, presenting the events and characters within the dimensions of space and time. In this paper, researcher attempts to study the German Playwright Bertolt Brecht's world-famous play *Mother Courage and Her Children* in the light of *Rasa* theory of Bharatamuni.

## **Brecht and Epic Theatre**

Brecht's theory and purpose of theatre are non-traditional. Brecht pioneered an unconventional experimental theatre movement called 'epic theatre.' It is also known as Brecht's concept of alienation, distancing effect, V-effect or A-effect. Brecht employed an anti-illusory or anti-hypnotic theatre device; he wanted to make the spectator an observer. Brecht uses the term "epic theater" to characterize his innovative dramatic theory. His new type of drama is non-Aristotelian—that is, his aim is not to purge the audience's emotions but to awaken the spectators' minds and communicate truth to them. In order to achieve this end, drama must not hypnotize or entrance the audience but must continually remind them that what they are watching is not real, but merely a representation, a vehicle for an idea or a fact. The actor-character duality, the stage setting, light, music, song, dance, episodic content, the use of mask, curtain, narration, chorus to comment and interrupt that discouraged the spectator from emotional involvement. Actually, Brecht's technique of alienation and *rasa* realisation are two extremes. The performance on stage makes the audience to experience emotions. The actors' presentation of a particular situation, dialogues and actions on the stage lead the spectator to realisation of particular *bhava*.

## ***Mother Courage and Her Children* as Anti-war Play**

*Mother Courage and Her Children* takes place during the Thirty Years' War, a religious war (Catholic versus Protestant) which ravaged Europe in the seventeenth century (1618-48). Every event, attitude, and emotion felt in this play is affected by the circumstances of war. Mother Courage is the woman around whom the play is constructed in total twelve scenes. Mother Courage is middle-aged and has three children by three different men: two sons named Eilif and Swiss Cheese and a daughter named Kattrin. Mother Courage runs a mobile canteen which sells food and various goods to soldiers. She and her children pull the wagon, following the Swedish regiments to wherever the war takes them. Each of Mother Courage's children suffers the consequences of war and is eventually destroyed by it. Through his protagonist's actions, Brecht shows war as a never-ending commercial opportunity, but he also highlights its affects on the common man and woman. He shows peace being less prosperous,

a state in which finances are less assured. Brecht's hatred of war finds a central place in the entire play. Katrin in the play is portrayed as the symbolic figure of suffering and extinction in the theatre of war.

### **Mother Courage - The Protagonist - a Tragic as well as Heroic Character**

Formerly known as Anna Fierling, Mother Courage is a cutthroat businesswoman and follows the war, and the commerce it provides, wherever it goes. Mother Courage got her name from an incident in Riga in which she drove her canteen through a bombardment to sell her bread and came out alive. Throughout the play, Mother Courage continually demonstrates that the preservation of her business is the most important thing in her life. She tries to avoid having her sons recruited for the war. Despite the loss of her children to the war, Mother Courage does quite well financially. Though business does go bad several times—notably during a short peace—Mother Courage survives every calamity that befalls her. By the end of the play, Mother Courage has to pull the canteen wagon by herself, but her business drive motivates her to persevere. Mother Courage leaves an everlasting impact on the mind of the spectator.

### ***Mother Courage and Her Children and Rasa Portrayal***

*Rasa* is realized when an emotion is awakened. *Karuna Rasa* is one of the prominent *rasas* discussed in *Natyashastras*. *Karuna Rasa* has its *sthayibhava* as *Shoka* (grief). When one feels very sad or sorrow, seeing other's tragic condition that is *Karuna Rasa*. It generally occurs seeing death, separation, pathetic condition etc. The play which primarily portrays and evokes the sentiments of emotions of pathos is a drama that belongs to *Karuna Rasa*. Aristotle also talks of achieving Catharsis at the end of the play. It is purgation of the tragic emotions of pity and fear. Grief is caused losing someone or on death of one's own. *Mother Courage and Her Children* mainly portrays *Karuna Rasa*. Though she has three children, she loses them because of war. Her eldest son Eiliff is a brave young man. He is interested in army. Eiliff is recruited when soldiers are needed for the Swedish Protestant army. He becomes a brutal soldier, losing his humanity, his sense of right and wrong, and, ultimately his life. He comes to see his mother for last visit, but he cannot meet her. It is scene 8.

*Followed by two soldiers: With halberds, EILIF enters. His hands are fettered. He is white as chalk.*

THE CHAPLAIN: What's happened to you?

EILIF: Where's mother?

THE CHAPLAIN: Gone to town.

EILIF: They said she was here. I was allowed a last visit.

THE COOK (to the SOLDIERS): Where are you taking him?

A SOLDIER: For a ride.

*The other SOLDIER makes the gesture of throat cutting.*

THE CHAPLAIN: What has he done?

THE SOLDIER: He broke in on a peasant. The wife is dead.

THE CHAPLAIN: Eilif, how could you?  
EILIF: It's no different. It's what I did before.  
THE COOK: That was in war time.  
EILIF: Shut your hole. Can I sit down till she comes?  
THE SOLDIER: No. (*Mother Courage and Her children* page No.69)

Eilif is not lucky to survive. He attacks peasants and steals cattle during wartime and is considered a hero. He does the same thing during the short peace—though he does not know there is a truce—and is arrested. He loses his life. Mother Courage cannot see her son Eilif. It is definitely a grievous condition for mother to lose her young son.

The death scene of the second son of Mother Courage is very heart touching. Swiss Cheese joins the same army as a paymaster for a Protestant regiment—he takes the clerical position so that he will not have to fight in the war. Still, his position leads to his death. He is spied and caught by enemies. Mother courage has to see his dead body, but she cannot feel the misery openly. It is Scene 3.:

YVETTE *brings* KATTRIN, *who walks over to her mother and stands by her.*  
MOTHER COURAGE *takes her hand. Two men come on with a stretcher;*  
*there is a sheet on it and something underneath~ Beside them, the*  
SERGEANT. *They put the stretcher down.*

THE SERGEANT: Here's a man we can't identify. But he has to be registered to keep the records straight. He bought a meal from you. Look at him, see if you know him. (*He pulls back the sheet.*) Do you know him?

(MOTHER COURAGE *shakes her head.*) What? You never saw him before he took that meal? (MOTHER COURAGE *shakes her head.*) Lift him up. Throw him in the carrion pit. He has no one that knows him.

*They carry him away. (Mother Courage and Her children* page No.42)

Though the dead body of her son is there she cannot cry over him. This is the most pathetic condition of a mother. Katrin is assaulted by soldiers in scene 6. Mother Courage is reminded of the dreadful past when Katrin became dumb because of war.:

MOTHER COURAGE: She'll never get a husband, and she's so mad about children! Even her dumbness comes from the war. A soldier stuck something in her mouth when she was little. I'll never see Swiss Cheese again, and where my Eilif is the Good Lord knows. Curse the war! (*Mother Courage and Her children* page No.59)

It is ironic that war is means of her living and she loses all her children because of the bloody war. Katrin loses her life when she tries to warn a town of a surprise attack by Catholics. Death of Katrin in scene 11 in Hale alarming the town folk to save them

THE LIEUTENANT: Set it up! Set it up! (*Calling while the musket is set up on forks:*) Once and for all: stop that drumming! *Still crying, KATTRIN is drumming as hard as she can.*

Fire! *The SOLDIERS fire. KATTRIN is hit. She gives the drum another feeble beat or two, then slowly collapses. (Mother Courage and Her children page No.86)*

In scene 12, Mother Courage is seen in the archetypal image of the mother, bending over and singing a lullaby to her child. She refuses to accept the fact that she has lost her daughter. Scene 12 is most tragic when Anna Firling is quite alone. Her companions, the cook and the chaplain are not there to help or console. Losing three young children in premature-accidental death because of war is the most tragic condition for a mother. 12<sup>th</sup> scene is very heart touchy and arouses feeling of Karuna Rasa when Mother Courage is seating near dead body of her daughter. She is so grief-stricken that she calls dead Katrin asleep.

MOTHER COURAGE: She's asleep now.

THE PEASANTS: She's not asleep, it's time you realized. She's gone. You must get away. There are wolves in these parts. And the bandits are worse.

MOTHER COURAGE: That's right.

*She goes and fetches a cloth from the wagon to cover up the body.*

THE PEASANT WOMAN: Have you no one now? Someone you can go to?

MOTHER COURAGE: There's one. My Eilif.

THE PEASANT (*while MOTHER COURAGE covers the body*):

Find him then. Leave *her* to us. We'll give her a proper burial. You needn't worry.

MOTHER COURAGE: Here's money for the expenses.

*She passes the PEASANT. The PEASANT and his son shake her hand and carry KATTRIN away. (Mother Courage and Her children page No.87)*

## Conclusion

Thus, by the end of the play, all three children of Mother Courage die. Yet the dramatist does not leave the play on a note of despair. Mother Courage pulls the wagon alone for her survival. It shows her spirit of struggle and fight against circumstances. Her passing through the bombardment in Riga is really heroic and for that event she was called 'Mother Courage'. Thus, the play is a tale of struggle of a woman who tries to survive. She does not give up. The secondary *rasa* is *veer rasa*. Anna Fierling and her children also represent heroism. The mute Katrin pursues her heroism to much greater lengths, taking great personal risks to help others. Katrin care also shows great concern for the

wellbeing of those outside her family, risking her life to save children from a fire. At the end of the play, Kattrin does give her life to save a town from a surprise attack by enemies. The upbringing of her children is implicitly heroic for Mother Courage. The overall pitiable picture of mother courage arouses our sentiments of grief. The play portrays the story dominantly with *Karuna rasa* with support of *Veer rasa*. The sympathetic responses the situation evokes in the spectators make *Karuna* as the main *rasa* of the play.

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