

# Politics of Songs and Music in Bertolt Brecht's Theatre

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper analyses the artistic role of songs and music in Brecht's political theatre. Brecht's self-referential playtext and gestural theatricality is realized with the help of a set of distancing devices called Verfremdung or V-effects. These formal and thematic techniques account for his shrewd theatrics and tactical strategies to question the prevailing hegemonies. Songs and music make one of these alienating techniques. Dialecticization of situations and episodes, repeated ridicule of gaps in the existing ideologies, political comedy and self-critical acting are the building blocks of songs and music to challenge the dominant sociopolitical structures. Unlike the traditional dramatic theatre where lyrics and music specifically contribute to the tragic effect, songs in Brecht's later plays are the essential part of his socially, politically and ideologically committed theatre to stir the rational faculties of the spectators. Instead of smoothing over the spaces of the current ideology, this V-effect exposes its contradictions. These self-questioning songs work as a diagnostic commentary on the theatrical narrative to enlist the audience. Brecht's mature plays Mother Courage and Her Children, The Good Person of Setzuan, and The Caucasian Chalk Circle make the data for the present research. Brecht's theories on theatre worked as the theoretical frame work for the present study.*

**Keywords:** Brecht, epic theatre, alienation effects, political songs

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## 1. Introduction

Bertolt Brecht caused a paradigm shift in the composition of drama and in the aims and objectives of the theatre. The centuries old traditions of Aristotelian theories on drama and theatre were for the first time seriously questioned. And there are some significant reasons for it. Traditional dramatic narrative and emotive theatricality had lost relevance to the existing brand of life (Ewen 75- 91). Two important brands of theatre that were in vogue in those days were the naturalist and impressionist theatre. These offshoots of the traditional/realist theatre were inappropriate to the changed times of the previous century. Naturalist theatre was absolutely pessimistic in disposition. It presented the humans as voiceless and miserable creatures who are conditioned by the environment and the hereditary materials. Impressionist theatre on the other hand dealt with the psychic material of the characters. These themes did not keep pace with the demands of time (Speirs, 108-122). In the days of Brecht some few ones of nonconformist stirrings were produced against the extravagances of the conventional dramaturgy. Erwin Piscator, the writer of *The Political Theatre*, is an eminent mention in this regard. Brecht carried out the cause of his epic theatre in his earlier plays that were an indictment of the pity and fear based dramaturgy.

The earlier decades of the previous century faced the devastation of the First World War. The postwar Germany was in the grip of volumes of poverty, miseries, confusion and disease. The cultural arts like drama and theatre were still pursuing the prewar narratives that had become obsolete to the existing sociopolitical realities of the times. In this scenario, intellectuals like Brecht were bound to come forward to rebel against the culinary theatre and traditional drama. According to the provisions of dialectical historicism, the postwar period expected the rebellion in art that is ushered in by Brecht (Ramthun, 110- 125). Brecht detected the sole cause behind the First World War: capitalism. His plays of the twenties of the previous century like *Baal*, *Drums in the Night*, and *In the Jungle of Cities* began to expose the ill effects of capitalistic ideologies on the life of man. The heroes of the plays of this era are not idealistic representation of humanity: they are the pursuers of their lusts and basic instincts of man in a course manner. He began to use the epic theatre terminology but not in professional way. This second phase of his dramaturgy and theatricality mainly depended on the epic plays like *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*, *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* and *The Threepenny Opera*. The Marxist Brecht had gone revolutionary. The emergence of the communist regime was, to Brecht, the only and inevitable solution of the present

Germany transfixed with countless sociopolitical ills. He wrote and performed these plays very enthusiastically for his people. These plays were propagandist and agitative in letter and spirit. For example, *The Mother* does not artistically find faults with capitalism and it also does not argue in favor of communism. It simply drives the audience to leave their homes and start their journey to dismantle the existing cruel hegemonies and introduce the Marxist system of social structures.

The aesthetic polish that was absent in the Marxist plays of Brecht was richly present in his later plays that were composed in late thirties and the early forties of the last century. The experience of two wars, exile in America, disillusionment of the communist revolution, and advancement in age taught and coached Brecht in many ways. Now he was a mature playwright and he wrote the plays that bear in fact the stamp of his popularity. *Mother Courage and Her Children*, *The Good Person of Setzuan*, *The Life of Galileo* and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. With the help of these plays he “wanted to take the principle that it was not a matter of just interpreting the world but of changing it, and apply that to the theatre” (Brecht, 248). For this purpose, he changed the propagandist, agitative and epic brand of theatrics to the dialectical theatricality. To aestheticize his dialectical playtext and alternative theatrical productions, in accordance with his own artistic poetics, he harnessed a kit of tools both in content and form. This Brechtian poetics is called *Verfremdung*, alienation effect or V-effect. These are the distancing devices which are used to keep the spectator safe from the trance and mobilize their rational faculties for going after the sociopolitical reasons which work behind the societal ills and dilemmas. Music and song is one of the most significant alienation effects that Brecht employs to achieve his intended aims and objectives. This alienating tool is a rational commentary on the internal dramatic situation from which it distinguishes itself very shrewdly.

When an actor sings, he undergoes a change of function. Nothing is more revolting than when the actor pretends not to notice that he has left the level of plain speech and started to sing. The three levels – plain speech, heightened speech, and singing – must always remain distant...The actor must not only sing but show a man singing (Willet 131-132).

Songs in Aristotelian theatre are devised to endorse and reinforce the central theme of the drama. For example, chorus in *Oedipus Rex* come forward along with its music and song to stress the authorial discourse. Quite contrary to it, songs in the Brechtian theatre are introduced to

alienate the audience, to highlight the alternative voice and to dialecticize the theatrical materials (Needle & Thomson, 121-145). Unity of opposite of filters, repetition of unexciting materials, historicization of the material, naivety, political comedy and ideologically comicalized irony are the specific techniques that the Brechtian music and songs harbour. Song and music, in league with all these estrangement devices, make half of the play and successfully engage the audience to complete the other half by bringing a change in their practical tone of life.

## 2. Literature Review

Brecht's plays, poetry, theatre theories and theatrical productions have been evaluated by so many critics, scholars and researchers. All of them agree on one point that he played a very significant role in adjusting the 20<sup>th</sup> to theatre to the current needs of time. Today the playwrights across the world are directly or indirectly under the influence of his political poetics. Important among the significant writers on Brecht are Catherine Belsey (1980), Jan Needle & Peter Thomson (1981), Ronald Speirs (1982), Raymond Williams (1983), John Willet (1986), Ronald Speirs (1987), Elisabeth Wright (1989), Fredrick Ewen (1992), Peter Thomson & Glandyr Sacks (1994), John Schechter (1994) Michael Patterson (2003) and Anthony Squiers (2012). Meg Mumford's analytical book *Bertolt Brecht* (2009) is especially a distinguished document on various aspects of this German theatrical genius. She divides Brecht's aesthetics into *Gestus*, *Vefremdung*, epic theatre, historicization and dialectics. Then she very lucidly explains these concepts of the Brechtian poetics one by one. She calls *Gestus* the social gests that need the attention of the reader and the audience. *Vefremdung* is a process of defamiliarization and estrangement of the play by Brecht. While commenting on the dialects in the art of Brecht she says:

The concept of dialectics features in many of Brecht's writings, particularly on politics and philosophy, but towards the end of his life he began to prioritize it by replacing the phrase 'epic theatre' with the phrase 'dialectical theatre'. In the early 1950s Brecht argued that it was time to discard the concept of the 'epic'.... At the heart of dialectical thinking is the belief that contradictions are the source of change and progressive development (Muford 85).

Anthony Squiers' doctoral thesis *The Social and Political Philosophy of Bertolt Brecht* synonymizes the political with the social landscape. He analyses the chosen plays of Brecht in terms of Marxist theories. That is

why Brechtian art as a question mark to the bourgeois weltanschauung remains the main thrust of his research. He also analyses the impact of the capitalist society on the personal and collective life of the society. Here the peak of this conspicuous research project is reached. It is a good piece of investigation as a whole but lacks an exclusive examination of the intended role of songs and music in Brechtian world. Hence the present study.

### 3. Data Analysis and Discussion

Song and music is one of the six constituents of Aristotelian tragedy. It is used by the dramatic writers to well out the personal emotions of characters, to throw light on their complicated psychic material and to let the audience empathize with the actor (Boal, 24-37). It is devised to contribute to the coherence and well weave of the plot; consequently, action is expedited and the gaze of the audience remains fixed on the end of the story. Pity and fear are aroused and the theatrical production finishes like the food that has gone down the throat. On the other hand, songs and music in the socially committed plays and theatrical performances have the other functions to perform. Brecht believes in the Marxist ideology that is why he makes use of song and music in his plays and theatrical products to promote his materialist aesthetics. Songs in his theatre are the outlet of the authorial intentions; that is certainly to pose a challenge to the existing hegemonies. Ronald Speirs (1987) says:

[Brecht's songs may] take the form of straight commentary or exhortation, whereby a character or actor simply functions as the mouthpiece of authorial views...the singing of the song, which is usually clearly marked off from the dramatic action by having the character come to the front of the stage to address the audience directly...The song isolates and focuses attention on certain important attitudes or features of behaviour (Speirs 55).

Brecht was well aware that high degree of seriousness of the traditional drama, both in form and content, was very suitable for the bourgeois theatre. That is why he comicalized his theatrical writings and performances as much as possible. And it serves his intended goals well. Comic is especially the substance of his songs on the stage. The protagonist of *Mother Courage and Her Children* is a poor canteen woman who follows the army camps to sell the articles like belts, shoes and eatables to the soldiers. She meets the sergeant and the recruiting officer and addresses them in a very humorous manner. She orders them to ask the soldiers to stop their warring activities and buy the needed items from

her. She says that she can provide the soldiers with very strong shoes which can accompany them to their death field quite successfully. Though their hair is filled with lice but they do not mind it and simply move on. She further says that the soldiers fight for the society therefore 'they need good boots to wear on'. She issues some self-mocking slogans: the soldiers cannot fight, if they are not given food; the blood that the soldiers spill for the nation is red therefore they should buy red meat from the canteen woman; to receive cannons from the enemy on their belly, first they should fill the belly with food. The refrain of the song is again self-critical and self-mocking. It reads thus: 'Christians awake! Winter is gone!' To describe the serious discourse of war in a mocking manner ridicules the sanctity of its discourse.

Thesis of Walter Benjamin posits dialectics as the aesthetic charter of the Brechtian dramaturgy and theatricality (Benjamin 5). Dialecticality of theatrical performance is in fact a political methodology to place two contrasting arguments against each other. A series of actions and reactions against each other lets the weaknesses and strengths of the arguments revealed. Mumford holds that the contradictions in the Brechtian plays and productions start a series of actions and reactions that produces so many other things (Mumford 85-86). For example, the process of interpenetration of contradictory sides continues to pulverize both the discourses to lead to the new one. This artistic strategy is used by Brecht to let the reader and audience look at the gaps and irregularities in an ideology that apparently looked seamless. In the six scene of *Mother Courage and Her Children*, the central character is busy in counting merchandise. Believing that war is to go on, she sends her daughter Katrin along with the Clerk to buy some items from the nearby market. On her way back home, the daughter is attacked by some soldier. Her face is badly wounded. Permanent scars on the face finish all the chances of her marriage. Courage is very upset and says: 'war be damned'. In the next scene, suddenly the war resumes and her business is once again at the peak. She forgets her curse against war and starts the song that eulogizes the war. She says that war 'kills off the weak, but they're write-off in peacetime too'. She calls war a 'better deal' and a 'private trading'. She seems singing a hymn to the war phenomenon. The stubborn individual in her seems to be thriving. Scene seven that consists of the song of Courage is juxtaposed by the playwright against the scene six where she was cursing the war. The dialecticization of these two opposing scenes foregrounds the unity of opposites. Resultantly the audience's mind is challenged by some questions. Which is more dear to Courage: Katrin or war? Who is more

powerful: the mother in *Courage* or the businessman in *Courage*? Is *Courage* really an independent woman or she is the interpellated subject? Will the audience admire her for her surrender to her capitalistic instincts or condemn her for her nonresistance against the temptation of the business drives? The answers to all these questions are supposed to be provided by the readers. And they are mobilized by the dialectical song to vote against the capitalistic character of *Courage*.

Capitalism has a lot of ideologies to tempt and interpellate the masses. One of them is called rugged and stubborn individualism. It hooks humans through beautiful slogans like Descartes' saying: "I think therefore I am" (qtd in Clarke 209). The philosopher believes that the human will has strength enough to bring a sea change in the world. It means man is the powerful subject and the world is just the weak and direct object. Ideology of capitalistic social formation welcomes, admires, elevates, distinguishes its subject so successfully that he begins to believe that he is the metaphor of the grammatical subject - source of action and independence – but reality is this that he has been subjected to ruling hegemonies that are devised to safeguard the interests of the elite (Belsey 61). Brecht in all of its plays is supposed to challenge and question such norms and musts of the capitalistic ideologies. In his play *The Good Person of Setzuan*, he achieves his this goal through songs especially. Song of the Smoke is a rebuttal to the stubborn individualism of capitalism. The narrator of the song says that he believed in his childhood that the self-support of a human can earn him wonders. Now when the narrator has grown up, he feels disillusioned; he says that the expansion of a rugged and stubborn individualism can never solve the problems of the community as a whole. Intelligence of a self-propelling man ultimately leads to the hunger and poverty of all the weak around as they are not well equipped in technological terms. This discovery of truth comes to him but in the old age. He says:

I too say: drop it  
Like smoke twisting grey  
Into ever colder coldness you'll Blow away

John Willet is a significant critic on Brecht. He gives the concept of split characters in the plays of Brecht. According to his scholarship, the Brechtian characters are split characters. They are the unity of opposites in themselves. What they say, they believe not; what they believe they say not (Willet 123- 134). Brecht is basically a socially committed artist; he historicizes his playwriting. Consequently, he composes the sociopolitical

realities in an ironic way. That is why the characters are drawn under the dialectical mode. These characters are not fixed entities; rather, unlike the Aristotelian characters, they are always in the process of making. Their consciousness is always bulging out in some other color, mode and direction. When his plays are brought to the stage, again the concept of split character is realized through acting. Brecht says “the actor ought not to ‘drop into’ song, but should clearly mark it off from the rest of the text” (Brecht 203). The central character of the play *The Good Person of Setzuan* is a prostitute. She is divided into two selves: the kind soul who resists capitalism and the cruel figure that practices capitalism. She loves Yang Sun and is ready to go to any limits to monetarily assist him. She sings this entire phenomenon. She says that she would accompany to Beijing with her lover at any cost. She would not reckon whatever it costs her. She will not allow the wise thoughts stop her from loving her lover. She does not care whether he loves her or not. She would sacrifice all of her wealth and life for his sake. The text of the song is self-critical. It invites the reader to understand its ironical tone. On the stage, the actor sings this song with the help of gestus. Gestus stands for an acting that instigates the audience to go for the unsaid meanings only. That is why gestures and smile of the character on the stage convey the opposite of the said meanings. Pfister is very correct when he says that a song in Brecht’s plays “exposes the fictionality of the play and subjects it to a critical and distanced commentary” (Pfister 80).

The concept of utopia has a different connotation with Brecht. It is not a mode of escape for him to resort to the configuration of a fantastic world of an unbridled imagination. Instead of being a figment of imagination, his utopian world is a technique plus a reality but of its own kind. Brecht, under the influence Marxism, believes in the strength of a fertile and dynamic vision. He believes that the higher the dream, the greater would be its advantage. Sometimes, not always, he takes, on purpose, his audience off the sociopolitical realities. The world he makes us visit is the site for ideal beauties and blessings and luxuries. This is also a reality but of much advanced stage. This idealistic utopian world sets the very goal for us that we are born to achieve one day. Dickson in his book *Towards Utopia: A Study of Brecht* sheds light on Brechtian utopia (Dickson 4-24). He says that utopia with Brecht is the name of that reality which we must achieve someday. Today it seems to be a fantastic idea but in fact it is the name of the ultimate goal of the human race. Brecht sometimes takes the help of songs in plays to sketch out utopia in the minds of the spectators. The song of the green cheese in *The Good Person of Setzuan* consists in

the provisions of the utopian world. The singer says that the day is in store for the mankind when the son of the poor parents would be the owner of the earth along with all of its treasures, minerals, metals, diamonds and crops. The difference between the poor and the rich will be deleted. And the crimes and vices would automatically come to an end. When the moon is the green cheese, the blue sky would look down upon the grass and the honey that stands for the best of nature would be adequately available to all the humans. No one would be the colonized and the oppressed as the very laws that produce the exploitative and coercive social structures are soon to be finished. This utopian song is a hope for the downtrodden and voiceless of the earth. It also works as contrast to the exiting sociopolitical realities that continue to fleece and dehumanize the social beings. In the epic plays of the early thirties, it was the propagandist procedure and tone that Brecht pursued in his plays. But in his later plays, he strengthened the hope the people through his dialectical theatre. The following lines of the utopian song encapsulize the very gist of revolutions for the oppressed humanity.

And as we have waited quite long enough  
This new world has got  
to be born

Song and music in the plays of Brecht are positioned very strategically. One of the most significant uses of the songs is to block the phenomenon of trance among the audience. In league with the loosely knit plot, songs in Brecht's theatre minimize the "dovetailing of the scenes" and tempt the audience to rationally gaze over the situations and episodes of the play (Mumford 81). The other function of music and song in his theatre is to historicize the narrative. This technique tends to succeed as every among the audience is already aware of the subject matter. The techniques of the alternative theatricality present the common theme in politico-strategic way. And that is the hallmark of Brecht's theatre.

## **Conclusion**

This research pursued in the above pages produced very significant results. Brecht makes use of songs in his plays to carry out his political agenda that is to convince the audience to question the existing dominant ideologies. For this purpose he places song and music in strategic positions. First, songs are mostly not to extend the theme of the plays in the Brechtian playwritings. Rather, they are used to make critical commentary on the thematic material of the narratives. It is a very tactful strategy to alert the audience to the weaknesses of the ruling hegemonies. The songs operate as the diagnostic commentator on a performance or

episode. Second, quite opposite to the traditional dramatic theatre, Brechtian theatre and plays practically participate in the process of realizing an episodic plot. In a loosely built plot every scene is an independent narrative too. This fragmented plot constructs one incident against the other ones. Consequently, the discourses within the narratives are dialecticized and contrasted to let the flat aspects of the ideologies emerge before the reader and audience. Third, sometimes the songs are used to acquaint the reader with utopian world that is a contrast to the present social environment. This song about idealistic realities tells the spectators that one day they must literally attain that paradisaical site that seems to be a dream today. Fourth, songs in Brechtian plays are also employed to ridicule the discourses of the hegemonic social structures which have grown outdated and worn out. Owing to different constraints the present study focused on the role of Brechtian songs in the political plays of Brecht. There are so many other areas to be explored by the future researchers like images and style of Brechtian songs.

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