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Contextualising Immanuel Kant's Views on Enlightenment in Bertolt Brecht's *Life of Galileo*

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Abstract:

The idea and concept of Enlightenment has been eloquently explained by Immanuel Kant, a German Scholar, who has elaborated his views on Enlightenment by means of relating it with the field of philosophy and psychology, and therefore defines it as a state, whereby an individual attains a sense of perception and skill to exercise his "reason" in the best possible manner. He has defined Enlightenment as a kind of "intellectual" movement, i.e. enlightenment of the mind itself.

Thus, in this paper I aim at discussing the views of Immanuel Kant about Enlightenment and simultaneously I will be tracing the reflection of the same in the play, titled *Life of Galileo* by Bertolt Brecht. He was also a renowned German playwright, who has revolutionized the world of theatre through his novel concept of "Epic Theatre", whereby the spectators are expected to critically reflect upon the various incidents being depicted on stage.

Brecht's play *Life of Galileo* depicts the clash between "reason" and "faith" in such a significant manner, as if, it aims at providing us the very essence of the societal restlessness that was the hallmark of the society of Italy during the 16th and 17th century. This is quite evident in the contrasting beliefs and ideologies of Galileo and Roman Catholic Church, as they both were the proponents of different theories of universe: 'Heliocentric' and 'Geocentric' Cosmology respectively. On this account, we can say that, this play provides us an insight into the socio-political scenario of Italy during the 16th and 17th century. Moreover, Kant's notion of enlightenment can be understood in a more significant manner by means of analysing the portrayal of Galileo, a man who stands for "reason" and "knowledge."

Keywords: Enlightenment, Geocentric and Heliocentric Theory of Universe, Private and Public use of Reason, Epic Theatre, Alienation Effect.

Enlightenment was an intellectual movement which came into light roughly around middle of the 17th Century. Initially, the ideas of cultural and intellectual reforms started in France during the 1500s-1600s, and subsequently these ideas swept through Europe in the late 1600s -1700s. The period of Enlightenment firmly laid emphasis on the notion that the economic and political reforms were possible, if the people were determined enough to exercise their 'reason' and possessed a firm belief in their 'intellectual faculties'.

The notion of Enlightenment focussed primarily on 'reason' as the most crucial and primary source of authority and legitimacy, which can be further linked with the ideas such as liberty, equality, progress, tolerance, fraternity and constitutional government. At the same time, it

stresses on the notion of 'freedom', which provides ample opportunities to the people to explore, investigate and learn. Thus, it can be argued that, if freedom was the heart of Enlightenment, then a belief in man's potential to reason, a hope for a new and better world was its soul.

During this particular period of time, there were number of scientific facts and discoveries being brought into light by eminent scholars like; Johannes Kepler, a German astronomer, he postulated: Three Laws of Planetary Motion. Galileo Galilie, who was considered as the Father of Modern Science, observed and described the Moons of Jupiter, the phases of Venus and even supported Copernicus' Heliocentric model of Universe.

Subsequently, these scientists tore down the flawed set of "scientific beliefs" established by the ancients like: (Ptolemy's Geocentric model of Universe), which was supported by Aristotle and maintained by the Church. In fact the scientists like Copernicus and Galileo, aimed at conveying the "true laws of universe" on account of their scientific observations and discoveries. As a result, people started thinking that they could use their own intellect and reasoning abilities in order to challenge the authority of tradition and dogmatic religious beliefs. Therefore, gradually 'a wave of reform' swayed throughout Europe in religious, political, economic and social spheres.

Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher, who is very well acknowledged as the central figure of modern philosophy, has expressed his views on the notion of Enlightenment, in the essay titled, "What is Enlightenment?" According to him, "Enlightenment is the man's release from self incurred tutelage." He states that, immaturity is a state whereby an individual solely relies on opinions of others to make any decision and thereby, he lets others decide for him and thus his condition can be equated with that of the "domestic cattle."

Kant further goes on to talk about, the various reasons for this tutelage and states that "laziness" is the first and primary factor that leads to this kind of immaturity. Secondly, "cowardice" and fear of failure, which stops and pulls him down so much so that he finds it too difficult to exercise his reason. The third and most crucial is the sense of "complacency and blind obedience", whereby people at the position of authority and power list out some rules and protocols to be followed by the masses. Consequently, the immature people immediately agree upon those given set of rules, which ultimately adds up to their state of immaturity.

If on one hand, Kant has mentioned the various reasons for this immaturity, then on the other hand, he has also mentioned certain qualities that an individual should inculcate and imbibe within himself, in order to shed away this tutelage and these qualities are: "courage", "resolution" and "vigour" which will entitle him to exercise his 'reason.' Moreover, in the beginning of the essay Kant has very rightly pointed out the motto of enlightenment, *Sapere aude!* "Have the courage to use your own reason!"

In a way Kant is bringing into light two contrary states of a man's personality. If an individual chooses to follow the path of laziness, cowardice and blind adherence, then undoubtedly, his condition can be equated with the domestic cattle. But, if an individual chooses to follow the

path of courage, resolution and vigour then definitely he could be able to attain a sense of enlightenment. In short, Kant is aiming at bringing into light the very fact that, a person embarks on the journey to attain a sense of enlightenment, if and only if, he is determined enough to exercise his own reason, and at the same time, resolves to set free himself from the wall of immaturity that he has created around himself.

Now, understanding and tracing the reflection of Kant's ideas about “enlightenment” by means of taking into consideration various incidents and events from Brecht's play, titled *Life of Galileo*.

One of the most prominent playwrights of the twentieth century, Bertolt Brecht, has left behind a body of work that has set 'the tone' for modern drama. He is credited for bringing into light a new form of theatre i.e. “Epic Theatre.” This is a form of political drama which intends to appeal to ‘reason’ rather than ‘emotions’. This form of theatre is very well known as ‘didactic theatre’ or ‘instructive theatre’, where learning and amusement goes hand in hand. He viewed epic theatre as a part of enlightenment project, which not only entertains the spectators but also stimulates them to reflect upon the various incidents quite objectively and critically; as ‘the ulterior motive of this kind of theatre is to instigate a social change.’ Moreover, this critical engagement of the spectators is what is known as ‘A -effect ’ or “Alienation effect,” one of the most peculiar feature of Brecht's Epic Theatre. In this kind of theatre the spectators are expected to critically and quite objectively reflect upon the events being depicted on stage, rather than to undergo the experience of ‘catharsis’ as propounded by Aristotle. Therefore it is also known as “non-Aristotelian” theatre.

Life of Galileo is one of the greatest plays by Brecht, which falls under the domain of ‘didactic’ and ‘instructive’ drama. In context of the greatness of this play, John Willet says, the play is “a hymn to reason.” As, on the surface level, the play turns out as a straight forward chronicle of the 17th Century intellectual history, whereby in Fifteen Scenes, Brecht brilliantly describes the life history of a renowned Italian mathematician and astronomer, Galileo Galilei. But, at the very core of this play lies the theme of the conflict between dogmatic beliefs (propounded by the ecclesiastical scholars) versus scientific theories (propounded by Galileo). The play also interrogates the value of authenticity and constancy of scientific theories in the face of religious oppression.

Initially in terms of providing a theory about the origin of universe, the ecclesiastical scholars have readily accepted Geocentric model of universe as propounded by the Greek astronomer and geographer, Ptolemy. His model of universe is also known as Ptolemaic System, whereby he propagated the very fact that, it is the earth that lies at the centre of the universe, while other planets move around it in circular orbits. This theory of Geocentric cosmology was readily accepted and embraced by the religious authorities, as it strengthened and even solidified their authority and position of power. They believed that it will strengthen and ascertain the 'faith' of the masses in the Catholic system and faith in God.

Dr. Jennifer Minter rightly pointed out that “by propagating the view that, the earth is static, they effortlessly peddle the belief that the pope lies at the centre of the universe (Earth) and

from this position the religious hierarchy is fixed and assured.” Thus, in one sense the religious authorities turn out to be the propagators of the dogmatic and cultural beliefs, solely to maintain and strengthen their position of authority and power.

But, on the other hand, Galileo supported Copernicus' Heliocentric model of universe, he even testified this theory by means of careful examination of the planetary motions with the help of a telescope. According to this theory, it is the Sun that lies at the centre of the universe, while other planets revolve around it. Thus, in a way Galileo turns out to be a proponent of 'reason' who possesses the 'courage' and 'resolution' to uphold his scientific discoveries. This is how he empowers the peasants and the masses to gain the worldly knowledge that discreetly affects them, so that they could be enlightened about the 'true' and 'factual' theory related to Cosmology. Moreover, Cathy Turner in her essay titled, "Life of Galileo: Between Contemplation and the Command to Participate", rightly states that “the play quite explicitly attacks the religious suggestion that faith is superior to knowledge.”

In this play, Galileo exercises both, the private as well as the public reason, and in order to understand this notion we need to look into Kant's notion of private and public use of reason. In the words of Kant, private reason is defined as:

"Private use I call that which one may make of it in a particular civil post or office, which is entrusted to him."

In simple terms, by the term "private" Kant aims at referring to the sphere, where individuals find themselves completely restricted from expressing their own views, solely because they are expected to comply with the obligations of their official designations.

In this play, Galileo exercises his private use of reason, by means of giving lectures to the students at the University of Padua in Venice. He is a learned person, who is more interested in his research in pure science rather than in its commercial applications. Though, he has been appreciated for his expertise, such as, for introducing a vital instrument like "compass", which has facilitated in trade and calculations. He is asked to produce similar instruments that could give a fillip to trade and commerce. Soon, he is convinced that research in pure science is of no immediate concern to the Venetian Republic. He realises the very fact that in Venice, the scientific discoveries are coupled up with materialistic gains, but being a professor there, he has to abide by this ideology.

How research is coupled up with commerce is quite evident from these statements being spoken by the Procurator of Padua University to Galileo:

“What is worth scudi is what brings scudi in. If you want money you'll have to produce something else” (15).

But within his heart, Galileo really admits that, he is much more interested in proving and testifying Copernican's theory, therefore, he decides to write a treatise titled, "*Discorsi*", to propagate his discoveries as a 'scholar', among the masses, and this is how he makes public use of reason. Understanding the notion of public use of reason in terms of Kant's ideology, as he himself defines it as:

"By the public use of one's reason I understand the use, which a person makes of it as a scholar before the reading public."

In simple words, we can say that, by the term "public", Kant aims at referring to the sphere in which individuals are free to express their own views, and are not at all restricted by the obligations of their official duties. So, in context of the play, Galileo, a man who is considered as the great virtuoso of Science, who has made pioneering observations in astronomy, and who has an abiding faith in "human reason", ultimately decides to put forth his 'findings' before the general public in the vernacular language rather than in the scholarly language i.e. Latin.

Galileo says:

"I might write in the language of the people, for the many, rather than in Latin for the few" (79).

Here, in terms of Kant's ideology, Galileo makes use of what, Kant calls as the 'freedom of pen.' This in itself turns out to be a very radical step on the part of Galileo, who is determined enough to enlighten the masses about the factual truths related to Cosmology and thereby to empower and enable them to come out of the tutelage; means the religious and dogmatic beliefs. Pointing out the ignorance of the masses, Galileo remarks that:

"For 2000 years, people have believed that the Sun and all the stars of heaven rotate around mankind" (6).

Then, he goes on to bring into light his belief that, the new age of reason is about to come. He states that, there is a burning desire to know the "reason" behind natural phenomenon. People have begun to question, why a stone falls to the ground, and this points to the birth(genesis) of 'a new age of reason'. Galileo very rightly says:

"...the old days are over...What is written in the old books is no longer good enough...now we are breaking out of it and... this is a new time" (6).

When Galileo moves to the court of Florence, there the high ranking church officials and ecclesiastical scholars find the "proposition", "impossible", and labels it as "scandalous". In fact an old Cardinal calls Galileo an enemy of the human races and suggests that he should also be burned at the stake for heresy as Bruno, was years ago. To express his rejection of Galileo's doctrine the Cardinal says:

"We only disapprove of such doctrines as run counter to the scriptures...it is foolish, heretical and contrary to our faith. Mr. Galilei, tonight the Holy Office decided that the doctrine of Copernicus...is foolish, absurd, heretical and contrary to our faith. I have been charged to warn you that you must abandon this view" (57-60).

In fact, Cardinal Bellarmine tries to make Galileo understand the ground reality of the society in which he lives, whereby it is the religious officials who hold the position of power and authority and dictate the course of the life of the people. Moreover, these ecclesiastical

scholars believe themselves to be the agents of the almighty God, and on account of this fact, they believe it as their complete right and authority, to command the masses whether to 'believe' and 'follow' a particular model of universe or not.

In this context Gaby Divay, rightly points out that the ruling tactics and strategy of the people on the position of authority and power completely relies on their efforts to maintain their command and thereby, to keep the masses in "a state of dependency and ignorance."

As Galileo's doctrine spreads, it gives rise to religious, social and economic unrest, and as a result, Galileo is called to Rome to face the Inquisition for heresy. The Cardinal Inquisitor says that Galileo's trial has already been arranged, but Pope suggests him (the Cardinal) that Galileo should be shown the "instruments" of torture in order to frighten him into submission. Therefore, fearing prosecution and torture for his radical beliefs, which go against the time-honoured notions of the church and its priesthood, Galileo realises that, no new research is possible in countries, which are still reeling under the domination of the church. Thus, this is how in Rome the freedom of exploration and discovery has been denied to Galileo, which on the contrary is of prime importance for the masses to embark on the journey of attaining a sense of enlightenment according to Kant's ideology of 'Enlightenment.'

In order to reflect upon the conflict between reason and faith, M. A. Cohen rightly points out that "Brecht's play suggests a universal theme: means the theme of Authority versus the Individual and his freedom of inquiry."

Thus, Galileo finds himself caught between his private and public use of reason, and therefore decides to recant in order to strike a balance. As, it has also been argued by Kant that, in order to exercise the public and private use of reason, an individual should be worldly wise and must learn to strike a balance between the two, and this is what Galileo did by recanting.

Galileo's Speech of Recantation:

GALILEO. I Galileo Galilei, teacher of mathematics and physics in Florence, abjure what I have taught, namely that the sun is the centre of the cosmos and motionless and the earth is not the centre and not motionless. I foreswear, detest and curse, with sincere heart and unfeigned faith, all these errors and heresies as also any error and any further opinion repugnant to the Holy Church. (97-98)

It has been very rightly argued by Gaby Divay that "the central theme of the play is not the historical Galileo and his contributions to astronomy or mechanics, but the complex relationship between science, politics and religion...the main character draws an anachronistic picture of the socio-political situation of early 17th century Italy."

Galileo after recanting his doctrine has been banished to a house outside Florence. He has been living there for the past 10 years, without making any significant scientific discoveries so as not to startle and unsettle the papal authorities. The authorities are pleased that Galileo has given up the pursuit of his doctrine. But as the play reaches to its resolution, we get to know that, he has been secretly working on the '*Discorsi*' (The Discourses Concerning Two New

Sciences: Mechanics and Local Motion) and hiding the transcript inside the globe on his table.

So, when Andrea Sarti, his pupil comes to meet him before leaving for Holland, to pursue his research there, Galileo hands over the transcript to him, asks him to put it under his coat and smuggle it out of Italy- away from the religiously dogmatic boundaries. On this account, the play is sometimes acknowledged as an "optimistic tragedy", whereby Galileo has proved himself to be true martyr to the cause of science. In one sense, Andrea turns out 'as a torch bearer' of the enlightenment project initiated by Galileo. His action of smuggling away the transcript, rekindles the sense of 'new beginning' and 'hope' among the spectators.

Moreover, at the end of the play, Andrea very rightly points out that: "We are really just at the beginning." This statement brings into light Kant's concluding argument whereby he states that, "We don't live in an Enlightened Age, rather we live in an Age of Enlightenment."

By this statement, he means that, "Enlightened Age" would be one whereby we have become successful enough to overcome this 'self incurred tutelage,' completely. But an "Age of Enlightenment", is the present age, whereby, we are 'still in the process' of overcoming this self incurred tutelage, and at the same time, we have begun to exercise our freedom-- to express ourselves, to exercise our reason and at the top of it all, to make progress through critique. In a way, we have just embarked on the journey of attaining a sense of 'Enlightenment', but still there is a long way to go. Since, 'Enlightenment' can only be brought and realized slowly and gently, it is a gradual process.

Thus, on account of analysing this play, we find that, the mission of enlightenment has been initiated by a renowned astronomer, Galileo, who (in terms of Kant's ideology) turns out as an individual who possesses the 'courage', 'resolution' and 'vigour' to stand for the cause of rationality. He also possesses the strength to exercise his "reason" (his act of writing the 'Discorsi') which ultimately entitled him to serve a noble cause, i.e. to enlighten the masses about the 'true facts' related to cosmology.

Food for Thought

Now if we try to read Immanuel Kant's essay on "Enlightenment" in terms of understanding the contemporary scenario of our society, primarily it's socio-political scenario, then one could easily trace the close nexus that exists between 'religion' on one hand, and 'politics' on the other hand.

The people at the position of power and authority aim at propagating their political ideologies by means of using the 'religious beliefs' of the masses as an 'effective tool.' As a result, the ignorant masses get completely swayed by these dogmatic beliefs and political tactics, so much so that they seem to lack the prudence to exercise their 'reason'. This ultimately leads to the gradual crumbling up of the socio-political foundation of our society.

Don't you think that, if we all will try to practice the idea of "exercising our reason" in various spheres of our lives, as propounded by Immanuel Kant, then we can definitely lead a successful life, and at the same time, we can bring out a change in the society for the better?

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