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Shen Teh/ Shui Ta: The Shifting Identity in Bertolt Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan* through the Lens of Marxist Fetishization

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Abstract:

Modern European Drama has emerged as one of the most significant historical and socio-political accounts of the World War II era. The playwrights like Bertolt Brecht, Dario Fo, Samuel Beckett, Ionesco and Henrik Ibsen to name a few have established a new form of Theatre and represented ideas pertinent to the spatio-temporal sensibilities of the twentieth century in their notable works.

This paper is a humble attempt to understand the mechanisms of Bertolt Brecht in association with the Theatre of the Absurd and his attempt at delving into the world of Marxism, Commodity formation, and Fetishization of the Commodity. This paper will specifically read *The Good Person of Szechwan* through the lens of Marxist Fetishization and uncover the use of Masking in the play in reference to the Marxist ideologies that are at play in Brecht's work.

Keywords: ***Modern European Drama, Bertolt Brecht, Epic Theatre, Theatre of the Absurd, Marxism.***

"Art is not a mirror with which to reflect Reality, but a hammer with which to shape it" (Bertolt Brecht). The playwright who did not confine to 'art for art's sake' but believed in the didactic and revolutionary potential of a work of art, Bertolt Brecht created a new theatrical form that would help restructure and rewrite reality of his times. He wrote *The Good Person of Szechwan* in exile during the rise of the Nazi regime in the World War II era. The play was

first performed on 4th February 1943 in Switzerland and first published in 1953. Brecht considered another title for the play which was, *Die Ware Liebe*, which meant 'love as a commodity'. A play on words in German, *Die wahre Liebe* meant 'true love'. Thereby, attempting to create a dichotomous intertwining of love and commodity in the naming itself. However, he went ahead with *The Good Person of Szechwan* because he wanted the play to be much more than just about love being presented as a commodity. He established a new form of theatre that defied the norms of the Aristotelian Theatre and brought to the fore the socio-political framework of that time. This paper, therefore, would analyse how Brecht's Epic Theatre is linked to the Marxist idea of Commodity Fetishism and how Shen Teh or Shui Ta's changing character is representative of the layered interpretation of the play.

During the early twentieth century, Brecht was highly influenced by Chinese Theatre. He admired their use of the stage, the techniques of distancing the character and the actor, and the breaking of the fourth wall. He tried to incorporate these in his plays and came up with a new form of theatre. Brecht developed the technique called 'Verfremdungeffekte' (alienation effect). This 'V' effect or the 'alienation effect' helped transform the audience from a passive observer to an active participator. There was a breaking of the fourth wall where dialogues were directly spoken to the audience, making them think about the socio-political placing of certain sections of people within the society. There were no specific details about the characters, making them either stock characters who represented certain section of the population or were ambiguous enough to not distract the audience from the central themes of the play. This meant that the audience could not relate to the characters and thereby did not feel any empathy or connection. The use of half curtains and inappropriate music too helped the audience feel alienated from the piece of art. This too was a very important part of the 'V' effect. Brecht believed that it was only when the audience was detached from the play that they could analyse it critically and start reasoning the political framework instead of feeling, in the Aristotelian terms, a cathartic experience.

In the Interlude of Scene 4, "Shen Teh enters, carrying Shui Ta's mask and costume". The act of masking is at the heart of this play. The use of the masks by Brecht is different from the Greek Classical plays and Asiatic plays. Where the Greek plays used masks to distinguish themselves as a character and present their personality, Brecht uses the mask to hide Shen Teh's personality and alienate her from the audience. Another contrasting feature was that the Greek and Asiatic plays usually had male actors and hence needed to wear female masks whereas here in *The Good Person of Szechwan*, Shen Teh wears a mask of a boy, Shui Ta, inverting the

stage dynamics. It represents hiding of the actual personality of Shen Teh and taking on the personality of Shui Ta. However, this act of Masking is problematised by Brecht. “Marx -- like Hegel -- looks at an object in its movement, in its becoming, and not as a static "object," which can be explained by discovering the physical "cause" of it” (Fromm). This emphasises the ‘historical materialism’ that presents a commodity as a subjective entity with a history of production which needs to be considered and acknowledged in the parallel juxtaposition of Shen The converting into Shui Ta through the act of masking. She, like a commodity, is seen to be shifting form to become more fetishized in the society through the mystery that Shui Ta brings with himself. This can also be viewed as Shen Teh, the proletariat, erasing her identity in the process of creation of the commodity of Shui Ta, who is fetishized, mystified, and removed from the actual production process.

In Marxist terms, Brecht tries to depict how the whole process of labour is masked by the Bourgeoisie and what is presented to the masses is just a commodity. Thus the commodity comes forward as a ‘mystical’ entity with no history of its own, creating relations between people and commodities. The real relationship between a proletariat who provides labour and a Bourgeoisie is then replaced by the relation between the commodity that the proletariat creates and the Bourgeoisie. This is what Brecht, with his new theatre, tries to critique. The half-drawn curtains, the technicians and musicians working on the stage during the performance and various other details tend to break that ‘mystical’ element and make visible to the audience, “...[that] you are not Wizard, / Friends, but workers...” (Esslin 136). Hence, Brecht is seen to be against the notion of propagating art through technology. For him, imitation of a piece of art, for example, Mona Lisa’s painting, not only denies ownership but also denies it its history and thereby, again masking the process of labour that has gone into it.

This idea of the commodities being fetishized hides the actual production of these commodities. “The whole mystery of commodities, all the magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labour as long as they take the form of commodities, vanishes therefore, so soon as we come to other forms of production” (Marx). According to Marx, a product only becomes a commodity when it has an exchange value, a use-value and when labour goes into it. Hence every commodity requires labour yet the work of the labour is hidden and the commodity is mystified. But what makes the worker work even though he lives in miserable conditions is the idea of ‘false consciousness’. The Proletariat can only rise when they revolt against Capitalism. But for this to happen, they need to be united and have a class consciousness that would result in a radical change. Due to induced competition and several

other techniques, the Bourgeoisie maintain their hegemonic control over the Proletariat as they do not let them get united. False consciousness then keeps them divided and hence a victim of Capitalism. But another important reason for this inequality is the interpellation of the dominant ideology.

According to Louis Althusser in his essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", the proletariat has to be interpellated by the dominant ideology to maintain the structure of the State Power. This works through the State Apparatuses, RSA, and ISA. The RSA (Repressive State Apparatus) functions primarily through repression and secondarily through ideologies. On the other hand, the ISA (Ideological State Apparatus) works primarily through Ideologies and secondarily through repression and encloses various institutions like schools, religion, and families. These ideologies are that of the Bourgeoisie or the ruling class, in the early 20th century and hence, they interpellated the ideas through the process of hegemony or indirect repression. In the play, the State machinery directly influences the people by restricting their wages. Subsequently, the societal and ethical codes of conduct on Shen Teh to be morally upright and work for the betterment of the society even at the cost of her life brings forth the hegemonic repression that ISA brings about. Ideology is defined by Althusser as a "representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of production". But an important question that he addresses is why the relationships are 'Imaginary'.

The German philosopher, Ludwig Feuerbach believed that due to the alienated conditions of living, the labour is alienated from his work and his surroundings. The invention of the 'Assembly line' by Ford particularly brought about alienation in the lives of the working class. The division of labour and addition of machines did not allow any worker to know the full process of the production of a product. This alienated him from his work. The petty salaries made it impossible for him to buy the products that he made, further alienating him. The inability to own and get recognised for what they create made them the 'alienated labour'. To survive, they alienate themselves from these alienating conditions, creating a belief or 'Imaginary Relationship' with their real conditions of existence which Althusser terms Ideology. The idea of morality too is a dominant ideology that propagates through the ISA. It operates at multiple levels like gender, class, etc.

Hence, the idea of the 'Good Person' is a construct of the Bourgeoisie or the ruling class to maintain their powerful position and anyone who tries to take away their power is

termed ‘bad’. Hence Shen Teh is constantly judged because of the ‘immoral’ work that she does. However, Shen Teh expresses the plight of the entire proletariat class when she says, “How can I be good when everything is so expensive?” (Prologue). It is through the character of Shen Teh that Brecht tries to represent the economic deprivation of the Proletariats who are exploited to no avail. The idea of ‘good’ is reiterated throughout the play. It is interesting to note that Brecht decided to keep the title ‘The Good Person of Szechwan’ and not ‘The Good Woman of Szechwan’. It not only plays on the pun of ‘good’ as being both morally good and being a ‘good’ in terms of a commodity but also presents the ‘Person’ to be ‘Good’, keeping the gendered perspective out of it. This could be suggestive of how Brecht wanted it to not only confine to the idea of a ‘Good Woman’ but look at it from the class perspective where Bourgeois would label all the persons who follow the dominant ideology as good.

Thus Shen Teh’s position in a way is triply problematic. She is a woman who is a proletariat, working as a prostitute. Her class, gender, and occupation make her devoid of any power or capital. The proletariat is referred to as “the scum of the district.” She is then treated just like a ‘good’ or a commodity. “In a capitalist society, this labour-power which produces commodities is itself a commodity” (Marx). It is because she can be bought at a price, has a use value, and an exchange value that she is dehumanised and becomes a commodity. In her essay, “When The Goods Get Together”, Luce Irigaray talks about how women are no more than goods as she says,

> The trade that organizes patriarchal societies takes place exclusively among men. Women, signs, currency, all pass from one man to another or... suffer the penalty of relapsing into the incestuous and exclusively endogamous ties that would paralyze all commerce. (Irigaray 119)

In the play, Brecht tries to portray the workings of a patriarchal society. For Shen Teh to survive, she needs help from the Gods, who represent the Bourgeois men. Her invasion of the masculine world of commerce is not easy to handle and could disrupt the existing structure.

Though Shen Teh is labelled as the ‘angel of the slums’ and tries to remain good to everyone by offering them space, food, clothing, and comfort, she gets entangled. For her to survive, she needs a man, Shui Ta. This is why the sister-in-law says, “He’s mean enough, but at least he’ll save her business”. He stands for reason and rationality. It is only when Shen Teh transforms from a woman to a man that she gains power. Shui Ta is a rich Bourgeoisie who does not need to think about being good or bad. It is only the ones not in power whom society

judges and marginalizes. When Shen Teh is exploited by Sun, an out-of-work pilot, on account of love and marriage, he makes it clear that he is the one who is obliging her by marrying her. Even though he too is devoid of money and has no occupation, he still is counted in the Bourgeoisie and is a man of power.

The power dynamics thus make Shen Teh, a commodity that could be exploited. In the eyes of society, she is bad as long as she works as a prostitute. But she suddenly transforms into a good woman once she gains power as a petty Bourgeoisie. This constant expectation to be good exhibits the hypocrisy and pretence of the Bourgeois society. In Scene 1, she speaks to the audience, "They are bad. / They are no man's friend. / They grudge even a bowl of rice. / They need it all themselves. / How can they be blamed?" The proletariat is always termed 'bad' and the Bourgeois is the 'good'. A person needs to survive in the poverty-stricken world and if he steals, he is not 'good'. "How can intelligence compete with hunger?" This again hints at how these constructs of 'good and 'evil' are produced by the dominant class to maintain its power and position.

Hence in the real world, where Bourgeoisie is superior and powerful, Shen Teh is seen as a commodity because of her occupation, class, and gender. But once she gets property, she uplifts her occupation and could be counted in the small bourgeoisie but her gender still weighs her down and people still use her. It is only when she changes her gender too, that people start seeing her as a person. But ironically, this masking of Shen Teh into Shui Ta is the process of the formation of a commodity in the real world that Brecht presents in front of us. The work or labour that goes into the creation of Shui Ta, setting up his value as a wealthy Bourgeois man and using him to maintain relations with society makes Shui Ta a commodity for Shen Teh, who is labour producing this commodity.

The proletariat labour is alienated from the commodity that it creates. It is because it can't hold onto it forever. Economically, they cannot afford it; psychologically, there is no meaning in the work they do or the commodity that they create; the conditions of working are inhumane; the wages are minimal and the lack of recognition makes them alienated from their work. But in Brecht's play, Shen Teh can hold onto Shui Ta forever. He does mean something to her, she controls him and so she is not alienated from him. So Shen Teh produces the commodity- Shui Ta who has relations with the Bourgeoisie on her behalf. People know Shui Ta reference to Shen Teh, as he is "her cousin", making her superior to Shui Ta and giving her agency to control him. It is only because Brecht presents to the audience the process of

production of a commodity (Shui Ta in this case), or the labour that undergoes the making of that commodity (Shen Teh's transformation into Shui Ta), that the change can occur. But this transformation is only possible because Shui Ta, whom Shen Teh creates, is not fetishized. This gives power to the worker and could make people see the grave problems that the workers face. Once people know the labour that has gone behind a commodity, there would be a renewal of relations between people and not between people and commodities. This historical materialism when presented would help them develop a 'class consciousness' and would lead to the empowerment of the working class. This would improve the conditions of labour and they would no longer be alienated from their work. Thus it would be correct to say that the transformation of Shen Teh to Shui Ta is a transformation from the oppressed to the oppressor and from the object to the subject. It is because Shui Ta is a creation of Shen Teh and so in reality, Shen Teh gains power, control, authority, and space in the bourgeois society with the help of masking that ironically shows the process of production of a commodity.

Hence, Brecht through *The Good Person of Szechwan* tries to bring to the forefront commodity fetishism as it existed in the society of his time and continues to do so. Shen Teh gains power in the end but only because of her male counterpart. Through the creation of the character of Shui Ta, Brecht shows the process of commodity formation and he urges people to work towards creating that world of "Green Cheese" where no commodity would be fetishized, labour would have their rights and not be alienated, and where the "...poor shall inherit the earth."

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