

## **The Post-Marxist Relevance of Bertolt Brecht's '*The Life of Galileo*'**

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### **Abstract:**

Literature and literary theories of criticism have brought in new concepts and alterations to the existing theories. Marxism is one such ideology that has influenced many writers and critics till date. Post-Marxism accepts the inspiration deriving from Marx's political involvement but denies the Marxist emphasis on economy as the determinant or on the idea that there is a universal class -the proletariat. Bertolt Brecht was an erudite Marxist and his work has throughout intrigued and challenged the theatre eventually making its way into the awareness of a younger and wider audience. It becomes interesting to see why Brecht's plays are becoming increasingly popular in the present conditions without the existence of the ideology propagated by him. His play, *The Life of Galileo* reflects that the dramatist was never content to confine his Marxism to theory. He demands Marxism of equal intellectual rigor and practical effectiveness. Thus, in lieu of this, the research's primary objective remains to attempt an analysis of how Brecht incorporated his political content with the gracefulness of theatre.

**Keywords:** Marxism, dramatic theory, political theory, theatre.

### **Introduction**

During the sixties and the seventies, one observes several new forms of criticism coming into prominence. They include structuralist criticism, deconstruction, semiotics, dialogic criticism, new historicism, and cultural studies. Some of these theories have new historicism and cultural studies. Some of these theories have new concepts whereas most of these are alterations of the existing theories. Marxism was a sweeping ideology of one time that influenced the outlook of several writers and critics, through the idea of dialectic, historicizing, looking at the individual as a part of the collective, and several such notions.

Post-Marxism questions the reductive and anti-democratic nature of Marxism and of any political movement which explains changes in history in terms of the role of a specific class or privileged agency. Broadly speaking, post-Marxism accepts the inspiration deriving from Marx's political

involvement but denies the Marxist emphasis on the economy as determinate or on the idea that there is a universal class-the proletariat. Post-Marxist now argue for radical democracy Bertolt Brecht, born in 1898 was an erudite Marxist and yet supported modernist and non-realistic art. He has had a considerable influence on non-Marxist as well as Marxist criticism. Brecht's work has throughout intrigued and challenged the theatre, while increasingly attracting, those in the other arts and media and eventually making its way into the awareness of a younger and wider audience.

After his death, Brecht's stature takes on increasingly mythic proportions yet his reputation fails to reconcile either the critics of his generation or those of the generation that followed him who is approaching his work for the first time. But Brecht's entire theory was based on contradictions. In Willett's influential *Brecht on Theatre* (1964) observes, "the theory is treated as if it were a coherent whole which sprang from Brecht's head ready-made. The endless working and reworking it underwent, the nagging at a particular notion until it could be fitted in, the progress from an embryo to an often very differently formulated final concept, the amendments and the after- thoughts, all this is something that tends to be overlooked" (179). Brecht regarded art as a collective rather than a purely individualistic enterprise hence he viewed the theatre as a team work aiming at the common objective of social

transformation. This he achieved without compromising on aesthetic values. Hence it becomes interesting to see why his plays are becoming more and more popular in the present conditions without the existence of the ideology propagated by him. In the present study, his play, *The Life of Galileo* has been selected for analysis as the representative of his plays.

### **Marxism and Brecht**

Marxism, as Brecht understood it provided a framework where all the attitudes were allowed to crystallize into a positive pattern. What was more important to Brecht, it was aesthetically satisfying. What attracted him more was the dramatic quality of the Hegelian dialectic. Marxism adopted many concepts from Hegel - the necessity to curb individualism, and the necessity of education for making choices in life. The idea that an individual is part of the whole and that it plays a role in society is the starting point of Marxist belief. However, he departed from Hegel in the concept of the economic factor as the determining one.

Marxist criticism grounds its theory mainly on three claims: the first claim is the control of the mode of material production on the evolving history of humanity, the second claim of Marxism was the historical changes affecting the social class structure, establishing in each era dominant and subordinate classes engaging in a struggle for economic political and social advantage.

There was a belief in the human consciousness as being constituted by an ideology that is the beliefs, values, and ways of thinking and feeling through which the human beings perceive and by recourse to which they explain what they take to be reality.

In its distinctively, Marxist use, the ideology that is dominant in any era is conceived to be ultimate, the product of its economic structure and the resulting class relations and class interests. The Bourgeois ideology is supposed to produce and permeate the social and cultural institutions and practices of the present era. Orthodox Marxism saw Communism as a solution to capitalism and the problems generated through Marxist critics 'explain' the literature in any historical era as 'products' of the economic and ideological determinants specific to that era. Orthodox Marxism has difficulty in accommodating anything indeterminate or subjective -no mimetic art as well as something like the quantum theory which is taken up by the progressive Marxists like Brecht.

More flexible Marxists, building upon the scattered comments on the literature of Marx and Engels themselves, grant that the traditional literary works possess a degree of autonomy that enables most of them to transcend their bourgeois ideology sufficiently to represent the 'objective reality' of their time. Writers like Tolstoy, and Dickens were examples of such 'declassed individuals'. Later Marxists like Trotsky,

and Lenin accepted flexibility as permissible in Marxism.

The Hungarian thinker Georg Lukacs, the most widely influential of Marxist critics represents such a flexible view of the role of ideology. He proposed that each great work of literature creates its world which is unique and seemingly distinct from 'everyday reality'. He believes that the fictional world of some authors like Balzac and Tolstoy accords with the Marxist conception of the real world of class conflict, economic and social 'contradiction' and the alienation of the individual under capitalism

Lukács, while lauding nineteenth-century literary realism, attacked modernist experimental writers as 'decadent' examples of the exclusive concern with the subjectivity of the alienated individual in late-stage capitalism. He inaugurated a vigorous debate among Marxist critics about the political standing of formal innovators in twentieth-century literature

In opposition to Lukács, the Frankfurt School of German Marxists, especially Theodor Adorno and Horkheimer lauded Modernists such as Joyce Proust and Beckett proposing that their formal experiments by the very fact that they fragment and disrupt the life they 'reflect' establish a distance and effect a detachment which serves as implicit critique- or yield a 'negative knowledge' of the dehumanizing institutions and processes of society

under capitalism. Adorno makes two key points, first that philosophy 'lives on' after the Marxist attempt to discredit it for being too idealist, had failed and second that philosophy needs a sense of its impotence before the materiality of the world so that it might remain creative and open to the new. Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin also supported modernist and non-realistic Benjamin's attention to the effects of changing material conditions in the production of the arts; especially the recent technological developments of the mass media that have promoted, he said "revolutionary criticism of traditional concepts of art"(12).

In recent times many critics have realized the flexibility permitted by Marxism and that the Marxist critical theory is to some degree an evolving historical process. In the sixties, Louis Althusser and Pierre Macherey put forward their theories which assimilated structuralism. In England, Raymond Williams demonstrates an adaptation of Marxist concepts to his humanistic concern with the overall texture of an individual's 'lived experience'. A leading Marxist critic, Terry Eagleton has expanded and elaborated the concepts of Althusser and Macherey and stated that in the literary text, the ideological discourse is reworked into a specifically literary discourse. We have Frederic coming forward with the concept of the 'political unconscious' while talking about the interpretation of the texts. Gramsci, an Italian Marxist proposes the idea of a

massive revolution, yet he is a post-Marxist critic.

Thus, one sees several undercurrents in post-Marxist criticism. Adorno comes closer to our times. He criticizes heavily the evolutionist philosophy of Marxism since he believes it is self-destructive. Marxism on the other hand is an emancipated notion, expressing immense faith in man's power. Brecht himself can be called a post-Marxist critic in the sense of his views about modern works of art etc. However, he differs from Adorno in the strong optimism that he expresses. In that sense, Brecht was close to Orthodox Marxism. His theatre revived the spirit of artistic independence and aesthetic experimentation, to achieve this he propagated his theory about the theatre.

### **Brecht's Dramatic Theory**

Brecht's ideology was inseparable from his aesthetic and hence one has to have a look at the dramatic theory propounded by him. The earlier influences like that of the dramatists Piscator and Buchner shaped his dramatic theory to some extent. He was also influenced by the theatre of Pirandello, Claudel, and the German Expressionist producers and also by the Soviet 'constructivist' ideas of Meyerhold. Brecht denied the restrictions of time, place, or relevance to formal plot while narrating the events while talking about the 'epic theatre'. Thus, he defies the Aristotelian 'unities'. Brecht equates, what he calls Aristotelian drama with

bourgeois drama and by rejecting it, aims for a proletarian or communist drama.

Emotion is allowed to exist in Brecht's theatre, though subordinated to reason. However, he does not allow any identification with the actor. He believed in feeling emotions through the process of thinking thus trying to awaken the capacity of the spectator to act. He later invented the term 'theatre for a scientific age' and 'dialectical theatre' both these meaning theatre based on philosophical and social insights of Marx, attempting analysis of reality and thus constructively entertaining people.

Brecht, through his art, seeks not only to provide insight into the mechanics of history but also to stimulate the desire to change its course. This is the root meaning of his 'alienation effect' which is the key concept of his whole theory of art. He felt that due to identification with the character, thinking would be almost impossible since the audience would adopt the character's point of view. He believed that the actor should not only enact the character but also present a case of the others. Brecht believes that alienating means stripping the event of its self-evident quality and creating a sense of astonishment and curiosity about them. Here one is reminded of T.S. Eliot who claimed that the function of poetry is to "make people see the world afresh" (264).

Estrangement (*Entfremdung*) also occurs in Marx's theory, which refers to the situation of the modern man, deprived

of, robbed of, and alienated from the totality of human nature which should be his. Also related to the Marxist theory is the assumption that by intensifying the situation, it becomes a revolutionary one. Brecht believes, like Adorno, that through the estrangement effects, the audience would be jarred out of the passive and complacent acceptance of modern capitalist- society as a natural way of life into an attitude not only of modern Capitalist shortcomings but of active engagement with the forces of change. Thus, Brecht also seeks the active involvement of the spectators in the theatrical activity.

### **Brecht's Plays**

Bertolt Brecht started his career as a playwright with the publication of his first play, *Baal* (1918). This play was written soon after his association with Communism began. His musical, *The Three Penny Opera* arrived in 1928 as a result of his association with the musician Kurt Weill. *The Measures Taken* is written in the thirties, after World War I. With the rise of Nazi power, Brecht had to flee Germany in 1933. His *St. Joan of the Stockyards* is an anti-Nazi document. *The Rise and Fall of Arturo Ui* is again a direct criticism of Hitler, where the alternative presented to fascism is Communism.

Brecht's later plays, which appeared between 1940 to 1944, provide an excellent example of epic theatre - *Mother Courage and Her Children*, *The Life of Galileo*, *The Good Person of Setzuan*, and *The Caucasian Chalk*



*Circle*. These later plays of Brecht are more complicated and less schematized moral and social arguments. *Mother Courage and Her Children* anticipate many of the situations that war eventually brings. Brecht shows the conflict between maternal and mercantile sensibility since *Mother Courage and Her Children* is 'a war-time profiteer'. In *The Good Person of Setzuan*, through the dilemma of Shen Te that of survival versus being, good, Brecht tells us that in today's competitive society, human values are corroded, the same message is given in *The Three Penny Opera*. *The Life of Galileo* illuminates not only the problems that are going to be faced by scientists but it questions the whole spirit of free inquiry in a regimented state.

### **Brecht's *The Life of Galileo***

Galileo is Brecht's single play where a historical figure is used as the central character. The conflict between the free spirit of scientific inquiry and power becomes very intense and along with it raises the question of the social aspect of scientific invention. The play is a montage of fifteen scenes. One does not find the typical notions of space and time; it is a multidirectional construction. The scenes appear like patches, instead of a linear motion; reminding of the cinematic technique.

The plot follows Galileo's conflict with the Church closely, with some restructuring. However, his character from the first conception to the final figure is Brecht's creation. Brecht has presented Galileo as an individual whose

genius is all a piece of his weakness. His passion for research makes him an egoist. He accepts Andrea's devotion and wrecks, his daughter's marriage for the sake of science without showing much feeling. He enjoys life with all senses. Several times the play mentions his love of good food and wine, poetry, music, and beauty. He can be as cunning as to think of how to use the telescope as his invention. Yet it is this man who invented the pendulum. The whole point here is you should not praise or condemn him. As an interpreter of History, Brecht is less interested in Galileo's morals than in the effect his action is likely to have on human welfare and this means the happiness of ordinary people with their mixture of good nature and weakness. Hence Brecht revised the initial draft of the play echoing changing the political conditions. When the first draft was written, there was the first Atomic Bomb Explosion. Brecht kept on revising this play. Today, when the world is exposed to atomic war, nuclear war or for that matter, bio war, the play acquires an altogether different dimension.

Brecht makes his Galileo claim that astronomy reached the marketplace, which may never be a historical fact. However universal access to knowledge was an indirect consequence of Galileo's secularization of thought. Galileo has the choice between a life of relative freedom and hard work in earning his living as a teacher in the mercantile Republic of Venice or of leisure and luxury in the service of the Medici in Florence where

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the Papal influence is strong and he runs the risk of having his researches prohibited by the inquisition.

In Scene IX, when he is forced to recant, his pupils discuss this dilemma; "He should have never left Venice" says one of them. "There he could not have written his book" retorts the other, "And in Florence, he could not publish it" (n.p.) replies a third. This decision by Galileo of going to a totalitarian country is analogous to Brecht's dilemma. When he stayed in Denmark where he had to work hard to keep alive. Ironically the choice of Denmark turned out to be a wiser choice as compared to Russia.

Brecht recognized Galileo's significant contribution to the Industrial Revolution but he qualified it with the serious charge of treason since Galileo was, in a certain sense its technical creator and hence a social traitor thus at the sometime a promoter of science and a social criminal. Brecht made his hero a negative character to elicit a critical response from the viewers. The dual nature of Galileo combines attitudes like the search for truth and plagiarism in appropriating others' work; for example, claiming the telescope as his research. His recantation was intended as an act of cowardice. However, one can also view this as an adaptation to circumstances. Andrea, for example, is persuaded that his master's new ethic is the ethic of a new age in which adherence to rigid principles is abandoned.

Here one sees Brecht, the post-Marxist who comes close to the contemporary times, and does not fix himself within the rigid frameworks of ideas. Hence even contrary to Brecht's intentions, the audience may feel sympathetic to the problem of restriction of freedom by the authorities and the long-term effects of scientific research on human beings. There are several layers of interpretation possible since one observes the complex relationships of an individual and the Church, an individual and the ruling class, an individual and science, an individual and the society, and finally the conflicts in the mind of a single individual.

Those in power try to suppress every single rebellious voice lest it would provoke the masses. This suppression could be by bribing, torturing, and restricting the freedom of expression, and so on. If the rulers are powerful, the individual has only martyrdom in his hands. This act may give him satisfaction for adhering to belief but is it always worthy? One cannot answer it in the affirmative all the time.

Brecht has projected the clergy as a power structure and as a religion, he shows how it keeps the masses away from the truth and by begetting superstitions how it becomes an obstacle in the way of rationalism. The ruling class is the one based on exploitation, denying basic rights to its masses, and flourishes along with the church. Brecht does not indicate how the power structure

should be but he is hinting at a tomorrow where knowledge would be respected and the common masses have their basic needs fulfilled.

In Scene XIV, Andrea revises his view of Galileo's recantation and makes it the basis of new ethics when one is allowed to run away from a hopeless political struggle to guarantee the continuation of scientific progress as the 'Discorsi' scene indicates. The moral victory at least goes to the new science against old obscurantism. For Galileo, the reason is irresistible. "Thinking is one of the greatest pleasures of the human race" (42) says Galileo in Scene III. And with this reason, Galileo and perhaps Brecht too had a vision of a better mankind.

### Conclusion

Brecht was, thus, never content to confine his Marxism to theory. He demands a Marxism of equal intellectual rigor and practical effectiveness. He places his plays in the context of a wide historical development. He further, incorporates political content with the gracefulness of the theatre. One sees the adaptations of adaptations Brecht's plays in various Indian languages. Besides these, the theatrical techniques of Brecht are also very popular.

Perhaps, these adaptations of the Brechtian theory are in keeping with the theory itself, a response to the changes in the given conditions of men's (and women's) life together. For Brecht, "the great and complicated things that go on in the world cannot be adequately recognized by people who do not use

every possible aid to understanding" (73). This statement, ironically enough, speaks about Brecht's own dramatic works and his ideologies expressed through them. One sees the defeat of Brecht, the political theorist at the same time victory of Brecht, the dramatist as he effectively handled much larger issues and hence achieved universal appeal.

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