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‘Politicisation of Aesthetics’ and the Life of Epic Theatre: A Study

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“For where belief has prevailed for a thousand years, doubt now prevails... what was never doubted is now in doubt” (LG 3).

It was after the First World War, that the suffering of the middle and lower classes, the Great Depression of 1930s and the teachings of Marxism led German artists and intellectuals into a profound re-examination of fundamental values of art itself. Arts and politics are integrally connected with each other and it is impossible to separate art and beauty from ideology. George Lukács and Bertolt Brecht had a debate over what the ideal form of art should be. Lukács had objection to the early 20th century approach to Modernism. He approached realism from a classical humanist position – an individual in touch with his surroundings – a dialectical relationship between the individual and his social position. He was trying to aestheticize the politics.

Brecht attempts at broadening the scope of realism, he wants to bring in formalistic changes because the nature of forces of production and the relation between them has been changed, which also leads to the changes in perceptions – trying to comprehend reality in different light. Galileo has rightly underscanned the spirit of enquiry – how to see to get at



the truth: “You see! What do you see? You see nothing. You only goggle. Goggling is not seeing” (5). In a modern world, the nature of forces of production and their relation have been changed because of the changes of perceptions. Brecht wants to expand the idea of realism by attempting to look at 19th century aesthetic principles in a new light. According to him, since society has been technologised, the aesthetic principle also has to be changed as to look reality from different points of view. His attempt is to politicise the aesthetics. A change in art also has to be brought about. So in order to bring about that change, an author has to be anti-illusionist – the idea of verisimilitude has to be done away with.

Brecht deliberately avoids the smooth inevitability of 19th century drama and he argues that only epic theatre can express the bewildering disjointedness of modern life. It is a new kind and a new theory of drama. He is debunking the Aristotelian theory in the *Poetics*. According to Aristotle, a tragedy can be tragedy only when there is ‘catharsis’ and emotional empathy with the character. A situation will be created so that the audience will be soaked in the tragic action and should get involved in it. But Brecht retorts as he wants his audience to know that it is not real, the characters are not real and Brecht will construct his plays in such a way that the characters will be able to watch the action from multi-perspective views.

Brecht’s plays are open-ended. Audiences are given chances to make choice. He wants to break the illusion of drama. Actors do not really play their part but quote merely. The audience will not be intrigued by the fact what will happen next. *The Life of Galileo* opens with Galileo being introduced with the help of commentary and placard:

GALILEO GALILEI, TEACHER OF MATHEMATICS AT PADUA,



DETERMINES TO PROVE THE NEW COPERNICAN SYSTEM

In the year sixteen hundred and nine

Science's light began to shine.

At Padua City, in a modest house

Galileo Galilei set out to prove

The sun is still, the earth is on the move. (1)

Use of placards, commentaries, long pauses, empty stages, episodic plots establish epic theatre as a place of entertainment, but not of brainless entertainment. Thus, the element of surprise is minimalised. The theme is to present ideas and invite the audiences to make judgement. Characters are not intended to mimic real people but to represent opposing sides of an argument.

Brechtian stage productions are also different. Musicians sit on stage – the distance between the stage and audience is broken down deliberately. Duality is engraved in every individual and through duality comes complexity and through this comes the scope for Brecht to broaden up the issue of reality. Here comes the idea of commitment. For Brecht, realism does not exist. It has to be arrived at and this reality has to be opened up by taking some anti-illusionist technique and 'alienation' is incorporated to make the viewers aware that reality in a performance is only a performance. One has to defamiliarise the familiar world to change it. Art, according to Brecht, should be considered as a product. The idea of 'artist' has also been changed radically – an artist becomes producer of a product, because of which relationship



between the artist and the audience has also been changed.

Brecht does not present Galileo as a hero in the traditional sense of the term deliberately. Initially he does have the potential to be a hero but he proves to be a person with 'heroic cowardice'. When Andrea loudly says, "Unhappy the land that has no heroes!" (82). Galileo calmly retorts and replies, "No. Unhappy the land that is in need of heroes" (83). Galileo is presented as a simple man whose mentality would serve the matrix of the dialectics of the society. There should not be any space for empathy.

In the romantic aesthetics, artist having full autonomy over his art is the guardian of the art that he has produced. The artist and art have a direct one to one correspondence but the use of technology gives rise to a new form of art. According to Benjamin, the peculiar 'aura' of art has declined with the introduction of print and technology. In modern world, the nucleus of modern-day art is shock experience centered around the urban life. To Benjamin, life is like a film – contingent, fleeting and fugitive which is the essence of urban experience and urban art. Because urban life is fragmentary, urban art should also be fragmentary. The modern artist has also become a producer. New kinds of audience have to be produced because of the decline of the 'aura' and because of the shock experience which is at the centre of urban life. Brecht through his epic theatre and anti-Aristotelian stance is trying to reach out reality in a manner which is radically different from Lukács.

To Benjamin, a truly progressive art should rise above the dichotomy of form and content. It should try to bring new techniques, latest technological tools in order to change art from within. He is really 'politicising the aesthetics'. The new form of art will help us for



distancing ourselves from constructing the principles of reality. Art had aura in the beginning; it had hermetic quality because of the exclusivity of art aspiring the ritual of art. But with reproducibility, the ‘aura’ declines. The purpose of art changes, now-a-days artists need to put politics in art so that we can have a peep at reality – thus resulting in commitment. Thus Brecht creates a new kind of Marxist theatre – classical in its ambition and resolutely modern in its form and content. It is nothing less than dialectics in practice.

It must be mentioned in this context that the original title of *The Life of Galileo* was *The Earth Moves*. It does not merely reflect the dynamic movement of heavenly bodies but also indicates a very same movement in society and seeing life critically is the first step towards changing it for “a new era” to be “dawned, a great age in which it is a joy to be alive” (6). In a way, the dramatists’, the actors’ and the audiences’/readers’ onus lies in materialising the dream into reality as Marx has rightly pointed out, “The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.” (Marxists.org Web)



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