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Redemption of the Playwright: Portrayal of Shen Teh in Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan*

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Abstract

In *The Good Person of Szechwan*, Brecht, pulled by his plot and his creativity, frames a female character who successfully earns the admiration of the audience (as well as of characters on stage) not as a stereotypical woman but as a strong and good person. Although this aspect of the play seems to fail Brecht's project of epic theatre it stands as a redemption in the face of the charges of sexism in Brecht's works by critics such as Sara Lennox. This article explores the role played by Shen as a lover dreaming of a family founded upon goodness and as a single pregnant mother fighting for survival and security of her child.

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"I have learned that success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome while trying to succeed." – Booker T. Washington, *UP from Slavery*

Women in Brecht's works suffer the ills of capitalist society but are seldom able to challenge them. They are means of making the audience feel and understand certain socio-economic problems, but they are seldom admired. They are denied the heroic grandeur which Brecht allowed to some of his male protagonists: most of Brecht's female characters do not have the charisma which may be noticed in Galileo in *The Life of Galileo* and even in Macheath in *The Threepenny Opera*. Galileo in *The Life of Galileo* becomes a legend in his own lifetime as in scene 10 we see that he is the object of the ballad singers; Galileo's critics are in awe of him and even in surrender to the power of the church neither is he ashamed of himself nor is the audience ashamed of him. Macheath in *The Threepenny Opera* is a criminal but he is also charismatically daring in visiting the whores and not bother about his safety; there is a clear admiration in Mrs Peachum's remark in the Interlude, "…even with all London at his heels, Macheath is not a man to give up his habits" (51). Brecht's women do not have such moments of glory, except one. They have suffered, more than the male characters, due to the scope of epic theatre which restricts the audience from admiring a character so that they ponder on the real problems of real men and women beyond the stage; they have suffered the weight of time and space of early twentieth century Europe which did not allow men and women to come out of patriarchal mindsets. However, in *The Good Person of Szechwan*, a play which occupied Brecht for a long time from 1939, when he first began work on it, to its first publication in 1948 [1], the protagonist Shen Teh through the course of the play grows beyond the shadows of patriarchy. Brecht wrote in his journal of March 1939 that "the girl must be a big powerful person" (qtd. in Willet and Manheim, v). Hence Brecht had to make his character strong and powerful as demanded by his plot. The pressure of social responsibility makes a poor businessman of Shen Teh and her love for Sun makes her apparently foolish. Yet she earns the respect of the audience through her humanity and honesty: her dogged struggle for her baby and also for the poor and the unemployed people around her with charismatic shifting of gender roles makes her heroic. She enjoys her moments of theatrical glory in the male guise of Shui Ta, who is smart and bold. Shen Teh has therefore a unique stature in Brecht's oeuvre.

Although separated by more than four centuries, both Shakespeare's Portia in *The*

Merchant of Venice and Brecht's Shen Teh display the same truth: that gender is a role which is performed rather than an identity. A female may perform an action which is identified as masculine by society. In the words of Butler, "[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (33). Shui Ta's cleverness in calling the police and driving the poor people out of her shop is a performance behind which there is no gender identity as Shui Ta is not actually male but a disguised female; simultaneously Shen Teh's inability to be practical and follow business principles[2] cannot be said to be feminine as she herself can become practical while in male disguise. Needless to say, a performance does not have a gender; it is the fallacy for ages in human civilization that some performances are for males and others are for females. Hence Shen Teh's kindness expressed in her song in scene one, where she speaks of her inability to blame the poor people for being selfish, is also a performance which is a human response subdued in kindness and sensibility and does not have a gendered identity:

> 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?[3]

Brecht's genius cannot be blind to the fact that neither being practical nor being soft-hearted has anything to do with gender. It is important here that the title "The Good Woman of Sezuan" is not an apt translation of the German original; Willet and Manheim point out that "'der gute Mensch' of the original title could be of either sex" (iv). While in disguise Shen Teh is referred to as "Shui Ta" or by the pronoun "he" throughout the play in stage directions by the playwright, as if it is difficult to say who is guise and who is real. It seems that Brecht intends to imply that both are real: the charitable nature of Shen Teh and the practical tactics of Shui Ta. The good person of the title is ultimately both Shen Teh and Shui Ta; Shen Teh

attempts to be good from the perspective of the gods: she asserts the religious value of charity which cannot solve the economic problem of poverty. Shui Ta is good from the perspective of reality: he saves the shop which supports a lot of people such as Sun and the unemployed man. Critics, such as John Fuegi, have argued that Brecht wants to imply that doing evil is inescapable for doing good: 'At the metaphysical level the moral is profoundly disturbing: it is suggested (and the echoes of Goethe's *Faust* are particularly strong in the play) that only by doing evil can one do good' ('The Alienated", 192). I think Brecht is not at all disturbed by morality and wanted us to realize the triviality of what we consider as 'profoundly disturbing' because it is poverty which is really disturbing for the playwright; if hunger and poverty of people do not disturb us that is a profoundly disturbing aspect about our morality; life is more profound than our ideas of good and evil and also than the traditional ideas of masculine and feminine. Hence, from the conventional perspective of gender, just as the role of a Balthazar could not be played by a Portia, Shui Ta has to be male. Shen Teh's disguise is not only a dramatic necessity, it is also culturally indispensable. The very word "businessman" indicates not only profession but gender too and hence the shopkeeper can save her shop by being "businessmanly" only as a male. It is a pity that Brecht's other female characters do not get this opportunity.

It is ironic that although Anna Fierling is called "Mother Courage" neither any character on stage nor the audience admires her for courage. She allows us to see war not from the perspective of nationalism, but from the perspective of a poor woman who values life more than war. However, she is never heroic; in scene 3 her bargaining (to save the life of Swiss Cheese at the minimum price) and her subsequent pretence of not recognising the dead body of Swiss Cheese make her detestable and she is rather beastly and sub-human. She has been repeatedly charged for living off war to which she has no answer. In scene 8 not only has she no answer to the charge of being "hyena of the battlefield" but she also displays happiness to hear that peace is over and war has broken out again. Ironically, she is oblivious of the impending death of her first son Eilif. However, she has deep insight on war which is revealed several times, for example in the very first scene of the play, observing the recruiters' attempts to enlist young men she remarks, "Let's both go fishing, said angler to

the worm" (*Mother Courage*, 6). Again, in scene 2 she speaks – as smartly and as wisely as Shaw's Bluntschli in *Arms and the Man* - that planning is more important than courage in war. Yet it is either due to the playwright's concern to materialize *Verfremdungseffekt* or due to his failure to rise above patriarchy that Anna Fierling is denied any expression of heart-breaking sorrow, neither anagnorisis nor any deep realization about the impact of war on common people like her. As she drags her cart in the final scene one loses all willingness to witness dramatic action. The character of Mother Courage is shorn of the basic dignity it deserves; over the years, some directors and actors have felt that the character needs some profound expression of grief. Suman Mukhopadhyay informs us that while performing the role of Mother Courage Helene Weigel used to sit with her dead child in her lap looking at the sky and a cry of pain emitting from her open mouth – a posture she derived from Picasso's *Guernica* (30). It is worthy to remember here that as argued by John Fuegi in his book *Brecht and Company: Sex, Politics, and the Making of the Modern Drama*, Brecht was indebted to Collective Workshop where women contributed significantly to the development of theories, plots and characters. In this article, however, the primary focus is on one of the products of the Collective Workshop, Shen Teh, rather than the degree of contribution made by Margarete Steffin and Elisabeth Hauptmann in giving shape to the play and the character.

In *Mother Courage* Kattrin is endowed with the glory which is denied to her mother. Her violent beating of drums is a sacrifice and her death is tragic. However, being mute she is unable to utter her lofty feelings and thoughts; moreover, she plays a minor role in the play. However, in scene 5, mute Kattrin becomes a symbol of motherhood as she rocks the baby of the peasant woman and makes lullaby noises. Anna plays a choric role in highlighting the significance of the image as she says, "Look at her, happy as a queen in all this misery" (*Mother Courage*, 45). Anna herself becomes a representative of motherhood when in scene 9 she refuses to marry the cook with the condition of forsaking Kattrin. In scene 5, Anna, Kattrin and the peasant woman are in the forefront while the victory and its music are in the background. The concern of mother for the child: of Anna's for Kattrin and of Kattrin and the peasant woman for the infant is more real and meaningful than the reality of war which is rendered meaningless. The women in this scene are confined within the instrumental roles

they are enacting rather than securing distinct identities for themselves. In *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, the mother in the unmarried Grusha – just like in Kattrin – is upheld throughout. Grusha does not control the action; things keep happening to her and she responds to circumstances as guided by her motherly instincts. Her dignity is rescued by a male judge who judges from his own perspective.

It is as a mother that Shen Teh's stature becomes heroic in *The Good Person of Szechwan*. Although in scene 7 she resolves to protect her child fiercely which makes critics (such as Iris Smith and Sara Lennox) accuse Brecht of falling into a patriarchal stereotype the character actually displays a more mature concern and sympathy for the poor and the unemployed. Since the time – in scene 7 - the unmarried prostitute-turned-shopkeeper comes to know that she has conceived and reacts joyfully and then subsequently fiercely resolves to protect her child her stature in the play moves towards heroism as manifested in the following stage direction: *Shen Teh looks after her without moving. Then she examines her body, feels it, and a great joy appears in her face* (73). Shen Teh's transformation from a prostitute to a benevolent shopkeeper is sponsored by the gods. But her spontaneous welcome of pregnancy, notwithstanding the fact that she is unmarried, single and without much resources, is heroic; her sole support is her disguised self, Shui Ta. This stage direction makes Shen Teh a hero. In the same scene she fiercely resolves to protect her child like a tigress:

> …Henceforth I
>
> Shall fight at least for my own, if I have to be
>
> Sharp as a tiger. Yes, from the hour
>
> When I saw this thing I shall cut myself off
>
> From them all, never resting
>
> Till I have at least saved my son, if only him (77).

What Shen Teh says and what she does are different; if we consider solely the above

soliloquy the play offers only a patriarchal stereotype; but considering what she says and does she is an admirable human being as she saves a lot of people from starvation and joblessness.

According to Sara Lennox, the dichotomy of Shen Te and Shui Ta indicates that gender is socially constructed (which I have already discussed above): 'Brecht seems to be indicating that such sex-related differences are tied more to the social expectations accompanying gender than to any natural differentiation by sex in psychological characteristics' (92). However, she alleges that Brecht "does not pursue the issue further" because she thinks that Shen Teh's resolution to be sharp as a tiger and to sacrifice her own goodness for the welfare of her child is a reversal to the patriarchal assumption that 'such stereotypical male and female behavior is natural to the sexes' (92). But the drama does not represent Shen Teh as sacrificing her goodness at all; rather the drama shows that Shen Teh in the guise of Shui Ta becomes more beneficial to society than before and also more than Shen Teh. In the same scene 7 the unemployed man says of Shui Ta, 'But it's a fact: he must be sent for for our sakes too'. In scene 8 Mrs Yang reports how Shui Ta 'turned my son Sun from a broken wreck into a useful citizen'. Shui Ta's factory absorbs the unemployed man in the respectable position of disburser of wages and the workers sing the 'Song of the Eighth Elephant'. Although the song talks of the mechanism of exploitation in capitalist systems the workers sing with a joyful rhythm because Shui Ta's factory has saved them from unemployment and starvation. Moreover, Shui Ta as the owner of the factory is not a 'savage beast'; in scene seven itself where she resolves to be savage to all others she actually takes care of the children of the carpenter. Shui Ta's exit in this scene is highly suggestive in the following stage direction: *Taking the hand of the carpenter's youngest child, Shui Ta walks off, followed by the carpenter, his remaining children, the sister-in-law, the grandfather, the unemployed man. Sister-in-law, carpenter and unemployed man drag out the sacks* (81). Like Shen Teh Shui Ta is no less a mother: she is a mother to all who are following him. The character displays that motherhood is not just a wonderful facet of womanhood but of humanity which cuts across gender.

In retrospect, therefore, Shen Teh's resolution in scene 7 is not a reversal to

patriarchy. It is up to the audience whether they take it as a stereotype of female behaviour or a depiction of motherhood irrespective of gender. The use of verse, instead of prose, in this soliloquy, uttering the universal love of the mother for the child and the resolve of the mother to protect her child, pushes us to identify ourselves with Shen Teh. I say 'us' as there might be a mother in any of us, irrespective of gender identity: the editorial of 'The Telegraph' on 30 November 2025 states, "A mother need not always be a woman. It is a role anyone can take up" (12). No such dramatic and emotional moment is given to Grusha in *Caucasian Chalk Circle* although the two plays are often grouped together owing to their Chinese contexts. The characterisation of Shen Teh is therefore quite unique in the world of Brecht's artistry.

In this play there is logical continuity between Shen Teh as a lover and as a mother. Shen as a lover suffers from the universal conflict of passion and reason and she is lovable if not heroic. In scene 4, Shen Teh's ode to the cityscape of dawn, while she is returning from Sun's home, understandably after her first night with her lover, is more poetic than realistic:

> I tell you, you miss a great deal if you are not in love and cannot see your city at that hour when she rises from her couch like a sober old craftsman, filling his lungs with fresh air and reaching for his tools, … All along the way I looked at my reflection in the shop windows, and now I would like to buy myself a shawl. (42)

She appears mean and cheap when she succumbs to her desires and decides to marry Yang Sun even after knowing that Sun is not in love with her. From a feminist point of view, she perpetrates patriarchy as she decides to marry the man who proves himself a thorough patriarch in scene 5. Sun proclaims that women are incapable of sensible arguments and boasts that Shen is bound to him because 'I've got my hand inside her blouse' (53). Brecht shows that Sun is confined within the stereotype of hegemonic masculinity which incorporates pride, disrespect towards women and boasting of that disrespect. Shen Teh consoles herself by arguing that men boast unnaturally before men and hence Sun's callousness need not be taken seriously. Moreover, Shen's intense passion forbids her to take

his conduct seriously. In scene five we see her unable to overrule her desire and her intense love:

> Shen Teh: … *To the audience*
>
> I would go with the man whom I love.
>
> I would not reckon what it costs me.
>
> I would not consider what is wiser.
>
> I would not know whether he loves me.
>
> I would go with the man whom I love. (59).

The anaphoric lines highlight the unbending, uncompromising desire of Shen; she confesses of her surrender to the seductive charms of Sun in the very next scene, that is the interlude between scene 5 and scene 6:

> I could resist neither his voice nor his caresses. The evil that he had spoken to Shui Ta could not teach Shen Teh a lesson. Sinking into his arms, I still thought; the gods wanted me to be kind to myself too. (60).

The human being is made a fool by her passion; yet, in spite of this powerful passion, Shen does not lose her conscience, her kindness and gratefulness to her friends who helped her in need. She states her promise to return the money to the old couple as she confesses in the same interlude, "How could I simply have forgotten the two good old people?" This act resurrects Shen as a lovable character – if not heroic – for whom the audience might feel pity and fear. She hopes that Sun will still marry her without the money: "At the moment, on the way to my wedding, I am hovering between fear and joy". In scene six where the bridegroom announces that the marriage is postponed Brecht does not highlight the sorrows of the tragic heroine nor make Sun a villain. The scene ends with "The Song of the Green Cheese"; the nonfulfillment of hopes and desires of Shen and Sun are overshadowed by the universal hope of all poor people on earth: "When the moon is green cheese/ The poor shall inherit the

earth". In spite of the admirable characteristics of Shen Teh Brecht has managed to retain the basic quality of *Verfremdungseffekt*. Our admiration for Shen Teh does not stop us from pondering on the real lives of human beings. The gods are rendered little in stature before Shui Ta revealing herself as Shen Teh; her problems remain unresolved: she is neither victorious nor meeting a tragic death at the end of the play. However, she achieves human dignity and admiration which are denied to other female characters penned by Brecht.

As Shui Ta she holds a position of power, particularly over her lovers, Sun, Shu Fu and also the landlady Mi Tzu. Like Prospero of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* Shui Ta makes others dance to his/her tune, in making Sun toil and become a potentially responsible husband and father. The news of Shen's pregnancy awakens the father in him in scene nine: "A Yang is about to appear on the scene! ...And the girl has nobody to look after her!" (*Good Person* 92). Sun's outburst of anger (at Shui) and pity (for Shen) marks the victory for both Shen and Shui as she sobs in the background overwhelmed by her success in finally winning the love of Sun. It is noteworthy that both Sun and Shen expect a male baby: she an "airman" and he a "Yang". Here both the characters of this modern parable are true to history as expectant parents did not dream of a female child in the early twentieth century. But Brecht's parable could not come to an end without Shen occupying centre-stage and rising above others in stature.

In the trial scene at the end Shen is a towering figure over the baffled gods, who are revealed as not all-knowing; their mouths fall open to behold that Shui Ta and Shen Teh are one and the same person and she boldly declares, "…Yet if I broke the rules/ I strode proudly around, and could eat myself full! Something is wrong with this world of yours" (105). Shen is more able to "manage" things than the gods, the first one of whom confesses, "She can manage! She is strong, healthy and well-built, and can endure much" (106). Here the male gods are compelled to describe a woman as having physical strength, mental strength and ability to "manage"; she is the liberated woman – although for a few moments only as she needs the male disguise - who fights for herself and her child with the support of a male disguise in a sexist society. The gods leave without offering a solution; in fact, they escape from the crisis and Shen Teh has no other choice but to rely on her own strength and intellect.

The gods escape, leaving the management of morality to the abilities of Shen, announcing that they have found the good person they were looking for: "… Here she is!" (107). This shift of the responsibility of management and the appreciation she earns from the gods and the people of Szechwan is a prestigious matter which very few Brechtian female characters may claim. Shen rises gradually, till the end of the play, from a prostitute to the cynosure of Szechwan as well as of the audience. Our appreciation for Shen Teh does not spoil the *Verfremdungseffek*t of Brechtian theatre. The play negotiates a delicate balance between traditional Aristotelean theatre and epic theatre.

In fine we may say that Sara Lennox's charges against Brecht's portrayal of women is not applicable to Shen Teh of *The Good Person of Szechwan*. One of the most important charges of Lennox, according to me, lies in her explanation of the coexistence of a significant number of female protagonists and a sexist portrayal of women in them. Deriving from the dissertation of Mary Cronin, Lennox argues,

> Yet this pattern, too, is a familiar one in stereotypical portrayals of women. Women are debased to the level of children or sex objects, and shown to act mainly on interests determined by their biological constitution (e.g., as mothers); yet simultaneously they may be elevated into incorporations of ideals which men project onto them (88).

This explanation is also based on the observation of Simone de Beauvoir: 'Man feminizes the ideal he sets up before him as the essential Other, because woman is the material representation of alterity: that is why almost all allegories, in language as in pictorial representation, are women' (qtd. in Lennox, 88). But Shen at the end of the play is not a dramatic tool or a feminized ideal; she is an admirable human being who demands solution and redressal of her crisis before the gods. She is no symbol of innocence like Kattrin in *Mother Courage*; she has felt the problems of poverty with deep sensitivity and she has also waded through the world of business to become the tobacco king. It is the gods who appear childish before her. Unlike Azdak of *Caucasian Chalk Circle* they fail to deliver justice and escape leaving Shen Teh to 'manage' her crises. They exit, leaving all the theatrical space of

glory to Shen Teh. While the audience wonders how she will ‘manage’ things it is quite sure that beyond the stage she redeems her creator Bertolt Brecht from the charges of sexism.

End Notes:

[1] For a detailed discussion on the history of composition and first performance of the play, see 'Introduction' by John Willet and Ralph Manheim in 'The Good Person of Szechwan', Bloomsbury 2015.

[2] One of the fundamental principles of business ethics is that it needs to be maintained rationally: a shopkeeper should not be a swindler and at the same time cannot be casual – if the shopkeeper's own son or daughter comes to purchase she or he must sell it for the price offered for all customers. Secondly, a shopkeeper cannot shelter beggars in her/his shop; she/he must find a separate space for humanitarian activities. Shen Teh compromises with principles of business ethics when she gives a cigarette free of cost to a factory worker on the very first day and also when she offers the shop as a shelter for poor fellows.

[3] All quotations from the works of Brecht are from editions as listed below in 'Works Cited'.

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