

SCHOLARLY ARTICLE

Idea of Capitalism in *The Good Woman of Setzuan*

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Abstract

The Good Woman of Setzuan by Bertolt Brecht portrays the struggle for survival in an impoverished society in the midst of rising capitalism. This paper examines capitalism through the lens of Marxism using various instances and textual references to the play. The characters in the play freeload off the protagonist Shen Te who goes from being exploited by the society to being a capitalist and exploiting others. Capitalism is represented as two sides of the same coin: both the positive and negative aspects are analyzed hereupon.

Keywords: Marxism, Capitalism, Brecht, Historical Materialism, Economic Subordination.

Brecht being a follower of Marxism incorporated its principles to critique Capitalism. Marxism is a social, economic and political philosophy that analyzes the impact of the capitalists on the labourers which leads to uneven distribution of wealth and privileges in the society; these injustices would stir a revolt by the labouring class and ultimately result in the formation of an “Utopian Communist Society” free of inequality. Capitalist society is made up of two classes: the Capitalists or ruling class and the labourer class. Capitalists own the means of production hence they dominate over the labouring class by overworking and underpaying them.

Brecht in his plays reveals the mechanisms of repression and exploitation, the injustices of class and the dehumanizing consequences of capitalism. *The Good Woman of Setzuan* is a parable set in a place called ‘Szechwan’ in pre-communist China and written during Brecht’s exile. The central conflict in this play is between the material level and the moral level, between the necessity for survival in a competitive world and selfless humanity that Brecht considers a fundamental instinct of human nature. It poses the problems of remaining ‘good’ under the existing social and economic condition of the place. The play examines the role of greed, capitalism, and corruption which makes the people of ‘Setzuan’ impossible to act morally good as a friend, neighbour, lover or employer.

The economic condition of ‘Setzuan’ as stated at the beginning of the play is one of ‘destitution and extreme material need’. Brecht incorporated the class struggle along with historical materialism according to which a society’s morality is determined by its socio-economic system. In a society where “there is nothing unusual about poverty” (Brecht 17), the citizens endlessly strive to fulfil their basic needs for survival. The three Gods are in search of a morally good person amidst the greedy and corrupted individuals of Setzuan. Brecht highlights this hypocrisy of the Gods as one cannot keep being good while struggling to survive. Gods are powerless in changing the economic condition of the people as stated by them, “That's not our sphere. We never meddle with economics” (Brecht 25). Free-enterprise

economics makes no sense to the three gods, as it is not their realm of expertise. Hence it is ultimately up to the people, to change their own living condition so that it benefits the many and not just the privileged few.

Shen Te receives a significant amount of money from the Gods, which leads her to quit her job as a prostitute and start her own business by purchasing a tobacco shop. She believes that being a proprietor will allow her to earn money in a more honourable way. However, she soon learns that there is no ethical way to make money under the capitalist system. This system relies on the exploitation of the poor to satisfy the wealthy and one can only progress by taking advantage of others. In a Capitalist society, money plays a critical role in advancing oneself. Shen Te's newfound financial status draws the attention of the family of eight, Mrs. Shin, and other individuals who seek her assistance in obtaining food, shelter, and other favours. Shen Te is going through a financial crisis and has to pay her landlady Mrs. Mi Tzu, a carpenter, and Yang Sun, her lover, the promised silver coins. Unfortunately, these individuals who lack humanity continue living like parasites and trying to leech off Shen Te.

In 'Setzuan', the inhabitants display a self-centred demeanour, but their conduct seems reasonable when considering the challenging economic circumstances they face. A culture of theft and bribery is prevalent in this society. People are starved and cannot even afford a pot of rice hence they need to accumulate wealth by any means right or wrong to improve their quality of life. On one hand where Shen Te endeavours to change her financial condition and break free from the class in which she is constricted to. The other people of 'Setzuan' keep living their lives either by praying to Gods for help like Wong the water seller or like the family of eight, Mrs. Shin, Mrs. Yang and her son Yang Sun who manipulate people like Shen Te to get material resources or money. However everyone is struggling to make ends meet whether for food or lodging which are the basic necessities for survival. In such a world only monetary

resources can help to advance in class, society and change the present living conditions of the people.

Capitalist Patriarchy believes in the economic subordination of women by men. Male supremacy along with capitalism oppress woman. In order to avoid bankruptcy, Shen Te invents a male alter ego called Shui Ta. In the play the issue of gender comes to the forefront when Shen Te in order to become a true capitalist has to remain in the guise of Shui Ta who is a practical businessman unlike her philanthropic female self, in order to gain authority as well as remain indifferent to their predicament for her survival. No one is there to help Shen Te economically, in 'The Song of Defencelessness' Shen Te first sings with Shui Ta's mask in her hand and appeals to the gods, pointing out that "even the gods are defenceless" and asking, "Why don't the gods do the buying and selling?"(Brecht 74). Shen Te is sympathetic to the woes of other citizens although having no income makes her feel frustrated. She is already helpless in providing for herself on top of that she is made responsible to provide for others too.

Women are considered to be unintelligible in such society and have to be guided by a man. Shen Te's lover Yang Sun interacts with Shui Ta in a different way than he interacts with her. He coerced financial help from Shen Te while belittling her "Shen Te is a woman: she is devoid of common sense. I only have to lay my hand on her shoulder, and church bells ring" (Brecht 80). He also planned to marry her but calls it off when Shui Ta does not show up with the money required for him to fly again upon selling the tobacco shop. Patriarchal men in a capitalist society manipulate woman for their personal gains.

Shen Te weaponizes this gender discrimination and uses it to improve her condition. Shui Ta starts a tobacco factory because his original persona alone cannot function in the capitalist world in which he inhabits—a dehumanizing "rat-race" world of greediness, dishonesty, evil, selfishness and uncompromising cruelty to others. He moves ruthlessly within

the realm of business. He promises to provide shelter to the homeless families and several other precarious characters in exchange for them to work in his factory. Brecht in his own preliminary note on the play clearly states that *Setzuan* stands for all places where people are exploited by people. Capitalism encourages materialism and the people high on materialism are more likely to manipulate others for their own purposes. As the factory grows and becomes a lucrative enterprise its inhabitants are completely stripped of their dignity and any semblance of power they had. Brecht's techniques points out how exploitation does things we cannot do morally due to conscience.

Shui Ta himself admits that “one can only help one of one’s luckless brothers / By trampling down a dozen others,” (Brecht 74) and continues acquiring capital in the forms of wealth, property and social control over his employees and neighbours. Shen Te slowly descends into greed while pursuing capitalistic power. Her employees are oppressed and the purpose of every move is to make money for the owner Shui Ta. ‘The Song of the Eighth Elephant’ sung by the employees of Shui Ta's factory is a criticism of the hierarchical systems in the industrial and imperialist structure, where one is put above the other, “Chang had seven elephants-all much the same/ But then there was Little Brother/ The seven, they were wild, / Little Brother, he was tame/ And to guard them Chang chose Little Brother” (Brecht 115). The exploiter and exploited is represented in the same body. The exploitive processes are represented by Shui Ta while Shen Te represents the oppressed who in order to protect her goodness has to turn to her alter ego. Shen Te symbolizes the marginalized labour class, whereas Shui Ta symbolizes the property owner of the capitalist system.

Shen Te's attempt to keep her moral integrity fails because the more power she has to act, the more she gets entangled in that corrupt, capitalistic struggle for survival. Nevertheless Shui Ta invents a new kind of “goodness” for Shen Te by giving employment to the very same idlers who had come to expect free handouts from her. Being forced to work and earn his keep

transformed even Yang Sun from “a dissipated good-for-nothing into a model citizen” (Brecht 112). After gaining wealth and this new power of a business owner, now Shen Te is capable of providing for her unborn child as well as the people of Setzuan who took shelter in her factory and contributed to factory work by an enhanced livelihood.

When the labourers start a revolt against Shui Ta demanding to know about Shen Te’s whereabouts, he catches a court case. However having the reputation of a successful industrialist, he gets defended by people of the higher class. When Mr. Shu Fu testifies on behalf of Shui Ta, “Mr. Shui Ta is a businessman, my lord. Need I say more?” (Brecht 130), the first god answers with merely a “Yes.” The gods would never interfere with the workings of the private capitalist economy which leads to a legal and moral disagreement between the two. When time comes for the labouring class to witness against Shui Ta, they all jump in. This is where the power passes to the labour class who take turns to testify against the ‘injustices’ done to them by Shui Ta. In reality he helped these people however he cannot cater to their personal demands. Even after sheltering the deprived, giving them a chance to earn money and improve their quality of life, he is betrayed by them.

Brecht portrayed the challenge of leading a morally upright life in any society. Shen Te further emphasizes this struggle with the poignant line, “It has torn me in two” (Brecht 107), which is considered the most emotive and powerful line in the entire play. This statement holds symbolic meaning in various aspects, as it embodies the class struggle between those in power and the working class, the dichotomy of good versus evil, the tension between genders, and the lack of trust between neighbours. As Shen Te’s appeals remains unanswered by the gods “What about the old couple? They’ve lost their shop! What about the water seller and his hand? And I’ve got to defend myself against the barber, because I don’t love him! And against Sun, because I do love him! How? How?” (Brecht 139) similarly there seems to be no clear solution to

eliminate poverty or social inequality. Hence the Communist ideal of equality may be impractical or 'Utopian' when such societies are taken into consideration.

The Good Woman of Setzuan portrays a simple situation: that being a nice person and staying capable of supporting oneself are mutually contradictory. Brecht uses dual characters to promote two opposite philosophies in this play. On one hand, Shen Te suffers from financial crisis due to her generosity in a society that takes advantage of the "good", whereas her alter ego Shui Ta is capable of acquiring wealth and raising his social status by careful management of the available resources like a true capitalist.

It is impossible and unrealistic to follow the three gods' demand and idealistic criteria for being 'a good person' and at the same time survive and prosper in the unsentimental and materialistic "Survival of the fittest" Darwinian world; which is governed by capitalism's laws of supply and demand and rational profitability. In such a world goodness or actual labour is worthless. Individuality and self-respect can only be gained through the acquisition of money.

The play expresses the reality of the suffering of the poor in the middle of the forces of industrialization and imperialism. It indicates that when humans are able to act beyond the social conscience, gaining power over the weak inevitably corrupts. Capitalism is shown as a 'necessary evil' for survival in a society like Setzuan. Brecht portrayed both the good and bad sides of this system of economy. The people of Setzuan did not try to gain material resources or wealth by fair means. After Shui Ta provided employment to the layabouts, a shelter to the homeless, he was still revolted against by the labourers for being dissatisfied with the fulfilment of their personal requests. However Shui Ta also employed unlawful number of labourers; exploited and worked them to the bone while profiting out of it. Nonetheless Brecht demonstrates how capitalism oppresses man's human nature by shaping it according to its own ideology.

Brecht smudges the distinctions between the exploiter and the exploited to present the helplessness in the face of a ‘cannibalistic capitalist world’. Capitalism cannot be done away with as it is required for a dynamic economical growth on the available resources for survival of people in places like “Setzuan”. At the same time Capitalism cannot survive alone, elements of Communism needs to be incorporated with it for the welfare and profit of both the general public and the industrialists.

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