



International Journal of KIU

Journal home page : <https://ij.kiu.ac.lk/>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37966/ijkiu2022032031>



Original Article

An analytical insight into the structure of the Brechtian theatre based on the plays ‘Mother Courage and Her Children’ and ‘The Caucasian Chalk Circle’

Amarasooriya D. N. P.

Department of Languages, KIU, Sri Lanka

Abstract

Article history:

Received: 21.10.2022

Received in revised form -
22.11.2022

Accepted - 24.11.2022

Cite as: Amarasooriya D. N. P.,(2022)
An analytical insight into the structure of
the Brechtian theatre based on the plays
‘Mother Courage and Her Children’ and
‘The Caucasian Chalk Circle’ International
Journal of KIU, 3. (2), 121-126. <https://doi.org/10.37966/ijkiu2022032031>
#Corresponding author: nimesha@kiu.ac.lk

Bertolt Brecht developed the form of the ‘epic theatre’ which can be defined as the foundation of the logical diversion of the direction of the conventional theatre. Brecht through this route of the epic theatre utilizes the theatre as a social and innovative logical instrument with the motive of initiating a social change which will have an impact on the existing social texture and the mentality of the social beings. The research focuses on analyzing how Brecht pursued a rationalistic route deviating from the core of the conventional theatrical structure, in instituting the form of the ‘epic theatre’ which can be defined as the foundation of the logical diversion of the direction of the conventional theatre. The foremost Brechtian plays, ‘Mother Courage and Her Children and ‘The Caucasian Chalk Circle’ were analyzed to examine to which extent Brecht portrays the inner conflicts which social beings undergo in identifying their survival in relation to the discipline of emotion and reason. The data collecting procedure was conducted by utilizing secondary data collection methods. Accordingly, content analysis (conceptual analysis, relational analysis), discourse analysis and structural analysis were used in collecting and analyzing the relevant data. The study focused on analyzing the two plays Mother Courage and Her Children and ‘The Caucasian Chalk Circle’ based on the Marxist ideological perspectives. The plays, ‘Mother Courage and Her Children, and ‘The Caucasian Chalk Circle, induce the spectator to contemplate and reflect on the Brechtian thematic perspectives such as ‘Victimization of the human being through the insatiable desire for material comfort, human incapability to confront the social evils, the dichotomy between emotion and reason etc. Thus, approaching the irrational social symptoms from a communist political point of view, Brecht within his plays portrays the inner conflicts which social beings undergo in identifying their survival in relation to the discipline of emotion and reason. ‘Grusha’ in ‘The Caucasian Chalk Circle and ‘Katrin’ in ‘Mother Courage and Her Children’ pursue the route of the universal principle of humanity which functions as the instinctive element in contrast to the rationally moulded sphere of reason. Brecht can be identified as a rebel whose intention is to move the social structure towards a new sphere in persuading the people to perceive through the obscured social veil. Along with the ideologies such as Marxism and the influence of the political theatre of Erwin Piscator, Brecht made an effort to transform the theatre into a source of social revival, thought inspiration and a foundation for social discourse.

Keywords: Brechtian plays, Epic theatre, Social reality, Rationality, Revolutionary approach

Introduction

Drama, which delves into the core of the social complex, approaches the hidden as well as common human realities, diagnoses the traumatic social mechanisms and perceives the existing elements of the natural world through a universal reality. Further it echoes the muted voices of the fragile human bodies and creates a space to expose and reveal the repressed human desires, instincts and expectations as a multifaceted social mirror with diverse reflections. Evolving through varied social dimensions and portraying the contemporary milieus, the structure of the theatre and its objectives experienced several transformations in relation to the influence of other social diversities. In examining the different theatrical forms which emerged along with the ideological movements such as romanticism, realism, naturalism, Marxism etc: it can be identified that the social consciousness of the individuals becomes thoroughly stimulated with a view to a socio-political change within the social whole.

The theatrical structure that fashions itself based on Romanticism creates a theatre of illusion where the irrational myths, supernatural forces, emotive elements and individual heroism evolve an idealized and abstract world with which the spectator is induced to identify himself. Within the realistic theatrical form, the existing social realities, conflicts, symptoms, individual naturalness and common existential phenomena are portrayed in structuring a real-life sphere on the stage. In sharp contrast to these forms of theatre, 'the epic theatre (Brechtian theatre)' constructs its theatrical setting based on the rational, non-emotive, intellectual and unpretentious elements with the intention of guiding the spectators to enlighten themselves and achieve self-realization pertaining to the social aspects which are dramatized within the theatre, maintaining a mental gap, a distance between the theatrical performances and their own 'selves'.

Deviating from the core of the conventional theatrical structure, Brecht pursues a rationalistic route in instituting the form of the 'epic theatre' which can be defined as the foundation of the logical diversion of the direction of the conventional theatre. Consequently, the settings, techniques and particular principles of epic theatre determine its distinctive form which concentrates on educating, enlightening and instructing the spectator rather than providing mere amusement and emotional inspiration. Evading the audience from attaching and identifying themselves with the dramatic characters in an emotional affinity, the Brechtian theatre induces them to critically examine, rationally realize and reason about the play, its thematic aspects and the social elements maintaining a certain distance as a detached observer. Brecht utilizes this dramatic technique which is introduced to encourage the spectator and the dramatic performances to represent and exist within two disparate spheres which are unrelated both in time and space. Along with the theatrical principles of epic theatre, the dramatist becomes capable of addressing and implying the theme, and the subject of his play without restricting and compressing the dramatic elements to an illusory or a realistic setting. That employs certain devices in making the spectator conscious of the fact that he is not watching a real-world phenomenon, but a theatrical performance. While the conventional theatrical techniques portray characters with indefinable human nature which can only be manipulated by nature, fate or invisible mystified force, the characters of Brechtian theatre are created as the components of the social complex, whose existence is changed and controlled by the individual as well as social mechanisms.

Methodology

The data collecting procedure was conducted utilizing secondary data collection methods. Accordingly, content analysis (conceptual analysis, relational analysis), discourse analysis and structural analysis were used in collecting and analyzing the relevant data. The study focused on analyzing the two plays 'Mother

Courage and Her Children and 'The Caucasian Chalk Circle' based on the Marxist ideological perspectives.

Through content analysis, the content of the referred texts was thoroughly analyzed in relation to the basic themes that are elucidated within the study. Thus, the relevant texts were examined based on the portrayal of the individual characters, their behavioural and thinking pattern, pertinent concepts, themes, ideologies, theories and criticisms. Accordingly utilizing the main two types of content analysis; conceptual analysis and relational analysis, the fundamental concepts, their relationship and the meanings they imply, their relation to the thematic perspectives of the study and the rational assumptions they evolve, were identified and analyzed based on the key elements of the study.

Consequently, discourse analysis was employed in critically analyzing the selected texts concentrating on the dialogues within the text, most essentially, the conversational pattern and the manner in which certain words were used. Through this analytical method, the individual, psychological, social and cultural characteristics, the communal beliefs, and the interactive and conflicting relationships were cautiously examined analyzing the conversations in the text in relation to the situation, the manner through which the interaction occurs and the outer socio-cultural forces which influence the situation and the communication.

Pursuing the means of structural analysis the relevant texts were studied scrutinizing the characters, the active details (motifs, symbols), themes, and the perspectives that were developed and connoted by the author through the portrayal of characters, setting and language.

Results

Brecht through the route of the epic theatre utilizes the theatre as a social and innovative logical instrument with the motive of initiating a social change which will have an impact on

the existing social texture and the mentality of the social beings. Thus, Brecht can be identified as a rebel whose intention is to move the social structure towards a new sphere in persuading the people to perceive through the obscured social veil. Along with the ideologies such as Marxism and the influence of the political theatre of Erwin Piscator, Brecht made an effort to transform the theatre into a source of social revival, thought inspiration and a foundation for social discourse.

In eliminating the defects of the conventional theatre from the epic theatre, Brecht assigns particular significance to each dramatic element and makes their individual involvement within the play highly influential. Hence, music and stage settings are not utilized as the elements which emphasize the emotional and appealing scenes but interrupt the continuation of the play by making the audience rationally aware of the incidents, motives, actions and settings. That encourages them to judge, evaluate and criticize the performance with an unprejudiced view. Within the Brechtian theatre, the actor and the character exist within separated realities. The Brechtian actor maintains his independence in controlling his emotions, changing his actions and revealing his comments on the character based on a rational interpretation. In observing the social or human subjects within epic theatre through a critical and demonstrative approach, Martin Esslin exemplifies that process as 'the study of human nature is thus replaced by human relations' (Esslin, 1959). Consequently, through the theoretical aspect of 'Gestus¹' of epic theatre, Brecht focuses on expressing the social behaviour and attitudinal changes of the human being in affiliating with the social other and thus the social or the outer life of the characters is given a thorough emphasis.

1 Gestus is an acting technique developed by the German theatre practitioner Bertolt Brecht. It carries the sense of a combination of physical gestures and "gist" or attitude. It is a means by which "an attitude or single aspect of an attitude" is revealed, insofar as it is "expressible in words or actions."

The plays, 'Mother Courage and Her Children' and 'The Caucasian Chalk Circle' are two of the foremost Brechtian plays that induce the spectator to contemplate and reflect on the Brechtian thematic perspectives such as 'Victimization of the human being through the insatiable desire for material comfort, human incapability to confront with the social evils, the dichotomy between emotion and reason etc. Thus, approaching the irrational social symptoms through a communist political point of view, Brecht within his plays portrays the inner conflicts that social beings undergo in identifying their survival in relation to the discipline of emotion and reason. Oscillating between these two spheres, Brechtian thematic expressions fashion a dramatic realm through which the spectator is induced to rationally think, argue, interpret and build a socio-political discourse. The emotive appearance which overwhelms the social and judicial boundaries evolves a virtuous reality though it does not exist within the structure of rationality. 'Grusha' in 'The Caucasian Chalk Circle' and 'Kattrin' in 'Mother Courage and Her Children' pursue the route of the universal principle of humanity which functions as the instinctive element in contrast to the rationally moulded sphere of reason. Their intuitive emotional values subdue the rational self-motives in identifying themselves with the universal 'Mother figure'. Yet, viewing through the Marxist ideological perspectives, Brecht endeavours to elevate the concept of rational self-control and the non-emotive realization within the texture of self-consciousness in initiating the fact that the submission of one's self to the inner emotive stimulations compel them to succumb to the self-annihilation. With the intention of establishing a revolutionary transformation, the Brechtian theatrical structure perceives 'Violence' as an instrument which is both rational and irrational and in another sense both moral and immoral, which emerges through the inner struggle between the self-emotional impulses and the rational self-motives of the principle of reason. According to the Brechtian view, violence has the tendency to oscillate between the boundaries of morality and immorality in manipulating the prevailing social order and the

human condition to encounter a transformation towards perfection or obliteration. In further analysing this approach, it can be stated that what Brecht values is not the violence which evolves the total negative destruction, but the violence which annihilates the other detrimental violence. The theatrical structure that the Brechtian concept forms, portrays the social complex as a sphere where God's omnipresent existence is absent and nullified. Consequently, the Brechtian theatre which opens a rationalistic third eye in piercing through the illusory social veil and perceiving an objective impartial reality appears to be an innovative analytical tool which delves deep into the social sphere and brings out that hidden reality through a new critical dimension.

Discussion

Brecht despite the fact that his experiences and observations are related to the western societal sphere examines and absorbs the eastern literature and disciplines of art, with the main focus on traditional and historical narratives and folklore. The Brechtian plays, 'The Caucasian Chalk Circle' and 'Mother Courage and Her Children', develop an intimate relationship and familiarity with the Sri Lankan literary as well as social context approaching Sri Lankan theatre through their Sinhala translations by Henry Jayasena. The play 'The Caucasian Chalk Circle' which is extracted and adapted from Chinese folklore, not only represents the Chinese historical setting but addresses the human condition and the intricate mechanism through which social order operates, based on a universal thematic expression. The folklore which is adapted within the play 'the Caucasian Chalk Circle' reflects the similarities to the 'Ummagga Jathakaya' in Sri Lankan literature and to the parable of King Solomon in the text Bible conveying the fact that owing to the universal applicability of the play, it becomes capable of gaining access to the inner perceptions, social concepts and existing realities of the oriental and western contexts. Consequently, within the Sri Lankan drama sphere where the traditional dramatic features involved the religious, as well as

cultural mythologies in portraying the historical narratives, the influence of the Brechtian theatrical concepts, generates a new episode within which the Sinhalese social reality is assigned a rational reality. The dramatist Henry Jayasena by acquainting the Sri Lankan theatrical structure with the Brechtian theatre allows the spectator to move away from the traditionally prescribed dimension of perceiving the dramatic elements, plot and themes which are portrayed within the dramatized environment. Still clinging to the historical substance of the dramatic plot, the traditional Sri Lankan dramatist is confined to a certain frame thus rendering him incapable of attributing a sense and rational appearance to the historical meaning and narrative significance of the dramatic elements. The translated version of the play 'The Caucasian Chalk Circle' along with the dramatic elements such as the narrator, songs and masks which have a familiarity to the Sri Lankan traditional theatre creates a vital impact focusing on designing and assigning a value and meaning to the old historical significance of the plot of the drama. Within this new approach of the drama to the contemporary social order and the human condition, the spectator is able to perceive the rationality, socio-political implication and critical evaluations of the plot evading the narrowed vision which is enforced by the traditional theatrical structure. Thus, the perspectives on capitalism, social divisions, the deformed agency of war, penury, social issues and the social position of the feminine figure induce the Sri Lankan spectator to expose his mental aptitude in interpreting those concepts and the realities portrayed by them with a critical and logical view.

Bertolt Brecht in the process of eliminating the defects and certain constraints of the conventional theatrical frame, critically exemplifies how those negative aspects compel the spectators to become transfixed and emotionally attached to the dramatic performances restricting them from perceiving and rationalizing beyond the theatrical appearances. Thus, within the dramatic space of irrational and emotional reality, the audience absorbs the dramatized coloured reality that the actors and other dramatic elements

portray, without approaching it through a logical dimension and a detached observation. With that, theatre is interpreted to be just a channel of entertainment through which the mental relaxation and the momentary escape of the spectator into the dramatized reality will be enhanced enabling him to identify himself with the heroic idealized figure, being oblivious to his own true self. Thus, Brecht views the illusory affinity of the audience with the dramatic characters as,

“How long are our souls going to have to leave our ‘gross’ bodies under cover of darkness to penetrate into those dream figures up there on the rostrum, in order to share their transports that would otherwise be denied to us?” (Brecht, 1959,)

Bertolt Brecht by bringing a new theatrical dimension through which the whole social structure is critically and judiciously examined and evaluated, pioneered in establishing a rational change within the existing order of the theatre. In an intimate ideological combination with Marxism and socio-psychological concepts, Brechtian theatre exposes the spectator's views into a theatrical mirror within which the thematic perspectives, social elements and human condition are reflected facilitating the audience to become unprejudiced independent critics. In analysing the ideological concepts and the theatrical mechanisms which Brecht adopts in establishing his 'epic theatre, it can be stated that his principle of detaching the audience from emotionally identifying themselves with the characters on the stage cannot be identified as applicable to every character and situation. In elaborating that criticism further, it can be stated that the characters like 'Grusha' in the play 'The Caucasian Chalk Circle' and 'Kattrin' in 'Mother Courage and Her Children', whose emotional sensitivity overflowed the boundaries of social demarcations exposing their humane expression towards the social other cannot be judged based on a rationalistic dimension resisting the emotional identification. The connotation of the moral sense which is implied through those

characters can be interpreted by the spectator viewing it through the dimension of emotion. Thus, in that sense, it can be questioned whether it will be possible for the spectator to identify the portrayal of the universal 'Mother figure' based on rationalistic reasoning repudiating its emotional significance.

Conclusion

Consequently, pursuing the ideological perspectives of Marxism, Brecht through his rational theatrical structure, elaborately fashions the deformed position of the human within the capitalist social order inducing the people to enlighten themselves about their restricted life sphere. Within this innovative process of creating a novel and drastic change, though Brecht endeavours to divert the direction in which the contemporary social order functions, he becomes incapable of bringing forward a concrete convincing step to be taken in implementing this expectantly predicted change. As Martin Esslin elucidates in his text 'Brecht,

a choice of evils (1959), 'Change the world': it needs to be changed!' is an exhortation that runs through Brecht's plays like a refrain. But he never succeeded in convincingly demonstrating what he wanted the world to be changed into and how it could be changed. Thus, the dramatist's portrayal of the rational reality impacts the illusory reality that the spectator is accustomed to believe, allowing him to view these two distinct realities with arguments, reasoning and logical interpretations. Bertolt Brecht enables his innovative theatrical process to expand and approach the other varied social systems and human conditions along with their specific characteristics, attitudes, beliefs and diversities. Further his theatrical approach explores and reveals the social and human nature whether it is distant culturally enriched east or sophisticated political oriented west. Hence Bertolt Brecht and his rational theatrical approach form a revolutionary opening to a new dimension through which the human social and psychological space are attributed a different altered meaning.

References

- Brecht, B. (1999). *Caucasian chalk circle* University of Minnesota Press
- Brecht, B. (1991). *Mother Courage and Her Children*. ↑Grove Press.
- Epic Theatre*. [On Line]. Available from: <http://Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.htm>. [Accessed: 5.5, 2014].
- Epic Theatre Vs Realism*. [On line] 7.2.2012. Available from: <http://gabbystheatreblog.wordpress.com>. [Accessed: 10.5 2014]
- Esslin, M. (1959) *Brecht: a choice of evils*. London: Eyre and Spottiswoode.
- Realism Theatre*. [On line]. Available from: <http://realismtheatre.blogspot.com/2010/05/background.html>. [Accessed: 2.5.2014].
- Wasala, R, R. (2014) *Sinhabahu and Sarathchandra's achievement-1. The Island*. [On line] 13 th May. Available from: <http://www.island.lk/>. [Accessed: 15.5.2014].