

Comparison between Shaw's and Brecht's Treatment of Political Consciousness

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Abstract

The German Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) and the Englishman George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) were socially and politically active, innovative, progressive, radical, controversial, and “problem” playwrights who wrote in tradition of political theatre. Most active during the first half of the Twentieth Century, both were revolutionary social critics who shocked their contemporaries with the unpopular activist philosophies of their plays and other writings. Their political philosophies stemmed from the same fount of Marxism.

Brecht adopted communism and Shaw espoused socialism. In their dramatic works, their political consciousness reflects in their dramatic characterization, thematic concerns, and stylistic organization and devices. This paper aims at examining the treatment of political consciousness in these master political playwrights of political consciousness through comparison and analysis of their art of characterization, thematic patterns, and dramaturgical techniques. Interestingly, their characters become their mouth pieces by manifesting their creators' political conscious through ironic tone or through morally negative consequences of the idealist behaviour of their heroines. Moreover, both cloak their political thematic patterns in dramatic devices which will also come under scrutiny. However, they were different temperamentally which somehow shaped their respective dramatic visions and intentions somewhat differently.

Key words: Bertolt Brecht, George Bernard Shaw, political consciousness in creative writing, comparison.

Introduction

When the playwright can stab people to the heart by showing them the meanness of cruelty of something they did yesterday, and intend to do tomorrow, all the tricks to catch and hold their audience, became the silliest of superfluities... The dramatist knows that as long as he is teaching and saving the audience he is sure of their strained attention as a dentist is or as Angel of Annunciation.

Bernard Shaw,
*The Quintessence of Ibsenism*¹

To understand the political dynamics of Brecht's and Shaw's plays, an incisive understanding of Karl Marx (1818-1883)'s idea of "[political] consciousness" is vital. In Marx's view, consciousness is always political, for it is always the outcome of politico-economic circumstances. What one thinks of life, power, and self, for Marx, is always a product of ideological forces. For him, ideologies appear to explain and justify the current distribution of wealth and power in a society.² In societies with unequal allocations of wealth and power, ideologies present these inequalities as acceptable, virtuous, inevitable, and so forth. Ideologies thus tend to lead people to accept the status quo. The subordinate people come to believe in their subordination: the peasants to accept the rule of the aristocracy, the factory workers to accept the rule of the owners, consumers the rule of corporations. This belief in one's own subordination, which comes about through ideology, is, for Marx, in a politically charged sense, becoming "politically conscious" is often meant to connote that people have awakened to their true political role, their actual identity. For Marx, this meant that the working classes would become conscious of themselves as the agents of history--they would unite and share in the wealth of labor. This, for Marx, was

¹ Shaw, Bernard, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (Routledge, 2009), p 50

² Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology Part One, with Selections from Parts Two and Three, together with Marx's "Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy"* (New York: International Publishers, 2001), p76

their historical role and their right (as opposed to working for wages, fighting wars on behalf of capitalists, and so forth).³ Significantly, both Brecht and Shaw endeavour to reach out the audience and awaken them from spiritually deadened existences and thus to germinate “political consciousness” in strictest Marxist term.

The political groundings of both Brecht and Shaw ran deep as they both were actively involved in their lives to pragmatically step up for their Marxist cause. Shaw’s association with Fabian Society and Brecht’s affiliation with Leninist-Marxist’s ideology and practice need no preamble.⁴

Discussion

This portion is concerned with the study of the traces of political consciousness in Shaw’s and Brecht’s plays in terms of parallel themes, devices, and characterization. Another subdivided part will bring out the points of departure in their political consciousness.

(1) Themes

First we will discuss the thematic similarities between these two modern playwrights’ works. The political aesthetics steeps deep as they radically castigate the society’s dirty politics, senseless war, corrupted societal institutions, illusive ideals, unequal distribution of wealth, nonsensical societal value-systems, and in the midst of which are mired apathetic people. Hence both understand the need to brutally shake them out of their bovine apathy. Needless to say, this aim is the sum and substance of the political theatre.⁵

In Shavian theatre, instances abound. Shaw’s attempt to dislocate the audience from their received notions so that out-of-box thinking will emerge if the society is to make headway is reflected in *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* and *Widowers’ Houses*. Dealing with

³ Ibid., pp.12-15.

⁴ Siegfried Mews and Herbert Knust (ed.), *Essays on Brecht. Theater and Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1974), pp. 8-10.

⁵ Ibid., p.20.

social conditions, “the unpleasant play” *Mrs. Warren's Profession* presents a practical discussion of prostitution, the means by which Mrs. Warren educated her children and made of them a lady and a gentleman. In return she receives their criticism for her profession. Like *Widowers' Houses*, this play realistically accepts a condition unmentionable in polite society at the time. Shaw boldly produced many such plays. He critiques the unjust economic system in *Pygmalion* and many others. In *Major Barbara*, Shaw posits that the hell is located in the poverty-stricken slums of cities and here he influenced Brecht in *Mahagonny and the Holy Bible*. His anti-war sentiments surface in *Arms and the Man* which is rather a satirical assault on those who would glorify the horrors of war. Here he fashions the subjects of false ideals, heroism, romanticism and the fake glories of war farcically.

In *The Apple Cart*, Shaw ridicules the course of modern world politics, the ineffectuality of the nations torn with dissension and jealousy.⁶ There is an irony about government and power, especially the people who use the power in the play. In preface to the play, Shaw says that he aims at shattering the idealisms attached to both democracy and monarchy. Therefore, Shaw's purpose, as the critic Eric Bentley has pointed out, was to investigate the relation between idealism and realism.⁷ Exposing hypocrisy was not his goal rather he hoped to demonstrate how human beings are hoodwinked by their own unconsidered actions and the beliefs they profess to hold. An opponent of second-hand thinking in all its guises, he shows his characters discover who they really are, not through the agency of the plot, but through the exercise of their minds and the movement of their souls. This sort of original thinking is the first step towards emancipation of an individual and that of the society on the whole and this is another underlying idea of political theatre.

The above-mentioned thematic patterns echo in Brecht's drama. He explores themes related to war, ownership, sacrifice, the notion of justice and the theme of the inequalities produced by “superior” people in power over the “inferior” lower class in scores of plays, for example, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. Here he also tries to teach his audiences not to

⁶ L. N. Morgan, “Bernard Shaw the Playwright”, *Books Abroad*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Spring, 1951), pp. 102-104.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.117.

accept the world as they find it. This dramatic intention is to recur in his plays again and again. In fact, Brecht later develops a new type of theater which he called *Lehrstück* “learning play.” As Hans Eisler posits these plays resemble “political seminars” and as Brecht described them as “a collective political meeting” in which the audience needs to participate. The “learning plays” are the model for the “theater of the future.”⁸ They exemplify the proposition of his political aesthetics keeping in mind participatory culture that would spring revolution. *The Measures Taken* is only one instance; it is about how the rights of individuals are taken away for the sake of group which is also another political issue. Some of his important plays are about the class systems. In *The Good Woman of Schutzen*, he points fingers at bourgeois ethos in bourgeois relationships. Similarly, in *Mahagonny*, *Mother Courage*, and *The Three Penny Opera*, he explores the dynamics of relations in the capitalist society.⁹ In *Life of Galileo*, he delineates truth-as-commodity idea which is another political theme. In short, the philosophical base of his theatre is political and he veils no attempt to politicize his theatrical art.

In short, Brecht’s and Shaw’s plays address the mental structures that underpin and validate the social institutions which is a political act on their part. They understand Althusser’s philosophy that ideology is imaginary and without critiquing it modern theatre would not and could not exist.¹⁰

(2) Devices

Shaw never theorizes his dramaturgy in great detail so his innovatory theatrical devices went unnoticed at first. Before Brecht, Shaw flouted the prevalent naturalism in his prologue to *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1898). This aligns him with Brechtian anti-naturalistic epic theatre which intended to subvert and revolt the dominant dramaturgy. The alienation effect, “*Verfremdungseffekt*,” which gained currency after Brecht’s theorization of it actually had its seed-beds in Shaw’s plays. As Hornby says, Shaw’s plays “are not mere oratory decked out with a few playwriting tricks...they do not promote socialism or any

⁸ Herbert Blau, “Brecht’s “Mother Courage: The Rite of War and the Rhythm of Epic”, *Educational Theatre Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Mar., 1957), pp. 8-10.

⁹ Ibid., p.6.

¹⁰ Bertolini, John Anthony, *Shaw and other Playwrights*, (Penn State Press, 1993)

other doctrine; they raise questions rather than answer them”.¹¹ Basically, this is the very idea of Brechtian alienation which buds critical thinking in audience’s mind.

The didactic sermonizing epitomizes the political genre of theatre which jolts the people out of their instilled robotic homespun notions and Shaw’s plays are no exception. Shavian introductions, prefaces, drawn out stage directions, lengthy descriptions of characters, epilogues and so on are to orientate the audience and reader to the spirit of his radical activism. Shaw’s *Pygmalion* is only one example where he propagates his socialist ideals even through characters’ descriptions. Brecht also does sermonize in his plays and steers the ship of audience’s mind to feed on his philosophical treatise of Marxism.¹² His putting a long speech into the mouth of Galileo in *The Life of Galileo* can be cited as an example. So, sermonizing is another commonality between the two. Shaw writes, “The theatre is really the week-day church; and a good play is essentially identical with a church service as a combination of artistic ritual, profession of faith, and sermon.”¹³ Shaw’s detailed descriptions and stage directions function to make the reader aware of play-within-a-play which later Brecht’s dramatic art also accomplishes to virtual perfection. Such an alienated effect-play makes the audience conscious that they are watching a play so their critical outlook springs.

More often than not both Shaw and Brecht present their political ethos through “historicizing”. As Brecht says, “...the epic poet presents the event as totally past, while the dramatic poet presents it as totally present.”¹⁴ History is teaching philosophy through examples. Shaw’s *Saint Joan* is situated in history yet currently relevant therefore he becomes part of “epic theatre” as dubbed by Brecht.¹⁵ Almost all of Brecht’s plays are distanced in corridors of history like *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *Mother Courage*, *Life of Galileo*. He terms this theatrical practice “historicization” through which a critical outlook

¹¹ Warren S. Smith, “John Bull’s Other Island Revisited”, *Educational Theatre Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Oct., 1951), pp. 237-38.

¹² Mews and Knust (eds.), *Essays on Brecht*, p.79.

¹³ Bertolini, John Anthony, *Shaw and other Playwrights*, (Penn State Press, 1993)

¹⁴ Harben, Niloufer, *Twentieth Century English Plays from Shaw to Bond* (Rowmen and Littlefield, 1988)

¹⁵ J. L. Wisenth, *Shaw’s Sense of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p.6.

toward the society is given birth. The reason is the status quo is, by then, viewed as “historical, transitory, and subject to change.”¹⁶ Thus Man’s patterns of behaviour are productive of his socio-political contexts and affirmation of this fact is another stepping stone towards political change.

Another theatrical device of “alienation effect” which is the point of convergence in both these playwrights’ spectrum of techniques is the use of “episodic” ploy. It is a constant chiming bell to remind the audience that they are watching the message-driven play so it stimulates contemplation. This is inspired from Elizabethan “Chronicle Play.” Shaw’s *Pygmalion* exemplifies such structural organization.

They share another ground which is their interest in music. The musical effect heightens the mood on the one hand, and, on the other, reinforces the fact that the audience is watching the dramatic performance which is another distancing technique. Their plays like *Pygmalion* and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* are examples. And as is known, to distance is to make the audience think and re-think. In fact, music is one of the greatest inspirational forces behind their dramatic techniques and conceptions.

Another element which binds them together is their resistance to the Aristotelean representational function of the drama and their endorsement of Platonic idea of drama. Their plays do not have emotive inducement but thought-provoking power. The non-naturalistic surrealistic settings are another significant junction point to trigger critical thinking in order to see the reality of things which are hitherto submerged in audience’s mind and their plays amply exemplify it.

Brecht contends that the distinguishing feature of epic theatre is its dialectic quality which is essential for the political play. This is also the characteristic feature of Shaw’s plays. For instance, Shaw’s *The Apple Cart* debates on the superiority of ideologies argued by the characters of Magnus and the labor leader. What makes the audience choose sides is

¹⁶ Maison, Bruster, Blackmore Evans, *In the Company of Shakespeare*, (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002)

the logic and force of the characters' words and actions and Magnus, as a Constitutional Monarch, hold influence in a sympathetic way.¹⁷ Similarly, Brecht's *Mother Courage and her Children* is all about its argumentative quality which is "live by the sword will perish by the sword." Some critics hold that Shaw's dialectics are more complex, and, therefore, powerful than that of Brecht. But significant is the fact that they both use dialectics to educate the audience's mind.

For Shaw and Brecht, the kernel is important than shell, the content than form. Shaw once writes, "...to listen for a writer's message, even when the fellow is a fool, is one thing: to worship his tools and tricks, his pose and his style, is an abomination. Admire them by all means, just as you admire the craft of the masons and the carpenters and sculptors who built your cathedral; but don't go inside and sing Te Deums to them".¹⁸ Therefore, their techniques are mere instruments to get across their message.

(3) Characterization

Shaw's and Brecht's art of characterization runs in same vein to an extent. Their characters often act contrary to the mood set by the music and stage-setting. They are endowed with unconventional and unanticipated features. In Shaw's *Ana*, there is a fusion of ideal and human traits which also flouts the preconceived notions about stereotypical female onstage. This is Shavian way of distancing and causing the audience to re-think about the instilled notions about women after winning them over with humour. The protagonist of *The Good Woman Schutzen* is another such character. Their most significant message gets through real characters and not conventional, expected archetypes.

To Rabey, the political theatre was trying to expose the contradictions via individual consciousness and thereby maneuvered its audience into a critical position towards the status

¹⁷ Bentley, Eric, *Bentley on Brecht*, (North Western University Press, 2008)

¹⁸ Stanley Weintraub, *Shaw: The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies*, Vol. 8. (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988), p.5.

quo.¹⁹ Hence characterization is the core. Shaw initiated such a ploy and Brecht furthered it which is the linchpins of political theatre.

The humane feature of their characters is essential element of their characterization and this places their political consciousness amidst humanism. Above all, Shaw's Eliza and Brecht's mother are humans in *Pygmalion* and *Mother Courage* respectively.

(4) Points of Departure

Despite Shaw's insight into the ways of world, he is still able to thread the utopian world.²⁰ But Brecht knows that such imaginative indulgences are not necessary and his indignation towards life leads him to draw a harrowing reality.²¹ Thus his plays reflect his "brutal, irrational, satanic side" of his personality in contrast to Shaw's genial temper which makes him keeps faith in human beings as reflected through their works.

Concluding Remarks

The drama of 20th-century was dominated by Shaw and Brecht who were believers of political aesthetics or social function of art and through their plays they crushed floating illusions of reality and addressed other urgent contemporary issues. As Shaw writes, "in modern society is full of people who are being imprisoned and harmed by institutions within which they live... patriotism, marriage, duty, respectability... not encouraged to be out of them. Idealism is beautifying the pictures of institutions. Ibsenities are revolutionary because they demolish Ideals and disable the psychological mechanisms which make institutions bearable".²² So, both came into the fold of Ibsenities. They placed their political perception in a historical situation to show larger dimension of time, awareness of different possible dimensions of an event, and a serious regard for the historical truth. The significance of the political plays was accentuated because they were writing at the time when the world was raged with appalling chaotic inferno of wars and revolutions.

¹⁹ Rabey, *British and Irish Political Drama in 20th-Century*, p.27.

²⁰ Larson, Crawford, *The Annual Bernard Shaw Studies*, (Penn State Press, 2002)

²¹ Ronald D. Gray, *Brecht the dramatist*, (Faber and Faber, 1956)

²² Shaw, Bernard, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (Routledge, 2009), p 34

In the 20th-century Europe, dominant politics was that of right, but political theater was meant to be of left though it should have denoted political neutral. Both Shaw and Brecht learned much from the same unlikely mix of “comedians, sports, film, Marx, and the Bible.”²³ Thus both were significant contributors to progressive theatre theory and practice. Both belonged to a similar tradition of dramatic writing as they had been subjected to similar influences, and showed a surprising agreement in such things as their attitude towards Naturalism, or their rejection of a merely photographic rendering of the world around them. In short, their thematic and structural patterns, dramatic devices, art of characterization struck the audience as similar because their tradition was the same.

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²³ Drain, Richard, *Twentieth Century Theatre: A Sourcebook*, (Routledge, 1995)

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