

Bertolt Brecht's "The Threepenny Opera": Reworking of "The Beggar's Opera"

Alpana
Graduation in English Honours
Post-graduation in English Literature
Delhi University,
New Delhi

Abstract

The main idea elaborated in this research paper is how a text has been reworked upon and how such an activity leads to a different text. The paper primarily revolves around a play called The Beggar's Opera written by John Gay and how Bertolt Brecht produces The Threepenny Opera in twentieth century. The paper attempts to draw a parallel between the two and shows how they are similar and yet different. Many excerpts from both of the texts have been picked up and put in juxtaposition with each other to further highlight the desired comparative study. The paper brings in light the way both plays entertain the connection. It also contemplates the independent existence that The Threepenny Opera possesses, if any. One also catches a sense of modernism in the work of Brecht which the erstwhile one misses.

Keywords: comparative, Brecht, Gay, different, meaning, play

Bertolt Brecht's "The Threepenny Opera": Reworking of "The Beggar's Opera"

"The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways;
The point however, is to change it."

-Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach

Bertold Brecht wrote The Threepenny Opera in 1928 which is in one way an adaptation of John Gay's play The Beggar's Opera(1729) and in other way a new piece of work altogether. The wide gap of two hundred years did not matter to Brecht who chose wrote his play with The Beggar's Opera as its basis. It is so because both the plays put forth the status of the societies of the respective ages they belonged to. Gay's play represents a "bright spot in a period of dramatic decline" whereas Brecht's adaptation too has earned him accolades.

"A distinguished and delightful work of art , striking,
sardonic, original, humorous and always interesting."

The New York post of 1954 on The Threepenny Opera

Despite the gap of two centuries, both plays deal with the outrageous system of order in a society. While Gay deals with the society under the reign of Sir Robert Walpole, Brecht talks about the obnoxious behaviour of upper class towards the deprived one. Though one can find various common threads in the plays , yet there are certain prominent features which distinguish them from each other .In the reworking of Gay's plays, Brecht has deployed his theory of epic theatre and one notices how the play is construed as an act invoking a social change. In Baal he states that "anyone can be creative, it's rewriting other people that's a challenge." According to Brecht, the theatre must provide entertainment as well as instruction. While Gay's play was meant for entertainment, Brecht presents his work as a catalyst triggering its audience's urge to bring a social change. In The Beggar's Opera, Gay manages to create a camouflage of criticism

while himself remains bereft of any attack but Brecht, in overt sense, targets the capitalist society and the people responsible for its sustenance. This essay will further elaborate why and how Brecht decided to rework on Gay's play and how it managed to keep theatres houseful even in the twentieth century. Brecht's theory of epic theatre has also been explained in brief so as to show how The Threepenny Opera is different from The Beggar's Opera.

“You ramshackle Christian, awake!
Get on with your sinful employment
Show what a good crook you could make.
The Lord will cut short your enjoyment.
Betray your own brother, you rogue
And sell your old woman, you rat.
You think the Lord God's just a joke?
He'll give you His Judgement on that.”

Brecht opens the Act I Scene I with the above quoted Peachum's "Morning Hymn". One can sense how ironically it has been called a hymn because the content reveals an attack on the kind of activities people are involved in. When Peachum says "ramshackle Christian", the religious inclination is quite evident. It is noticed throughout the play how Bible holds different meanings for different people. Later in the play, when Mac makes Brown guilty for not rescuing him and gives him a 'deep withering stare'. Mac states that he learnt it from Bible. In another play by Brecht called Mother Courage and Her Children, when witnessing war in her town, Mother Courage blatantly puts the reason that people are "waging war in the name of almighty God but in reality waging for what they can get". Brecht denies the existence of God, and see how "heaven" is a consoling mirror image of a better world from which the poor are excluded. In "The Ballad of Mac the Knife", Brecht's display of the beast(shark) in man (Mac) is quite provocative. Also, his anti-religious attitude forms a secular basis of the religious world. Brecht shows how religion is being used by people to hypnotize others for fulfilling their purposes. Brecht is in a way showing mirror to the society. Clearly, the play deals with the critique of the increasing barbarity of a totalitarian Nazi regime along with exposing the ills of capitalist society.

“Yes you have to keep on offering something new.”

In these lines Jonathan Jeremiah Peachum shows a reflection of the way society functions. It sounds very ironical when he says that his work requires lot of hard work because it is "arousing human sympathy". It throws light on how the time is crucial when it comes to denoting value to an entity or practice. He puts emphasis on how a powerful act loses its worth when repeated very often. From here one recalls one of the statements Brecht made in an interview where he remarked that when one comes up with something new on stage he is called radically transformed.

“Often as you may see the river sluggishly flowing
Each time the water is different
What's gone can't go past again. Not one drop
Ever flows back to its starting point.”

The above stanza briefly describes Brecht's inclination towards presenting something new on stage. It also shows how a transformation comes into play whereas the idea of going back to the "starting point" is not feasible. This brings one to the whole theory of epic theatre by Brecht.

On further elaborating the character of Peachum, one realises that the play The Threepenny Opera keeps on insisting upon how society emphasises upon moral principles and code, not by living within it but living off it. In The Beggar's Opera, Peachum's business is just about making profit. It does not really partake of other people's humanity. But in The Threepenny Opera, it is not just about business. It shows how in the garb of misery or illness, people are looted. There is deception practised at the moral level of the people. This difference between the kind of business shown in both the plays is further accentuated with the help of songs. This brings one to the whole notion of opera as Brecht understands. Considering the title of the play, The Threepenny Opera (1928) it is noticed that the word "opera" implies a parody of the conventional opera. It is because the music is so disunited in Brecht's play. In "The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny", Brecht's contempt for conventional opera is clearly seen. He says, "Our existent opera is a culinary opera." He felt that the idea of opera was to draw its audience into its emotion in an uncritical fashion. No higher judgement is involved. This is as valid a criticism of conservative opera today as it was of opera on the Germany of 1920s. There is no active critical response in the audience. In his plays, Brecht represents a changing face of opera where one witnesses a great struggle for supremacy between words, music and production. Coming to the use of music in Brecht's plays, one witnesses an entirely new music. The Festival of German Chamber Music of 1921 too influenced the contemporary music scene in Germany. Besides being mere songs, they also pointed to a social evil. In Brecht's plays one notices untrained voices in a vernacular, popular style with "rough" tunes. In "The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny", one can see how the affect of music is slightly out of tune, "I am not sure if that's the right note" feel. While reworking on The Beggar's Opera, re-arrangement/re-orchestration of the original tunes was done. But in fact the music in The Threepenny Opera is entirely new. Brecht comes with songs which reflect the social contradictions. The songs of The Beggar's Opera heighten and illustrate the text, and paint the psychological situation whereas Brecht's songs set forth the text, they communicate and give the attitude. The way Brecht's songs have been represented is quite unique. He says, "Nothing is more revolting than when an actor pretends not to notice that he has left the level of plain speech and started to sing". In The Beggar's Opera Gay has thrown light in how despite the rigid social stratification, human nature remains universal. His focus is mainly in exposing the hypocrisy of the upper class and frailty of law that always favours the privileged ones. In a society enmeshed in hypocrisy, deception and betrayal, Gay enlightens its audience about the kind of friendship people maintain in a society like this. Be it Peachum-Lockit or Polly-Lucy, their bond on the surface level appears true but beneath it lies a trap of lies and an urge to beat each other. For them friendship is a self-consciously insincere tool. In other words it can be remarked that Gay represented the then society in its true colours. In case of Brecht too one comes across a concept of friendship here people can do anything to sustain themselves, no matter how stained one's relationship becomes. Gay and Brecht have dealt with the idea of friendship in quite a same way but their way of representation is very different. Gay's style is rather an oblique one while Brecht in The Threepenny Opera puts it as clearly as this-"it's all a matter of give and take. "It's quite an odd way of defining the friendship of Mac and Tiger Brown. The bond of friendship can therefore be summarised in this song by Macheath from The Beggar's Opera:-

"The modes of the Court is common are grown,
That a true Friend can hardly be met;

Friendship for Interest is but a loan,
Which they let out for what they can get,
'Tis true, you find Some friends so kind,
Who will give you good counsel themselves to defend
In sorrowful ditty
They promise, they pity,
But shift you for money, from Friend to Friend."

Coming to the institution of marriage, both The Beggar's Opera and The Threepenny Opera portray it as solely imbued in monetary gains and concern about social rank and status. In The Beggar's Opera when Mrs. Peachum mentions that Polly and Macheath are fond of each other, Peachum says "Gamesters and highwaymen are generally very good to their whores, but they are very devils to their wives". Clearly, he opposes this marriage. For him Polly is a "profitable wench" and therefore, warns her not to marry Macheath lest he faces any loss. Similarly, in The Threepenny Opera, Brecht too throws light on marriage being a mere means of transaction of money from one family to another and love or similar feeling has no place in it. However, in The Beggar's Opera, their marriage is just informed but in Brecht's play, the entire event has been described. This description gives a deep insight into the kind of society Mac the Knife inhabited. The marriage is arranged in a bare stable. From furniture to the crockery they have their meals in, the whole lot is stolen. Mac the Knife seems to be so absorbed in self-aggrandisement that he keeps on telling others how important this day is. On the other hand, Polly is confused and unable to figure out what exactly happens around her. Everyone feels elated and the scene ends with Mac and Polly singing these lines:-

'And though we've no paper to say we're wed
And no altar covered with flowers
And nobody knows for whom your dress was made
And even the ring is not ours-
The platter of which you've been eating your bread
Give it one brief look; fling it far.
For love will endure or not endure
Regardless of where we are."

Though both Mac and Polly sing but they have different meanings. These lines show traits of courtly love and also an underlying sense of deception of Mac's part. "We've no paper to say we're wed" implies that their marriage has not been registered and thus Mac the Knife easily shuns his marriage later in the play. Gay's Peachum sings how marrying a man like Macheath can bring loss whereas Brecht's Peachum is inclined towards describing the "insecurity of the human condition" which is as follows:-

"Let's practise goodness :who would disagree?
Let's give our wealth away :is that not right?
Once all are good His kingdom is at hand
Where blissfully we'll bask in His pure light.
Let's practise goodness :who would disagree?
But sadly on this planet while we're waiting
The means are meagre and the morals low.
To get one's record straight would be elating

But our condition is such it can't be so."

These lines by Peachum throw light on the way human society functions. All three of them, Peachum, Mrs. Peachum and Polly end up singing, "That's why He's got us in a trap/And why it's all a load of crap." Again, Peachum shows how Bible teaches that human life lies in a trap, though one strives to reach a height but remains where he started.

Finally addressing the question of whether The Threepenny Opera can exist independently, i.e., without The Beggar's Opera, one realises that the answer is affirmative. Though it follows the same basic plot as The Beggar's Opera but Brecht brings up a nuanced style in relation to the period. Gay's work is a revolutionary work, "a play about a social group that had never had a play written about them before." Brecht caught the satirical and wider political possibilities of the original. John Millet has mentioned that, "in Gay the target was an aristocracy whose affair were much like that of the underworld; here (The Threepenny Opera) it is a bourgeoisie society which allows there to be an underworld at all." Gay's play was more about entertainment and presented a critique of Italian opera which dominated in England in the eighteenth century. On the other hand, for Brecht theatre must entertain as well as instruct. He holds theatre as a part of enlightenment project. In "A Short Organum of the Theatre"(1949) Brecht states that he believes in bringing some social and political impact instigated by theatre. While dealing with the reading of these two plays separately, the perceptions formed are hugely different. The issues like class conflict, marriage, love, friendship, etc. have been addressed in both the plays but due to different connotations of the whole concept of theatre, meanings construed differ.

Works Cited:

- Brecht, Bertolt. The Threepenny Opera(1928)
Gay, John. The Beggar's Opera(1729)
Brecht, Bertolt. Mother Courage and Her Children(1939)
Brecht, Bertolt. Man Equals Man
Willet, John. ed. Bertolt Brecht On Theatre
Brooker, Peter. Bertolt Brecht: Dialectics, Poetry and Politics
White, John J. Bertolt Brecht's Dramatic Theory
Thompson, P. Cambridge Companion to Bertolt Brecht