



**TO BE OR NOT TO BE A “MOTHER”: A Study of Bertolt Brecht’s
Mother Courage and Her Children and Indira Goswami’s “The Offspring”**

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Abstract

This paper is a comparative analysis of two female characters, one from the west and the other from the east and is an effort to revisit the notion that surrounds the concept of being a “mother”. Done in the attempt to defend Anna Fierling, nicknamed Mother Courage, from Bertolt Brecht’s play *Mother Courage and Her Children* and Damayanti, from Indira Goswami’s short story “The Offspring”, we analyse the social, political, economic and cultural situations that contribute in the germination of these unconventional mothers. For the same, the paper has been divided into four parts, wherein the introductory section, it discusses the concept of motherhood, mothering and a mother. In the next section, we further the discussion with the character of Mother Courage and the idea of a feminine mother or a feminist mother. The following section is an investigation of the character of Damayanti and the power of choice that often is criticized vastly when utilized by a woman. Finally, in the conclusion of this paper, an attempt has been made to encourage readers to be a female and an ungendered form of powerful existence or Shakti for the upliftment of our society and a better tomorrow.

Keywords: Bertolt Brecht, Mother Courage, Indira Goswami, Damayanti.

Mother, according to Sigmund Freud, is the primary love object of a child and the one most responsible for the optimal development of it too. He also believes that though the relationship between an infant and a mother is regarded as the closest during infancy, however, a definite distancing occurs as the child grows. This, as Freud believes, is due to the Oedipal conflict which makes the father a powerful other and the mother a castrated, and hence a powerless one.

The *Encyclopedia of Motherhood* (Reilly, 2000) while explaining “Motherhood Studies” states, “Motherhood Studies has developed into three categories of inquiry: motherhood as an institution, motherhood as an experience, and motherhood as an identity or subjectivity” (831). Surrounding the word “motherhood”, we come across three primary words: mother, mothering and motherhood, each connoting a different essence. Motherhood is the ‘the institution’ (Rich, 1995), ‘Mothering’ is the action and “Mother” is the individual. While attempting to define and explain the concept of “mother”, we take into consideration two very important female characters, one being a Swedish Brechtian character named Mother Courage and the other an Assamese lady from North-East India named Damayanti.

Tatjana Takševa while discussing about the concept of Motherhood in her essay “Motherhood Studies and Feminist Theory”, states that,

The relationship between feminism and motherhood is complex. Some studies

conceive of motherhood as “taken-for-granted dimension of women’s normal adult role” so that it becomes “one of the key sources of women’s oppression.” They criticize the mainstream U.S. women’s liberation movement for their “unqualified support of motherhood as one of the most important women’s rights,” which is seen as being “insufficiently critical of its oppressive dimensions.” Such criticism concludes that “women’s liberation from male dominance is inextricably linked to women’s and men’s liberation from compulsory parenthood.” The oppressive dimensions of “compulsory parenthood” are being increasingly theorized by motherhood scholarship seeking to problematize and deconstruct “the patriarchal construct of a mother as a biological and essential category.” The deconstruction of “mother” as an essential and biological category that characterizes much recent scholarship in maternal theory exposes the second-wave liberal feminist ideology inherent in these views. (as cited in Takševa, 2018, pp. 180-181)

The Second-wave feminism fought for women’s right to full control over reproduction and believed motherhood to be dangerous for women as Tatjana further states:

If woman, in patriarchy, is she who exists as the womb and wife of man, every woman is by definition a mother: she who produces for the sake of men. A mother is she whose body is used as a resource to reproduce men and the world of men.... Motherhood is dangerous to women because it continues the structure within which females must be women and mothers, and conversely, because it denies to females the creation of a subjectivity (as cited in Takševa, 2018, p.181).

Though some like Adrienne Rich (1976) believed the existence of a crucial distinction between the patriarchal institution of motherhood and the experience of mothering, which is not inherently oppressive, however, the predominant notion towards the concept of motherhood was “being inimical to the establishment of female subjectivity” (Allen, 1983).

This was then followed by investigations where this blind attitude towards motherhood was questioned and attempts were made to see if motherhood could be a source of empowerment. As a discipline, it is based upon the premise that mothering, namely the lived experience of being a mother, “is not a singular practice” and that the verb “to mother” cannot be understood as a monolithic category of practice, since “even among similar mothers practices vary significantly” (Chandler, 2007, p. 273). Tatjana stated that this premise has significant implications for how to understand identity, experience, and agency within not only motherhood studies but feminism as well. If mothering practices vary significantly even among mothers who are in some sense similar, and if practices do give rise to and shape the experience of mothering, then the experiences of mothering do vary significantly and result in different forms of identity and levels of agency that negotiate, critique, and resist patriarchal constraints in different ways. Just as the category of woman is not universal—a stance for which academic feminism has fought long and hard to establish—the practice and experience of motherhood is not universal either, nor are the ways mothers may acquiesce to or may resist oppressive structures (183).

Anna Fierling, the title character of Bertolt Brecht’s play *Mother Courage and Her Children*, is a commoner whose life along with her three children has been portrayed in this play. The play has a backdrop of the Thirty Years War. Anna had spent most of her life in war. She has no particular home or place to live. War field is her abode and she keeps travelling along from Dalecarlia, Sweden from where she travels to Wallh of and Poland. She also travels across places like Poland, Moravia, Bavaria, Italy and returns through Bavaria to Magdeburg. Further, her expedition takes her to Halle via Ingolstadt and Fichtelgebirge, where, finally, the play ends.

Mother Courage has mastered the way of co-existing with war, where she sells goods and merchandise to the soldiers and ones involved in the war. Therefore, when the rest were scared of war and prayed for it to end, Anna had made the best out of it and took advantage

of the war to use it as her source of income.

She comments in scene VI:

All your victories mean to me is losses. (Brecht, 2000)

Therefore, because of her courageous nature, she was nicknamed Mother Courage. In Scene I of the play, she states,

I was scared of going broke, sergeant, so I drove me cart through the bombardment of Riga with fifty loaves of bread aboard. They were going mouldy, it was high time, hadn't any choice really. (Brecht, 2000)

However, she was criticized for her courageous choices as a mother. The play begins with Mother Courage pulling a cart that contains provisions for sale to soldiers. We are then, introduced to her three children Eilif, Katrin, and Schweizerkas or "Swiss Cheese". It is also then when for the first time, we come across of a shade of Anna's motherhood.

The Recruiter and the Sergeant tried to influence her to allow Eilif to join the army and talked about his bravery. Though she took pride in being a mother on her child's chivalry, she decided to not lose him to the horrors of War. Mother Courage was seen exhibiting strict anti-war sentiments at the beginning of the play as she says, "Nowt doing, Sergeant. Yours is no trade for my kids" (Brecht 728). Being aware of the dark realities which came along with war, this mother, chooses to protect her son. We can truly observe the motherly love when she denies the

cook's offer to go and settle with him, for the sake of her daughter.

Anna Fierling thus can be regarded as a feminine character as defined by Elaine Showalter where she imitated the prevailing modes of dominant tradition. Mother, according to our culture, is regarded as a nurturer and Anna chose to be that. However, Mother Courage was portrayed as a layered character by Bertolt Brecht. She was seen contradicting herself when she decided to be a provider then a nurturer.

Brecht's plays were often *Lehrstücke* meaning learning plays with a didactic intention. *Mother Courage and Her Children* was not any exception and was used as a platform to voice his hatred and detestation for the cause, condition, and consequences that surrounded the idea of war. His pro-Marxist and anti-capitalist ideology peeped in through this play, especially through the character of Mother Courage. He believed that the capitalist section was the cause of a war, who carefully watered the condition for it to continue and benefit them. To make this possible, these superpowers made every attempt to deceive common masses and gave them the impression of it being a boon rather than a curse. "It means money. It meansfame"(Bentley, Scene one, 18), they said. The best way to do so was by tickling the economic quotient of the poor and redefining war as a means to better their conditions. Mother Courage was seen as a victim of the same misguided representation of war when she later agreed to the joining of Eilif and Swiss Cheese in the army.

As far as the question of being a mother is concerned, here we were introduced to a feminist shade of the character Anna Fierling, who had chosen to be a symbol of protest against the standards and values with which a woman is conditioned. We are reminded here about the core idea that a woman is made of and that was adaptability. In a situation like so, she was forced to get out of the feminine wrap of a mother who happens to be a nurturer and becomes a feminist provider. She had to drag a carriage on the battlefield and do business even after losing all her kids to the same battle is probably the most courageous act which only a mother can do. We cannot also ignore the fact of how she chose to be a canteen woman and lead a life of hardships when she had an easy option of becoming a prostitute and abandoning her children. Hence, it would be a biased analysis of her character, if her financial quest overshadows her maternal instincts and thereby questions her choice of being a "mother". Though she sang songs praising the war but when her daughter Katrin gets raped, the scream that echoed inside the walls of the theatre, "...War be damned" (Brecht 743), should be the testimony to judge the validity and worth of her motherhood.

In Assamese culture, a proverbial saying, “বৈশিষ্ট্যবিশিষ্ট মাতৃপুষ্টি স্বাভাৱিক” (As the river flows without any interruption, love of a mother is as spontaneous and ever-flowing) had conditioned generations of Assamese woman. Damayanti, a character from Indira Goswami’s short story “The Offspring”, questions the legitimacy of these ideologies in our present societal situations. Set in rural Kamrup, the story revolves around the idea of having an offspring to continue the legacy of Pitambar, the rich landlord. His wife being a patient of rheumatism is described as a bundle of bones lying on a bed, hinting at her inability of becoming a mother and hence demining her as nothing but a useless object. On the other hand, we are introduced to Damayanti, the Brahmin widow, who has been ostracized for her choices. She lives with her young daughters and to provide them with a better life, she had consciously chosen prostitution.

The feminists believe that prostitution is, in most cases, not a conscious and calculated choice. They argue by saying that most women who become prostitutes do so because of pressure or force by a pimp or by human trafficking. In other instances, when it is her independent decision, it is generally a resultant action of extreme poverty and lack of opportunity, or serious underlying problems, such as drug addiction, past trauma (such as child sexual abuse) and other unfortunate circumstances.

Feminists, like Catherine MacKinnon, also point out that women from the lowest socioeconomic classes—impoverished women, women with a low level of education, women from the most disadvantaged racial and ethnic minorities—are overrepresented in prostitution all over the world. She writes: "If prostitution is a free choice, why are the women with the fewest choices the ones most often found doing it?".

Catharine further argues that,

In prostitution, women have sex with men they would never otherwise have sex with.

The money thus acts as a form of force, not as a measure of consent. It acts like physical force does in rape. (MacKinnon, 1993)

Another reason for the society to boycott Damayanti was her choice of not abiding by the Sattra customs and rituals laid for a widow and violating it by her choice of food and lifestyle. Holmes & Rahe (1967) characterizes, widowhood as one of the most distressing of all life events. Bowlby stated that spousal death represents a severing of the emotional attachment to one’s life partner (1980), as well as the reconfiguration of the daily decisions and routine responsibilities that were once shared by both spouses (Carey, 1979-1980).

There is an enormous consequence widowhood has on the routine social and behavioral tasks of everyday life. Most importantly, the role that others may play in relation to the bereaved person cope with the transitions associated with becoming widowed should be scrutinized. Because human lives are embedded in a complex network of social relationships (Elder, 1998) and also because no human is in complete isolation from others, we assume that the death of a spouse will not only affect the daily experiences and self-identity of the surviving spouse, but the consequences will reverberate through the network of related social actors. However, depending on the culturally dominant stereotypes regarding age and gender that exist in a society, widows and widowers may receive different levels of support/criticism.

Pitambar and the greedy Brahmin Krisnakanta was seen to have scrutinized the widow of the story, Damayanti as a piece of meat hanging in a butcher’s shop, as Goswami states in her story and decides to use her as a medium to get a child and continue his lineage.

According to Social Reproduction Theory, the ‘production of goods and services and the production of life are part of one integrated process’, or in other words, it acknowledges the fact that race and gender oppression occur capitalistically. Within the Marxist tradition, it was Karl Marx who introduced us with the idea in Volume I of the *Capital*. In Chapter 23 on ‘Simple Reproduction,’ he states that ‘viewed . . . as a connected whole, and as flowing on with incessant renewal, every social process of production is, at the

sametime, a process of reproduction' (Marx, 1977, p. 711).

Almost a century later, both Louis Althusser and Pierre Bourdieu, by the utilization of their Marxist insight were seen to have theorized the ways in which 'ideological state apparatuses' (Althusser) and 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu) feature in the broader reproduction of capitalism.

According to Susan Ferguson as stated in her work "Social Reproduction Theory: What's the Big Idea?"

Althusser's and Bourdieu's ideas about social reproduction point in rather different directions. Althusser sees himself as building on Marx's theorization of the conditions necessary for capitalist production by emphasizing the role of ideology in the social relations of reproduction. He identifies the ideological state apparatuses (state agencies and institutions) that perpetuate the capitalist social formation. And Bourdieu drills down to the education system and other cultural institutions and practices to show how 'cultural capital' tends to be passed along through generations, preventing class mobility (8).

This also inspired the feminist who too had then developed their theorization of social reproduction – one that explores and explains the relationship between oppression and exploitation.

What came along was a set of upcoming generation of SRF theorists and activists who recalibrated a theory analyzing the relationship between gender and class. In recent times, the circumference seems to have widened itself even further where it involves not just gender but also race, colonialism, sexuality and other oppressions have been identified by SRF as a defining feature of capitalist societies.

In the short story "The Offspring", we find a similar nexus of production and reproduction which was undoubtedly influenced by power, position and ideologies. These ideologies were cemented and based on stereotypical norms relating to gender and capital. Both the parties, Pitambar and Damayanti, were needy; one for an offspring and other for money. Krishnakanta here was the opportunist who agreed to be the mediator, who would otherwise be the one criticizing a woman like Damayanti with the comfortable company of patriarchs like Pitambar.

This was nothing new for Damayanti, as she had been doing such odd jobs since her widowhood for the sake of her daughters. However, it was a secret attempt made by Pitambar. She committed to it for the hunger of money however was conjured by the horror of being polluted because of sleeping with a man from a lower caste and most importantly mothering his child. Hence, though she was threatened by Pitambar, she chose to abort the baby after conceiving it. The most powerful and stereotype-shattering turn takes place in the story when she buries the fetus in her backyard and Pitambar is seen digging for it. She refers to the fetus as "just a lump of flesh, blood, and mud!" (Goswami, 1988, p.30)

Feminists have always argued and stated the necessity to include the so-called private spaces of family, sex and reproduction in the political sphere making it subject to principles of justice.

The article, "Feminist Perspectives on Reproduction and the Family", published in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy" states the following three reasons to support the same:

1. Families are not "natural" orderings, but social institutions backed up by laws. For example, marriage is a social institution. Therefore, the state cannot choose not to intervene in families: the only question is how it should intervene and on what basis.
2. The state has a critical interest in the development of future citizens.
3. The division of labor in traditional families constrains women's opportunities and freedoms in the wider society.

This also, therefore, will not only have a just eye and hearing towards production or

reproduction but also legalize the choice and right of a woman to abort, when and if needed.

It was, *Roe v Wade* in the year 1973, who granted women the right to terminate an unwanted pregnancy, based on an implicit fundamental right to privacy. However, it would be very inappropriate to view abortion only in terms of the freedom of individual choice or even as a clash of rights. It will undoubtedly neglect a range of other relevant considerations.

The fact that women and only women get pregnant and bear children, that women earn less than men, that they are subjected to sexual violence, have little or no access to publicly provided day care, and that they have less familial or political decision-making power than men. Abortion is connected to other issues that need to be considered, especially the effects of unwanted pregnancies on the lives of women and children (Sherwin, 1987, pp. 265-84).

Damayanti was a mother, who chose and consciously sold herself for her kids and to provide them with a better living. However, she was not ready to be just a mother who stayed in the dark and was used as a mere commodity by a rich patriarch. She was a mother who was ready to get marginalized for her kids but a woman who was not ready to get marginalized for becoming a mother.

In both these stories, Anna Fierling and Damayanti were two female characters who chose for themselves and most importantly their way of becoming a mother. They acted as a nurturer and a provider and adapted accordingly. They were, therefore, neither feminine nor feminist, rather they were female-s who exercised the power of choice. They were, as Indian philosophy would state, that ungendered power called *Shakti*, who willingly chose to be either the “angel of the house” or the “fallen angel”, as the society would suite themselves and call. Above all, both *Mother Courage* and Damayanti unapologetically decided whether “To be or not to be, a mother”.

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