

Communist Revolutionary Feature in Brecht's the Caucasian Chalk Circle

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Abstract

The present paper discusses the communist revolutionary feature in Brecht's The Caucasian Chalk Circle. The communist revolutionary feature of the work is analyzed from two aspects: keeping justice by fighting against class oppression and challenging the private ownership. Through the analysis, Brecht's consistent anti-bourgeoisie nature of his plays is revealed.

Keywords

Communist Revolutionary Feature; Brecht; The Caucasian Chalk Circle.

1. Introduction

Written between 1941 and 1944 during Brecht's exile in the United States, The Caucasian Chalk Circle implicitly indicates Brecht's antagonism on the bourgeois politics. One of the most prominent critics, Professor Bian Zhilin, once commented that "although the setting of the play lies in the ending of the feudal time, the theme remains disclosing the darkness in the society of class, hinting the injustice in bourgeois society and prefiguring the future revolution directed by modern proletarians". Therefore, the traditional view of considering it only as a play intended to attack feudalism turns out to be shallow and narrow-minded, for the play's communist revolutionary color and its alluding to unfair social situation have been put between lines and accepted by more and more critics. The play's revolutionary feature can be illustrated from two different angles: keeping justice by fighting against class oppression and challenging the private ownership.

2. Body

2.1. Social Background of the Play

Although the play did not gain popularity in the U. S. until the 1950s, it became Brecht's most popular parable soon after it made the first run at Hedgerow Theater in Philadelphia in 1948. The story is mainly drawing its materials from a Chinese play. With a relatively happy ending, the play itself was unusual for Brecht. At the same time, as a Communist play, The Caucasian Chalk Circle was implicit in its Communist morality reflection with a typical anti-religious fervor of the playwright who had paralleled Christ's story through the life of the drunken judge Azdak. Furthermore, this play was also a version of Solomonic Law, originated from the Biblical story of Solomon and the baby. When two women came to ask Solomon to judge the belongings of a child, he ordered the child cut in half. The true mother decided to keep the baby's life and give up the baby to the other woman, which just revealed to Solomon that she was actually the mother.

2.2. Keeping Justice by Fighting against Class Oppression

With an almost happy ending, in nature the play mirrors that in a society with class, the poor can scarcely get a fair treatment unless in the turmoil situation, the upper authorities probably offer the poor some justice temporarily in order to get the support from them. Instead, though

the poor have suffered a lot from the oppression of the upper class, some of them can still offer their kindness and justice to all the people with the virtue of humanity.

From the prologue, the discussion is lively but peaceful between sheep breeders and fruit growers, resolving with reason, good common sense and social utility. Some of their dialogues come as follows:

THE EXPERT. Don't be angry. It is true that we have to consider a piece of land as a tool with which one produces something useful. But it is also true that we must recognize the love for a particular piece of land...

THE PEASANT WOMAN LEFT. Our thoughts were that our soldiers-you're your men and our men-should return to a till more fertile homeland.

THE GIRL TRACTOR DRIVER. As the poet Mayakovshki said: 'The home of the Soviet people shall also be the home of Reason!' (Brecht *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* 5-6)

By presenting the praise for Communal goodness, Brecht has attached Marxist ideas to this play with the view that only the Communal sense can give the peace and justice to all the people. Definitely, Brecht has expressed his positive attitudes towards Marxist Communism and meanwhile his antagonism on the injustice of class society.

Referring to Grusha's story which happens at a time of political turmoil and upheaval, readers can see that even a first attempt at formulating its theme is impossible without entering the universe of social relationships in that story. That universe is, right from the beginning, clearly identified as a world of topsy-turvy human relations passing for normal and indeed hallowed, where basic human values are polar opposites to the official ones:

In olden times, in a bloody time
 There ruled in a Caucasian city—
 Men called it the City of the Damned—
 A Governor.
 His name was Georgi Abashwili.
 He was rich as Croesus
 He had a beautiful wife
 He had a healthy baby.
 No other governor in Grusinia
 Had so many horses in his stable
 So many soldiers in his service
 So many petitioners in his courtyard. (9)

Obviously, the world is a world of war, "of class oppression of the poor and powerless by the rich and powerful, and of internecine warfare of each against each in the upper class, engendering a system in which the lower class also has to choose between kindness and survival". Grusha saves the infant because she is an exceptional sucker, which means that she responds to norms of human kindness although they threaten her with death in the unnatural class society. Distinctively speaking, "behind the old legend, the basic Brechtian questioning of what is 'normal', of the alienation effect of social power-relations on human potentialities, insidiously reemerges". In the situation of disturbance, the behavior of saving others' child may only happen on a person like Grusha who owns kindness of humanity although she belongs to the class of proletarians.

From Azdak's story, audiences can realize that it is not only autonomously enjoyable but also essential in order to bring out its theme of an advent of justice as a temporary reversal of historically normal power and jurisprudence. "As an intercalary short-lived at the time of

power-vacuum, Azdak can rid the chalk-circle judgement of a non-cognitively fantastic or fairy-tale character". As a proletarian, Azdak should become a judge to help the poor with justice only by chance. If the Fat Prince never betrays, Azdak will never have the opportunity to be chosen as the judge by the soldiers for the Fat Prince wants some superficial justice to comfort his soldiers. If Azdak never saves the Duke, he will never keep his life and his position as a judge to order a temporary fair judgment in the case of Grusha. Therefore, all the justice from Azdak should be ascribed to the unstable conditions of the society, when the upper class faces the danger of rebellion and asks for the help from the lower class to keep their authority. "Humaneness and justice in time of upheaval—how contemporary that theme was for the year 1943 to 1945! It is the mirror of bourgeois class oppression and war". Similar with the social situation in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, the bourgeois society was experiencing World War II on purpose of the benefit essentially. Owing to the war, the problem of class oppression in capitalist society seemed to keep a temporary alleviation for the bourgeoisies who expect to win the help from the proletarians. Under such a circumstance, Brecht has insisted on a cynical criticism on the hypocrisy of bourgeois politics and the irrationality of the class society, revealing his pity on the poor who can only obtain justice from the upheaval.

2.3. Challenging the Private Ownership

Defining morality in the terms of social use, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* has tried to challenge the private ownership featured in capitalist society with Grusha's transformation of personality and Azdak's breakthrough of the separate property of upper class. Maria Shevtsova has suggested:

As the biological mother, the wife of the governor has abandoned her right to own the child for the sake of saving herself, protruding her selfishness and cruelty. However, Grusha brings her social morality into play and makes the child her own through her own privations and sacrifices".

The sociopolitical circumstances in which Grusha takes flight are foregrounded in Scene 3:
 THE CORPORAL. Well, there is the child I wanted to have from you. He walks towards the crib.

GRUSHA. Officer, it's mine. It's not the one you're after.

THE CORPORAL. I'll just have a look at it. He bends over the crib. Grusha looks round in despair.

GRUSHA. It's mine! It's mine.

THE CORPORAL. Nice linen!

(Brecht *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* 39)

When she is confronted, in turn, by the Ironshirts whose bully corporal is about to seize the child, Grusha hits the offending corporal over the head, seizes the child and escapes once again. The dialogue between Grusha and the Corporal, the action of Grusha's fighting for the baby and the song of musicians explain explicitly how she has bonded with the child through their shared hardships and has at last consciously and deliberately decided to keep him as her own baby. Furthermore, it is by now clear that "keeping" Michael is a qualitatively different phenomenon from "taking" him. Each act of benefit to the child jeopardizes her own chances of escape or survival. Just as the disorderly tramp Azdak, Grusha brings order into the disorder of the times. "Although she illegally appropriates the child, all her acts are struggling with the private ownership of class society with the transformation into a productive personality". She produces motherhood within herself.

As for Azdak, the spokesman for the insulted and injured, through his actions which to some degree interweave humaneness and disorderliness, traditional order is disclosed to us as an

oppression and a tyranny. "Soon after he becomes a judge, he continues to help the poor and the oppressed ones, defying the private ownership of upper class". On the judgment of the case of Grusha, he has understood the hidden motives behind the action of snatching the baby for the governor's wife who needs Michael to unblock the revenues of her estates, capital and greed going hand in glove. Thus, Azdak has generated a good deal of suspense by his tricks and pretences by ordering the chalk test twice to judge the private ownership not upon the class but upon morality and rationality. Whether the child should belong to the natural but selfish mother or the life-saving and hardship-shared mother has been raised to the audiences as a difficult question to answer. But through the activity of Azdak and the song of minstrel, Brecht himself has honestly given his answer:

But you, who have listened to the story of the Chalk Circle

Take note of the meaning of the ancient song:

That what there is shall belong to those who are good for it, thus

The children to the maternal, that they thrive;

The carriages to good drivers, that they are driven well;

And the valley to the waterers, that is shall bear fruit. (The Caucasian Chalk Circle 96)

In Brecht's mind, the private ownership can never be unchangeable and it should belong to the one who holds the true morality and rationality even in evil times when humanity and humaneness themselves become dangerous.

3. Conclusion

Generally speaking, as for bourgeois politics, Brecht continually holds a negative attitude, conveying his antagonism in most of his plays, especially in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. By unveiling the bourgeoisies' durance on the freedom of working class and the truth behind their temporary presentation of justice, Brecht artfully constructs his Communal idea as the main theme in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, carrying on overall generalization to the two features of politics in capitalist society. Undoubtedly, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is written in his masterful period. Though he didn't comprehend Marxist aesthetics clearly in his early time, he had already begun to take bourgeois politics as the oppression on people's freedom of minds and bodies with his special radical irony, which could consistently rank this play as an anti-bourgeoisie work. With his accepting of Marxist ideas gradually, influenced by the two world wars, he expands and deepens his understanding about bourgeois politics, anatomizing the question like "Utopian justice" in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. Overall, the whole journey of Brecht from a simple radical to a mature Marxist, the changeable social conditions and his study on Marxism have pushed forward his theatre of reason.

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