

Analysis of Shen Te's Goodness in Brecht's "The Good Woman of Szechwan"

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Abstract

The present paper is an analysis of Shen Te's goodness in Brecht's "The Good Woman of Szechwan". Based on Brecht's changed world views and the plot of the play, the paper analyzes in detail the depersonalization and gender dismantling of the heroine Shen Te.

Keywords

Shen Te, goodness, Brecht, "The Good Woman of Szechwan".

1. Introduction

Since the outbreak of World War II, many people had turned into political refugees, fleeing their home countries to avoid persecution and death. Facing the imperialist war of poverty and uncertainty, common folks tended to lose their identities. The turbulent situation might have led Brecht to question whether goodness could exist in that world as is shown in the case of depersonalization and dismantling gender of Shen Te in Brecht's "The Good Woman of Szechwan".

2. Body

2.1. Brecht's Change of World Views and the Plot of the Story

It may already have been remarked that in the poetry, drama, and theoretical works of the period of exile, a certain new note enters Brecht's world views. "On the purely formal side, there is a greater simplification, if not austerity, of tone, without loss of humor; on the emotional side a deepening of his sense of human beings as human beings. Both sides are interdependent and fused within his Marxist world-outlook." [1] The tragic historic present has made him more flexible and less doctrinaire. A more humane and less categorical outlook on human relations in his writing becomes evident. Having retained his dialectical principle and the guiding principle in judging history, Brecht begins to focus on the individual development in a society. To be specific, female individuals play a more and more important part in his theatrical creations.

"The Good Woman of Szechwan" begins with a water carrier, Wang, telling the audience that he is awaiting several important gods on the city outskirts. When the gods arrive and ask Wang to offer shelter for the night, Shen Te, a young prostitute living in poverty, volunteers to give a helping hand. To show gratitude for Shen Te's generosity and goodness, the gods give her cash to buy a tobacco shop both as a gift and a test. The gods wonder whether Shen Te is able to maintain her goodness with these newfound means. Shen Te lives up to the gods' expectations. But ironically, Shen Te's goodness quickly turns her shop into a messy poorhouse. Shen Te is forced to introduce the invented cousin Shui Ta disguised by herself. As an overseer and protector of her interests, Shui Ta will show up whenever she is in a desperate situation. While Shen Te is soft, compassionate and vulnerable, Shui Ta is unemotional, pragmatic and even vicious. It seems that only Shui Ta manages to survive in the world where they live. Eventually, the employees take Shui Ta to court on the charge of having hidden or murdered his cousin. During the process of his trial, the gods appear in the robes of the judges. When the townspeople

have gone, Shen Te makes a confession that she is Shui Ta, and reveals that she is stuck in a dilemma caused by the gods' arbitrary divine behavior. Though the gods have offered a fortune to her, they ignore the vulnerability and circumstances that this goodness can engender and proceed. In a word, it is difficult for a good person to muddle through an evil and corrupted society.

2.2. Depersonalization of Gender-Dismantled Shen Te

In the play, the goodness of Shen Te and the harsh reality in a corrupted society render the gender-dismantled heroine depersonalized. Shen Te tries to fulfill the commands of the gods by being good to her neighbors, her lover and herself. However, she can't be good to others without endangering her own survival. After realizing this, she responds by inventing a calculating male cousin who is skilled in coping with the harsh world. In assuming the role of this cousin, Shen Te compromises her goodness for the sake of survival.

"Whether deserving or not, it is without thought for the consequences because in the capitalist society, the generosity by itself is counterproductive at a high price of depersonalization and even dismantling gender for Shen Te." [2] As is depicted by Brecht, the society of Szechwan is a society in which it is difficult for any individual to survive. It is a society where poverty governs every action, turning some people to crime of one sort or another and others to greed. Survival requires unfriendliness. Shen Te and Shui Ta are alternative responses to the harsh society of Szechwan. Shen Te's experiences suggest that goodness is sure to fail in a corrupted society, while Shui Ta's role indicates that self-interests can only be guaranteed at the cost of others in such a society.

Shen Te's good actions combine altruism with a desire for pleasure through giving. Shen Te's observable good actions, driven by the pleasure she derives from altruism, are scarcely more effective than the gods' bland ethics for they prove to be ruinous to her material well-being. As soon as she opens her tobacconist's shop with the money the gods have given her, she is invaded by the very people who have ever thrown her out to the street. By the end of Scene One, she is driven to distraction:

My beautiful shop! Oh such hopes! No sooner opened, than it is no more. To the audience:

The dinghy which might have saved us

Is straight way sucked into the depths:

Too many of the drowning

Snatch greedily at it. [3]

Even at this point of despair, she is beleaguered by cries from outside the shop: "Open up". However, Shen Te does spontaneously appear to be of a good nature when she offers accommodation to the gods even at the expense of losing a much-needed client. Initially, she believes that her new-found prosperity, apart from freeing her from prostitution, will enable her to undertake acts of charity. Immediately, she is beset by petitioners of all sorts—deserving as well as parasitic ones—so that in desperation and self-defense she is forced to assume another face and drop into depersonalization.

It is valuable to examine another kind of love with which Shen Te is afflicted. Judging from Shen Te's goodness to her lover, Yang Sun, the spectators can find that she is again mercilessly exploited. Having saved an unemployed flyer Yang Sun from suicide and fallen in love with him, Shen Te finds that he makes use of her to obtain a pilot's post by bribery, which will bring Shen Te to a financial ruin. Made pregnant now by her lover, Shen Te vows to turn into a tigress in defense of her young baby. It is left to her alter-ego, Shui Ta, to restore her fortunes by means of a tobacco factory which exploits its workers ruthlessly and uses the ambitious and unscrupulous Yang Sun as a slave-driving foreman. By and large, Shen Te's gentleness towards Yang Sun and ultimately her search for pleasure in love will prove as disastrous for her well-

being as those of her other actions that are driven by her humanity rather than the needs of her business.

Closely tied to her female sex, Shen Te's goodness is connected with gender and only in male guise is she able to assert herself sufficiently to prevent her own exploitation and act to her own economic and personal advantage. Laureen Klein Nussbaum has viewed that: "Nevertheless, since it is Shen Te herself who incorporates this male self-interest, Brecht seems to be indicating that such sex-related differences are tied more to the social expectations accompanying gender than to any natural differentiation by sex in psychological characteristics." [4] Shen Te is never shown to be capable of pursuing self-interest openly as a female so that she must dismantle her real gender to be a man. Furthermore, once she discovers her own pregnancy, she becomes so selfless a mother that she is willing ultimately to sacrifice her own goodness, a defining characteristic of her self-identity, towards others, for the welfare of her son. She says, "To be good to you, my son. I shall be a tigress to all others, if I have to. And I shall have to." [3] Thus, the necessity of protecting her interest and her son can serve as one of the most significant factors in Shen Te's depersonalization and dismantling gender.

3. Conclusion

As prominent gods who have come to earth to find at least one good person, the gods in essence are the embodiments of the bourgeois mentality. Since in capitalist society, the identities of working people are closely linked to the production relations which are strictly controlled by bourgeoisies, the bourgeois mentality plays a key role in deciding what kind of identities working people should possess and what not. "The gods' concept of goodness as an absolute disregards the material circumstances that determine people's actions." [2] The three gods' idea of being good is based on an essential notion of ethical goodness that bears little direct relationship to the realities of the world. The gods' abstract concept of goodness makes inflexible moral demands on society, without reference to what is practical and what is not. That is why at last the evil remain inherent in capitalist society. It is urgent to find a resolution to this drama, a resolution different from that of Shen Te. The three gods, as the embodiment of bourgeoisies, can't find any ways to solve the social problems and have to leave the earth. It is necessary to create a world in which it is possible for a man to be himself, but unfortunately this goal can never be achieved in the capitalist society.

References

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