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**BERTOLT BRECHT *THE THREE PENNY OPERA* SEEKS TO SHATTER THE
ARISTOTELIAN CONCEPT OF WRITING PLAY THROUGH THE
TECHNIQUE OF ‘EPIC THEATRE AND THE ALIENATION’**

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Abstract:

The Three penny Opera is a revolutionary play by 20th century German dramatist Bertolt Brecht, who was no mean poet. It is based on the English play *The Three penny Opera* by John Gay, dramatist of 18th century. There is trend of remake in Hindi film today. The present play can be seen as the German remake of an English play. It is necessary to know the original play and have a clear idea about the concepts ‘opera’ and epic theatre’ in our mind, to understand the play better. Let us just state here that this play has revolutionized the German musical theatre.

Keywords: *Epic Theatre, The Alienation, Aristotelian Concepts, Bertolt Brecht, etc.*

Bertolt Brecht was German dramatist who began his writing since he was in school and edited school magazine “The Harvest”. He had already begun writing for the local newspaper by the time he was 16, he had written his first play *The Bible, The Three penny Opera*” which is one of the great play but it is *The Mothers Courage and her Children*” which is called as best play ever. Brecht experimented with Dadaism and expressionism in his early plays, but later gave up the attempts. Brecht was against the Aristotelian concept of drama where the audience was expected to become one with the protagonist. That is full involvement of the spectator was what the play demanded. Brecht was determined to destroy this theatrical illusion and in that effort he started what is known today as ‘Epic Theatre’ and for that purpose took over the theatre named the Berliner Ensemble. Brecht received the Noble Prize in 1951 and in 1954 he won the international Lenin peace prize.

Brecht’s *The Three penny Opera* is to use the latest term, a remark of old play named *The Beggars Opera* by John Gay, a 17th century British dramatist. Brecht kept the basic skeleton constant and rebuilds the play. The purpose of effort was not to revive the old play but to expose and satirize the bourgeois society and its money-mindness. But in doing so Brecht used what is known as the alienation effect. The stage on which such plays are produced and presented is called the ‘epic theatre’. Brecht detested the Aristotelian concept of drama where the union of the spectators, the action and the actor was of prime importance. Aristotle believed and claimed that the play is best enjoyed when the spectator is completely involved in the action and this can be achieved only if the spectator identifies himself with the hero and heroine in the play. Then and then only catharsis, the desired aim of drama, can be affected, he suggested. Even today we believe in this and feel like siding with Aristotle. But Brecht was determined to shatter this concept of theatrical illusion and the result was the emergence of the ‘epic theatre’. The concept was based on the Russian formalist concept of



“defamiliarization “which aimed at effecting and sustaining the critical attitude of the audience and to rouse them against the social reality. The Aristotelian drama created a dream world this technique hoped to shatter.

Though the term the ‘epic theatre’ Brecht suggested the distinguishing features of the new type. The Aristotelian theatre created the theatrical illusion through linear story, progressive plot development reaching the climax and then the denouement and suspension of disbelief on the part of the spectators. The result is that the theatergoer is fully involved in the story and identified himself/herself with the protagonist. The epic theatre sought to shatter this theatrical illusion. The distinguishing features of the epic theatre were episodic plot, emphasis on technical aspect, failure of the protagonist to generate any sympathy in the mind of the theatergoer and the use of devices that would shock the audience and make the theatre look artificial. The result was that the spectator was alienated / distanced from the plot: he felt shocked and was often jarred: and as a result criticized the play while he watched it. This is exactly what Brecht aimed at. He tried to emulate on the stage an objectivity of epic narrative.

Brecht affected this alienation effect very nicely through the spectators and characters. Let us see how he did it in some details. We speak of an actor as if he is born for a peculiar role and point out that the actor has actually lived the role. What we mean is that he has identified himself with that role so much that whenever we think of that particular role. This considered to be the strongest point of an actor. But Brecht seems to think distances even the actors from the story. The songs are one such technique of producing this alienating effect. When Polly, for instance sings of pirate Jenny song, she is automatically distanced from her role as a beloved newly married to her lover. Again, when, for instance, Peachum announces that Mac will not be hanged as this end does not suit an opera, he is alienating himself from the action and bringing in an element that he would not like to add as Peachum. The total effect of all this is that the spectators and the actors are never allowed to identify themselves with any of the characters in the plot and are rudely reminded again and again that they are watching a play. This way the spectator, who is distanced from the action, becomes critical of the action and looks at it in comparison with the life he lives. This, Brecht felt, should be the aim of dramatist while writing play.

In *The Three penny Opera* Brecht presents the bourgeois society of the 17th century England. In doing so he presented the hateful and evil aspects of the society prominently. The bourgeois love money and this is seen in the blunting of their emotions so much that nothing but making pots of money matters to them. What do Mac and Peachum aim at? Mac, through his criminal activities, which include murder, setting fire, arson, earns money. Peachum, who controls the world of beggars, is producing money through the commission and deposits that he gets from those who want to beg in the streets of London. Both are unscrupulous as to important than any other thing. Peachum is opposed to Polly’s marriage with Mac, the don, not because he is a criminal, but because this would affect his business adversely for Polly is of great help to him in running it. Mac too thinks of business only, even in jail, and wants Polly, his wife, whom he married a day ago, to take over his business and not shed tears of sorrow.

Secondly, the protagonist is not an ideal person in any way. As a result, he fails to generate any sympathy in the mind of the spectators. He is young, attractive, sweet tongued no doubt. But he is the



ruler of the criminal world. He marries Polly though he loves Lucy, the daughter of Tiger Brown, the sheriff of London and one time intimate friend of Mac. He is afraid that the Sheriff would know his affair with his daughter and so seeks to conceal the matter through this marriage. Even after the marriage we see him going to the whores. Low-Dive Jenny is his favorite while even Suky Tawdry is another with whom he frequents. We hear him singing of his past life with Jenny and Jenny joining the song presents another hateful side of Mac, namely his ill-treatment of Jenny and his immoral permission to her to do whoring. Let us note that he is arrested twice and on both occasion he was with one whore or other and this is just one day after his marriage. How detestable is this sex hunger.

Thirdly, by using on the stage unnatural devices like play cards and wrong furniture for the marriage Brecht shocks the spectators and thus helps to keep them away from the theatre. Again, the songs, which are the part and parcel of an opera to further the plot, sever the link between the story and the spectators. For instance, the song of “the Pirate Jenny” tells the story of a dishwasher who becomes the leader of pirates. It is totally out of place and while listening to it we break our link with the plot. Similarly, the plot structure is another point. It is not a linear development. The structure is episodic. Each scene is complete in itself and has no link with the other scenes. This again helps sever the link between the spectators and the action. And last but not least, is the end of the play. Peachum claims that an opera ought to end in happiness and hence Mac is not hanged. On other hand, he is rewarded. He is elevated to the rank of aristocracy by the Queen on the occasion of her coronation. The spectators however are shocked to see. The unwanted, unhealthy element of the society is rewarded, though virtue is not punished.

Even the actors do their bit in distancing the spectators from stage. They behave in ways the spectators do not expect them to, Peachum, for instance, is engaged in a quarrel with his daughter on the issue of her marriage with Mac the Knife. At that time five beggars come to seek help from him and he immediately leaves aside this very important emotional issue and turns away to see what they want. Polly goes to see Mac, her husband in the jail. She is sad and dejected and worried about his release and we see Mac asking her to take care of his business. He does not seem to be worried by his arrest or by her sadness. Later he easily forsakes the same girl whom he married a day before, because to him she is expendable. This would be natural for the villain, but here the hero behaves like that and spectators are shocked by his heartlessness. Tiger Brown’s arrival on the stage as the riding messenger from the Queen with the order of Mac’s release and elevation also shocks the theatergoers. Equally shocking is the defeat of Brown at the hands of Peachum. Brown is the sheriff of London. He has the full police force under his command. But peachum easily vanquishes him again the songs that the characters sing are out of tune with the action on a number of occasions. They come to the spectators as a jarring shock.

To conclude, let us remember here one more thing, that while producing this alienation effect, Brecht is not satisfied by just distancing the spectators from action. He also aims at and succeeds in alienating the actors from the action, by constantly reminding them that they are just performing a role and are not a part and parcel of the person the enact.



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