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Mother Courage and the Paradox of Survival: A Marxist-Feminist Reading of War and Morality

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Abstract: This research paper undertakes a Marxist-Feminist examination of Bertolt Brecht's Mother Courage and Her Children, focusing on the ideological and moral paradox of survival in a capitalist war economy. By employing Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony and Nancy Chodorow's concept of the reproduction of mothering, the study analyzes how Brecht exposes the intersection between economic exploitation and gendered subjugation. Mother Courage's relentless pursuit of survival within a system of violence reveals the internalization of hegemonic values that transform morality into market rationality. The research further explores how Brecht's epic theatre functions as a counter-hegemonic form that replaces empathy with critical reflection, compelling the audience to recognize the social and ideological mechanisms that sustain war and capitalism. Through the interplay of Marxist and feminist frameworks, the paper demonstrates that Brecht's protagonist is not only a victim of the capitalist structure but also its unconscious perpetuator. Her motherhood, shaped by socio-economic necessity, becomes both her means of endurance and her moral undoing. Ultimately, the play emerges as Brecht's political testament, urging spectators to confront the dehumanizing forces of hegemony and reclaim consciousness as the first act of resistance.

Keywords: Bertolt Brecht; Mother Courage and Her Children; Marxism; Feminist Criticism; Hegemony; Capitalism; Alienation Effect; War Morality.

Bertolt Brecht's Mother Courage and Her Children (1939) stands as one of the most compelling political dramas of the twentieth century, merging art and ideology into a revolutionary critique of war, capitalism, and human morality. Set during the Thirty Years' War but conceived on the eve of World War II, the play transforms historical conflict into a study of economic survival and moral decay. Through the character of Anna Fierling—known as Mother Courage—Brecht explores how individuals caught in a war economy internalize capitalist logic, mistaking necessity for virtue. This paper approaches the play through a combined Marxist-Feminist perspective, guided by Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony and Nancy Chodorow's theory of the

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reproduction of mothering, to demonstrate how war and capitalism jointly deform human relationships, particularly those grounded in motherhood and morality. The central paradox—the pursuit of survival at the cost of ethical death—lies at the heart of both Brecht's dramatic vision and his political aesthetics.

A brief survey of critical interpretations reveals the play's enduring theoretical relevance and adaptability to contemporary scholarship. Recent critics have revisited Mother Courage and Her Children through Marxist and feminist frameworks, emphasizing its critique of capitalist ethics and the commodification of survival. H. Harsha Das and colleagues argue that Brecht "constructs a world where war operates as an industry, transforming human suffering into economic opportunity and moral collapse" (26). In a related vein, Fedaa Tareq Qassim and Rasha Abdulmunem Azeez contend that Brecht's portrayal of Mother Courage reveals "the illusion of female economic freedom under capitalism, where independence becomes another form of dependence on patriarchal power" (47). Complementing these Marxist-feminist readings, Gutimali Goswami highlights how Brecht's heroine "embodies the tension between maternal instinct and capitalist self-preservation, a duality that transforms motherhood into a transactional act of endurance" (82). Collectively, these studies reaffirm Brecht's continuing relevance as a dramatist who exposed the ideological contradictions of war and gender. Drawing upon their insights, the present research synthesizes Marxist and feminist frameworks to demonstrate how Mother Courage stages the interplay of hegemony, gender, and morality within the capitalist war economy.

The theoretical framework of this study is drawn primarily from Gramsci and Chodorow. Gramsci's notion of hegemony—"the supremacy of a social group manifested through intellectual and moral leadership" (669)—explains how capitalism sustains itself not by force alone but by consent, embedding its values within cultural consciousness. Mother Courage's acceptance of war as a business reflects this "spontaneous consent" of the dominated class to the ideology of the dominant. Complementing this, Chodorow's theory of mothering as a social construct—"a structure reproduced through ideology rather than instinct" (785)—illuminates how patriarchal capitalism transforms maternal care into economic function. Together, these frameworks expose the mechanisms through which capitalism reproduces both class and gender subjugation under the guise of survival. Structurally, this paper is organized into three main analytical sections. The first section explores the hegemonic economy of war, analyzing how capitalism commodifies conflict and survival. The second section examines

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motherhood, gender, and the feminist dialectic of care versus commerce, situating Anna Fierling's maternal identity within ideological reproduction. The third section discusses Brecht's epic theatrical form—particularly the alienation effect—as a counter-hegemonic device that transforms spectatorship into political awareness.

Mother Courage and Her Children takes place during the Thirty Years' War in seventeenth-century Europe. The play follows Anna Fierling, known as Mother Courage, who travels with her canteen cart selling food and supplies to soldiers. She is accompanied by her three children—Eilif, Swiss Cheese, and Kattrin. At the beginning, while Mother Courage bargains over the price of a belt buckle, a recruiter persuades Eilif to join the army.

Years later, Mother Courage meets Eilif again. He has become a celebrated soldier for stealing cattle from peasants, but she worries for his safety. Her second son, Swiss Cheese, becomes paymaster for the Finnish regiment. When the Catholic army captures the regiment, he hides the regimental cash box. To save him, Mother Courage tries to bribe the soldiers, but before the bargain is settled, Swiss Cheese throws the box into the river and is executed. She denies knowing him to protect herself.

Mother Courage continues to trade as the war moves on. Her mute daughter, Kattrin, helps her. When wounded soldiers need bandages, Mother Courage refuses to give linen, but Kattrin helps an injured baby. Later, Kattrin is scarred by drunken soldiers. The chaplain and the cook travel with Mother Courage for some time, but eventually both leave. When peace is declared, Eilif is executed for acts once praised during war.
Mother Courage and Kattrin are later found begging for food. The cook inherits an inn and invites Mother Courage to live with him, but refuses to take Kattrin, so she stays with her daughter. In a peasant village, while Mother Courage is away, soldiers prepare to attack. Kattrin climbs onto a roof and beats a drum to warn the town, saving the villagers but losing her life. Returning to find her daughter dead, Mother Courage pays for her burial, straps herself to the cart, and continues her journey alone.

The play opens as a direct confrontation between the logic of survival and the ethics of humanity. Through the character of Anna Fierling, or Mother Courage, Brecht constructs a world where human life and moral integrity are subordinated to economic necessity. The Thirty Years' War provides the historical backdrop, but the drama's significance lies in its exposure of capitalism's persistence even within destruction. Brecht's war is not ideological—it is industrial, producing profit through perpetual conflict. This condition reflects what

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Antonio Gramsci terms hegemony, "the supremacy of a social group manifested in two ways, as domination and as intellectual and moral leadership" (669). Hegemony, in Brecht's play, takes form through the normalization of war and commerce; the characters do not perceive themselves as victims of ideology because they inhabit it as their natural world.

From the outset, Mother Courage embodies the contradictions of capitalist morality. She introduces herself by saying, "They call me Mother Courage because I drove my wagon right through the cannon fire when I was selling fifty loaves of bread that were going moldy" (Scene 1.5). Her so-called bravery arises not from conviction but from fear of economic loss—a telling symbol of how material survival redefines courage. In Gramsci's framework, this is the most successful form of ideological control: when the oppressed believe that compliance is necessity. Her remark to the Sergeant, "The war's going well, may it last another five years, and if I keep my eyes open, I'll make a decent living from it" (Scene 3.34), illustrates how capitalism transforms devastation into opportunity. The repetition of this sentiment throughout the play turns economic pragmatism into a moral standard.

This moral inversion pervades every aspect of Brecht's world. Eilif's recruitment marks the first instance of ideology overtaking reason. Lured by the promise of heroism, he commits acts of violence that are celebrated during wartime but condemned in peace. His mother's warning—"You killed those peasants? You call that bravery? When there's war, you're praised for it; when peace comes, they'll hang you for it" (Scene 2.21)—encapsulates Brecht's dialectical irony. Morality itself becomes contingent, determined by the needs of capital and the state. Fedaa Tareq Qassim and Rasha Abdulmunem Azeez observe that this ambiguity "reveals the illusion of freedom under capitalism, where independence becomes another form of dependence on power" (47). Eilif's fate exposes the ideological logic that rewards exploitation as long as it serves profit.

The illusion of choice continues when Mother Courage negotiates for her son Swiss Cheese's ransom. Her refusal to pay the full amount—"If I give everything, I'll have nothing left for the others" (Scene 3.36)—demonstrates how capitalism imposes economic reasoning even upon maternal love. Raymond Williams calls this "Brecht's realism of the social process," where emotion is replaced by the calculation of survival (112). Her maternal instincts, instead of countering the system, become complicit in its perpetuation. This complicity is not conscious but systemic. Gramsci's observation that "hegemony transforms coercion into the appearance of

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consent" (673) clarifies why Courage acts not as a rebel but as a participant. Her survival instinct mirrors capitalism's self-preserving mechanism: she lives by adapting to the logic that consumes her.

The play's structure reinforces this internalization. Each episode depicts a variation of the same cycle—trade, loss, adaptation—emphasizing the futility of individual resistance. As Walter Benjamin writes, "Brecht's theatre transforms the spectator into an observer capable of decision, not identification" (91). The audience, like Mother Courage, witnesses repetition until recognition becomes unavoidable. The system sustains itself through habit; ideology reproduces itself through routine. When Mother Courage laments, "The war's been good for business, but it's taken everything from me" (Scene 8.73), her words expose the paradox at the play's core: survival equals self-destruction. This is not irony but dialectic—the coexistence of profit and loss as structural necessity.

If the play's first movement reveals how capitalism colonizes morality, its second exposes how it reshapes gender and motherhood. In Brecht's wartime economy, motherhood is both a sentimental ideal and an economic function. Nancy Chodorow's The Reproduction of Mothering explains how this duality arises: "Mothering is a social construct that reproduces itself through ideology; it is not instinctual but culturally required, and it binds women to relations of care that maintain patriarchal order" (785). In Mother Courage, this reproduction is literal. The maternal body, traditionally a symbol of nurture, becomes an instrument of survival within patriarchal capitalism. Anna Fierling's commercial instincts and maternal affections are indistinguishable because both are shaped by the same ideological machinery.

Her interaction with her children demonstrates this collapse of care into commerce. When Swiss Cheese hides the pay chest, his honesty proves fatal. His mother's delay in paying his ransom is not mere greed—it is structural constraint. She cannot act maternally without ceasing to exist economically. Helene Keyssar observes that Brecht's women "mirror the contradictions of their social formation; their love and labor are both defined by systems that oppress them" (64). Mother Courage's maternal failure thus represents ideological success: capitalism has successfully redefined selflessness as self-interest. When she denies her son's corpse—"I don't know him! He was never mine!" (Scene 3.38)—the horror lies in her sincerity. Ideology speaks through her voice, as Louis Althusser would phrase it, "constituting individuals as subjects through the repetition of social practice" (693).

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Her daughter Kattrin, however, provides the ideological counterpoint. Mute and compassionate, she embodies what Chodorow describes as "the relational capacity that could transform society if not absorbed into its maintenance" (790). Kattrin's muteness signifies her resistance to the dominant discourse; she refuses to participate in the language of profit. In the climactic scene, she climbs to the roof to warn the villagers of an approaching attack, drumming until she is shot: "Kattrin drums frantically, falls but continues to beat until the end" (Scene 11.99). This final act restores motherhood's moral core—protection without calculation. Gutimali Goswami remarks that Kattrin "embodies the tension between instinct and preservation, a duality that transforms motherhood from ideology to resistance" (82). Through her silence, Brecht reclaims the voice of moral courage that capitalism suppresses.

Mother Courage's reaction to Kattrin's death completes her ideological imprisonment. Paying the peasants to bury her daughter, she harnesses herself once again to the wagon, murmuring, "Got to get back to business again" (Scene 12.102). The war resumes, and so does her labor. Elizabeth Wright rightly calls this moment "the revelation of capitalism's infinite reproduction, where even grief becomes a function of necessity" (146). The audience's pity is displaced by comprehension: the moral order cannot be restored because the economic order remains intact. The family, which ideology sanctifies as a private refuge, proves to be its own battlefield, where love is transacted in the same currency as survival.

Brecht's theatrical form is the crucial vehicle for this revelation. His epic theatre dismantles the illusion of naturalism to expose the material conditions behind emotion. The alienation effect (Verfremdungseffekt) transforms empathy into critique, compelling audiences to examine rather than experience the drama. Louis Althusser's analysis of ideology provides the theoretical equivalent: "Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (693). Brecht's dramaturgy makes this relationship visible. Each interruption—songs, placards, or scene summaries—shatters emotional continuity, revealing the structure beneath illusion. When Mother Courage sings, "The war is like love, it finds a way" (Scene 6.54), the song parodies romantic lyricism while exposing war's seductive normality.

The episodic structure functions as a political instrument. By presenting self-contained scenes, Brecht denies the audience emotional catharsis. Raymond Williams notes that this fragmentation "converts pity into understanding, reassigning tragedy from private emotion to public meaning" (119). The spectator becomes a

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thinker, not a sympathizer. The cart that Mother Courage pulls from one battlefield to another serves as the visual gestus of capitalist endurance—a perpetual motion machine of ideology. Elin Diamond describes gestus as "the body's inscription of history," an action that "dismantles naturalism by showing how the social world writes itself upon the body" (85). In each scene, the cart's movement embodies the burden of consent: she pulls not only goods but the weight of complicity.

This aesthetic strategy fulfills what Gramsci calls "intellectual and moral reform," the process by which hegemony may be resisted through new forms of consciousness (675). Brecht's stage becomes such a space of reform, where spectators learn to perceive rather than consume ideology. The alienation effect is not cold detachment but moral awakening; by refusing identification, Brecht liberates the audience from emotional subjection. The final image—Mother Courage pulling her cart alone into the distance—offers no resolution, only recognition. War continues because ideology continues. The curtain falls, but the machinery of consent rolls on.

Through its synthesis of Marxist and feminist critique, Mother Courage and Her Children reveals the full architecture of domination: economic, ideological, and emotional. Brecht does not seek to humanize the system but to historicize it, to show that what appears inevitable is, in fact, constructed. The play's anti-illusionist form turns theatre into a site of production where meaning is not given but made. The audience, alienated from identification yet drawn into understanding, enacts what Gramsci envisioned as the work of the "organic intellectual"—to translate suffering into knowledge. Mother Courage's survival is not heroic endurance but historical evidence of how ideology reproduces itself through the most human instincts. Yet Brecht's art transforms that recognition into the beginning of resistance. The war, like capitalism, may persist, but awareness becomes its first negation.

In conclusion, this paper reveals that Bertolt Brecht's Mother Courage and Her Children is a comprehensive political and moral allegory that exposes the mechanisms of survival within capitalist and patriarchal systems. Through a synthesis of Marxist and feminist criticism, the study demonstrates how economic necessity becomes moral ideology and how motherhood, far from being a private refuge, is socially constructed to reproduce the logic of profit and obedience. Drawing on Gramsci's theory of hegemony, the analysis finds that Brecht's characters embody the internalization of dominant values; their choices reflect

consent rather than freedom. Chodorow's framework further clarifies how maternal instincts are appropriated by capitalism, transforming love into labour and care into commodity.

Brecht's epic theatre, as examined through Althusser's and Benjamin's theoretical lenses, functions as a counter-hegemonic form that exposes rather than conceals ideology. The alienation effect converts emotion into understanding, compelling spectators to confront their complicity in systems of domination. Ultimately, the findings affirm that Brecht's play transcends its historical setting to diagnose the persistent moral paradox of survival under capitalism. Mother Courage's endurance is both testimony and warning—a symbol of human strength corrupted by necessity and a call for critical awareness as the first step toward emancipation.

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