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# Complex seeing on the concept of religion in brecht's selected plays

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### ABSTRACT

No story is ever told as if it is the only one; the subtext changes as time passes by. It can have a number of meanings, explanations, understandings, and interpretations according to its context and readers. Consequently, appreciation of any literary work may have its own evolution in course of time. The possible plurality of meaning leads into the maze of meaninglessness of meanings. This indeterminacy of meaning requires deconstruction of the text and its structure and reconstruction of it to find an appropriate meaning. The works of very many authors apparently seem to be in the same *meaningless* level. It is the researcher's task to find meaning to this meaninglessness of meanings. The works of Bertolt Brecht, the German playwright are not an exception to this task. His complex artistic works require deep study and careful analysis to arrive at new understanding. In short, they require *complex seeing*. Brecht's plays grapple with some of the intense situations of life as lived in different societies. Some of his leading concerns are issues derived from religion, war, capitalism, motherhood and rebellion. This article investigates the theme of religion in the selected plays with the tool which Brecht himself has expected from his audience - complex seeing.

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### Introduction

Bertolt Brecht defines complex seeing as, "thinking *above* the flow of the play which is more important than thinking *within* the flow of the play" (Williams, 1973:320). In other words, it is the idea, the mould of form that matters. Things that look the same are different, differences matter, and the margins matter.

The phrasal verb *Complex seeing* can be interpreted as reasoning of something, which is difficult to understand or deal with. It can also stand for a special treatment given to a difficult and confusing thing or situation in order to know it better. *Complex seeing* denotes an explorative investigation into something, which requires a researcher's attempts to find out the details to facilitate a better understanding.

Complex seeing, in the context of this article, is understood as approaching an artistic work from various dimensions to find out the intricacies of the text and its implication. To be more precise, complex seeing is entering deep into the issue, the crisis, or the situation in the text. It enables the reader to understand the particular form of crisis in which men create themselves and their situations in a rather special way.

Complex seeing then becomes the basic commentary on a persistent Brechtian theme. Brecht was so directly concerned with the contemporary society that he turned often to fable and history to achieve complex seeing. This article is an attempt to explore what lies *within* and *above* the flow of the plays of Brecht, which demand complex seeing for an intelligent understanding of his genius.

Abbreviations: LC – Life of Galileo

MC- Mother Courage and Her Children

CC- Caucasian Chalk Circle

### The Life of Galileo

Brecht holds the view that "Each man is free to embrace and profess the religion he would judge to be true according to

the light of reason" (De Laubier, 1989: 34). Religion, in this article, refers to Christianity. One of the cardinal assertions of Christianity is that *Truth shall free you*. Brecht's play *The Life of Galileo* is about the condemnation of a scientific truth of Galileo's astronomical findings by the Roman Church. The play dramatizes a conflict between vested interests and new knowledge. The scientific principles proposed by Galileo are part of a continuum with practical applications of knowledge for the development of trade and manufacture.

The Catholic Church is afraid of truth in the form of new knowledge that it will endanger the faith of the people. This is well expressed in the words of the Inquisitor who cautions the Pope, "what would happen if all these people, so weak in the flesh and inclined towards every excess were to believe only in their own common sense which this mad man declares to be the sole court of appeal!" (LG, 1964: p.76).

The questions related to faith are always in conflict with Brecht's outlook on the religion. He finds religious tension in the society that causes unnecessary conflict and leads even to war among men and nations. Brecht observes, the institutionalized religion, here represented by the Catholic Church is so powerful that it overpowers the individual's faith and freedom. It also shakes hand with the rich and the ruling class, neglecting the weak and the poor. His approach is a sarcastic appraisal of how the church fails the society.

Galileo, with his improved telescope went to Rome and showed it to the dignitaries of the Catholic Church with great success and honour. Though he had accepted the Copernican theory years earlier, he kept quiet about it for fear of ridicule rather than persecution. He published a treatise in Rome on the spots on the sun, which the Church found dangerous. Yet "the Church hesitated to give a decision, all the more because its official astronomer agreed with Galileo" (LG, 1964: p.105). The Church warned Galileo this time.

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The Church declared the doctrine of Copernicus an anti-religion in 1616. Galileo was asked to promise not to hold, teach, or defend it. Nevertheless, Galileo, realizing the social responsibility of himself as a scientist published *A dialogue on the two Principal systems of the Universe* in a debate form, in 1632. In fact, he defended Copernican theory, which gained for him a widespread feeling that the Church has gone too far in hampering the advance of knowledge.

The Church authority suppressed Galileo's book and Inquisition called him to Rome in 1633. He was warned of being tortured and burned alive if he persisted in his view. This is what the Church has done to those convicted as heretics in the history. However, Galileo gained international acceptance, which made the Church authorities too reluctant to make a decision on him. Hence, they showed him the instruments of torture to make him recant.

Looking back, Brecht brings out the relation between man of science and the public through Galileo's action. The Catholic Church is the most powerful authority of both civil and religious in the history. In those days, the Church alone can decide what is to be made known as truth to the people, even in a scientist's research findings. Thus, Brecht explains the power of the church and its interference in every sphere of life.

The Church, admitting the use of improved navigational charts but condemning the theory of it, places itself into a false premise. The Church is so powerful that it is able to crush the innovator. Galileo's observations through the telescope promise the desired proof of Copernican theory of the universe. His friend Sagredo warns him about the danger from the Church. However, Galileo determines to challenge the church. Brecht, who is a profound believer in change, finds an intellectual stagnation in the Church, which he challenges through Galileo's determination. (Alfred D. White, 16 February 2005: <http://www.litencyc.com/php/sworks.php>.)

Brecht presents Galileo, a man who struggles between the scientist's passion for truth and his compulsion to survive. This is a tension created by the church interfering in individual's freedom. Brecht's presentation of his characters, especially Galileo, is plausible and according to his reading of human nature. In scene 6, there is a significant dialogue between Galileo and Cardinal Bellarmine, which suggests that Galileo may go on working if he agrees that what is true in physics should not be called true in fact:

Galileo: That means that all further scientific research ...  
 Bellarmine: Is well assured, Signor Galilei. And that in conformity with the Church's view that we cannot know, but we may research. You are at liberty to expound even this teaching through mathematical hypothesis (Brecht, 1964:50).

This is a robbery of a scientist's work and its practical meaning by the authority of the Church. It limits any research findings in conformity with the Church's view and if one does not agree; must not work. Brecht condemns such an attitude of the church in the words of Andrea in scene 11: "he who does not know the truth is merely an idiot, but he who knows it a lie, is a criminal" (LG, 1964: p.97).

Brecht wants to make it clear to his audience that the truth is with Galileo and the Church, which has to propagate the truth and goodness, is on the side of falsehood. Brecht's intention is that his audience must understand that the power of the opponent lies in the people's faith. Because people believe, what the church says, as the truth. As long as people have such a blind faith, they may not find the truth. Hence, he makes mockery of it as, "Speak, Speak! The habit, you wear, gives you the right to

say whatever you wish" (LG, 1964: p.53). When someone like Galileo contradicts the accepted belief system or comments like Andrea in scene 11, "I can not wait any longer they are killing the truth" (LG, 1964: p.81) the conflict arises.

Brecht reasons out that truth can stand alone; and falsehood is dependent (sc 10). The Inquisitor finds various reasons to convince the Pope to punish Galileo, lest those who are with their childlike faith in the word of God should go astray. He brings in the theories of scepticism and barbarianism, and affirms his fear of people reposing faith in science and machines instead of in God. This is the magnitude of the disturbances caused by Galileo's new knowledge.

In the words of the Inquisitor lies the fear of the Church authority losing its control over the people. Due to the conflict within the Church authorities, they take a long time for making a decision. The Inquisitor in his long speech in scene 10 refers to Galileo as "mad man", "wicked man" and "worm" (p.77). This shows his personal anger towards Galileo and the unrest within himself.

Galileo is despised for using common people's language: "This wicked man knows what he is doing when he writes his astronomical works, not in Latin, but in the language of the fishwives and wool merchants" (LG, 1964: p.77). It is ironical of the Inquisitor speaking for the sake of the simple people's faith and despising their own language. Brecht uses it to show that Jesus had chosen his disciples among the common rustic people from the seashore and countryside (Mt 10:2-4, Lk 6: 14-16). However, the Church is not on their side.

Brecht gives Signora Sarti and Galileo's own daughter Virginia as examples of what power the Church exercises over simple devout minds. Other such touches fill in the picture of a changing world and explain the Church's fear of change. Brecht makes it clear that the Church, which is the most powerful authority in the world in Galileo's time, is wrong in its principles of astronomy. It is interested in keeping the people submissive and content with the social order and thereby suppressing the *subversive* ideas.

Brecht gives a picture of Galileo right from the beginning. His theory of *heliocentric cosmos* (sun-centred universe) does not contradict the Bible or Christian dogma, but the way it is being interpreted at the time. Galileo distinguishes between science and the Bible, which is essential to his theories. His letter to Christina, the Grand Duchess explains the need of the Church to interpret the Bible in the light of the discoveries based on Copernican theories. The life of Galileo teaches a lesson to the church or any religion that works for the salvation of mankind must interpret the word of God according to the signs of the times.

### **Mother Courage and her Children**

Brecht shows religion, which is supposed to be a source of redemption for humanity, endangering the very life of people in the name of God. He places the characters at the point of danger from their practise of religion. Mother Courage says to Chaplain, "Here you sit-one with his religion, the other with his cash box, I don't know, which is more dangerous" (scene3, p.28) Brecht places religion more dangerous than money.

Mother Courage, for example, is more afraid of hiding the Chaplain from the Catholic soldiers in her wagon than keeping the regimental cash box of Swiss Cheese. Religion makes people cowards - Mother Courage asks Chaplain to get a Catholic flag, not out of her faith in Catholicism but that she might save herself and the wagon from the Catholic army. In the same way the people of Catholic faith must pretend before the Protestant

army in order to save their lives (MC, 1985:sc3, p.29) - and they had to pretend according to the whims and fancies of their rulers.

Brecht criticizes the religion, which has no love for humanity and indulges in religious superstition. Both Catholics and Protestants applied the term anti-Christ to each other. Brecht describes them both as anti-Christ as they stand against human love in a futile war. The Chaplain's comparison of Swiss Cheese with Christ seems to be audacious, even though both are innocent victims of human aggression in their respective evil societies.

The Thirty Years War, being a war of religion, is stated as a holy one. Poland was Catholic while Sweden was Protestant. It is a war of claim by Catholic and resistance by Protestant over the Baltic provinces. Brecht satirically directs the Commander's pretensions to religion, of which he is making politic use. He honours Eilif for plunder and treats the Chaplain with obvious contempt. The undignified position of the representative of religion in a war of religion exposes the flaunted religious cause as sham.

Brecht places Mother Courage and her three Children with the wagon in the war of religion. In scene two, Eilif is applauded by the commander for his brevity of killing peasants to get food for the army. He is encouraged as, "you've played a hero's part, you've served the Lord in his own Holy War" (MC, 1985: p.14). When asked for a Biblical precedent, the Chaplain claims that the Bible provides no example of killing for food since God is always able to provide. This is juxtaposed with the Swedish Commander's statement that God is on the army's side.

In a religious war, it is always said to be pleasing to God when one kills the opponent. Brecht adds irony to the Swedish Commander's argument that God is on their side: he invokes God in the same sentence as killing "you cut'em to pieces in a good cause, our chaps were hungry and you gave'em to eat" (MC, 1985: sc 2:17). The commander finds justification from the Bible, "whatsoever thou doest to the least of these my children, thou doest unto me" (Mt 25:40). It is an obvious corruption of Christian morality.

Brecht makes it clear to the audience that it is the same religion which teaches love, mercy and truthfulness, is forcing the ever honest Swiss Cheese to lie towards the end of his life. He refuses to divulge who he is or where the cash box is hidden (MC, 1985: sc3, p. 33). For the first time he lies and dies as a result. Brecht makes an ironical commentary on the value of great virtues. Swiss Cheese is killed by his great virtues and thereby Brecht undermines what Swiss Cheese stands for in a war of religion.

Swiss Cheese is explicitly compared to Jesus Christ in the third scene. Mother Courage is forced to deny her son thrice: at the time of his arrest, while haggling for him and when he is dead. Brecht has given a similar form of Peter denying Jesus in the Bible (Lk22: 54-62). The Chaplain makes this comparison explicit by singing *The Song of the Hours* (MC, 1985: sc3, p.34f).

Brecht views through Mother Courage the conquest of Catholic Poland as an act of liberation. Hence, he makes Chaplain support Mother Courage by condemning the Catholic Roman Empire. The Chaplain, a Protestant pastor, though stands for peace yet afraid of the danger from the Catholic forces due to his religion (MC, 1985: sc3, p.29). Thus, Brecht mocks the religious leaders who have no value in a war of religion and he states the undermining of even religious uttering – "Blessed are the peace makers" (MC, 1985: p.26 & Mt 5:9).

Even the Chaplain has grown cynical about religion and feels the Bible no longer applies in a time of war. Mother Courage is fond of using Biblical language in scene 3 such as – 'Thanks be to God', 'God is merciful', 'His will is done on earth as it is in Heaven' (Mt 6:10), 'Jesus in Gethsemane' (Mt 26:36) - to give her words the ring of wisdom and the sanction of religious authority. The Chaplain represents the institutionalized religion and voices the Establishment's attitude. The cook who belongs to the lower rank of society demolishes the voice of Establishment with sarcasm.

Brecht demonstrates the relativity of morals by emphasizing the tragic irony of Eilif's situation. Eilif becomes a victim of the brief peace because of his war training. He is to be executed for a deed similar to what has earlier earned him military honour during war. The complexity of the situations brings about different ramifications, as the dump Katrin becomes the speaking stone of the situation's requirement in scene 11. Brecht closes the play stating that religious miracles might be over, but the possibility of human miracles remains open to the audience.

The causes of violence and death are innate in man's sinful nature. Brecht finds a justification for man's brutality of war in the Christian doctrine of original sin. Both Catholics and Protestants believe it (Gen3: 1f). Human beings are born and brought up in sin and share an innate depravity. Brecht gives this idea in the words of the cook as, "mankind must perish by fire and sword, we're born and bred in sin" (MC, 1985: p.63). He also states that punishment for crime may be delayed but is inevitable.

Brecht believes in man's redemption only by his compassion and the help he renders to the humanity, and not by practising religious ceremonies. He figured this concept in Katrin who has total love for people and compassion towards the needy.

She is depicted though a dump and disfigured as a messianic figure by her heroic act of serving the mankind. She rescues the child from the fire. She is so compassionate towards the wounded soldiers that she goes against her mother to help them with linen clothe. All the more she sacrifices her own life for the sake of saving the whole town, a messianic act like that of Christ, who redeemed the world by his death.

### **The Caucasian Chalk Circle**

The Caucasian Chalk Circle has a secularized version of the Biblical Christ story. With typical anti-religious fervour, Brecht makes a direct comparison of Azdak to Christ in the verses from the singer: "to feed the starving people, he broke the laws like bread" (CC, 1979: p.220). Azdak's judgments always sided with the poor and he makes the rich give to the poor in his judgments. Brecht in Azdak characterizes Jesus' ministerial option for the poor.

Furthermore, the *Chalk Circle* itself is a version of Solomonic Law, based on the Biblical story of King Solomon and the baby (1 Kings 3:16-28). Brecht takes the religious connection further to Azdak representing Solomonic Wisdom in the judgment of the Governor's child and presents Azdak as a spiritual figure. He leaves behind a memory of his reign and the justice that it created for the people.

The play opens on Easter Sunday, a time for the resurrection of Christ. Easter Sunday is the first of the many religious themes Brecht presents in the play. The fact that the Fat Prince kills his brother Governor for dynasty brings to mind the Biblical story of Cain and Abel (Gen 4:1-16) in the Old Testament. Brecht continues to undermine religion throughout the play in both subtle and obvious ways.

Brecht makes a scene of the Church being with the authority and not at the cause of the poor in *Caucasian Chalk Circle*. The act of Governor's family entering into the Church is juxtaposed with the image of the soldiers pushing the common people out of the way (CC, 1979: sc 2, p.150). Thus, he makes his audience see that even the Church, which is a place of worship for all God's Children, is denied to the ordinary people.

Brecht's sarcasm towards religion is reintroduced when the Governor is led on stage in chains. The singer remarks, "You no longer need an architect, a carpenter will do" (CC, 1979: p.155). This alludes to the fact of Jesus, the carpenter, is needed to save the Governor on the Easter Sunday. Brecht disperses the Seven Sacraments of the Catholic Church throughout the play. The silver chain given by Simon to Grusha seals the engagement of Simon and Grusha. This represents the act of confirmation of the Sacraments of Catholic faith in the play.

Brecht makes fun of religion repeatedly. He presents Jessup as a draft dodger representing Joseph who married Mary, mother of Jesus (Mt1:16). In scene 4, Lavrenti's wife Aniko is constantly described as religious, who finds all the means not to help Grusha. She uses religion as an excuse for kicking Grusha out of her home. The final parody of religion is presented in the form of a drunken monk. The mother-in-law had arranged a cheap monk to conduct the marriage ceremony.

Grusha's mother-in-law is so calculative that she is annoyed of paying for the wedding ceremony. She gets a cheap monk, who is after money, seeks her consent to perform extreme unction, a sacrament for the sick and the dead immediately after the marriage (CC, 1979: sc 4, p.191). Brecht explicitly states the involvement of money in the performance of Church's sacraments.

#### **Conclusion**

Often Brecht cites Biblical passages to validate his position in all his plays. Brecht's practice of complex seeing into this theme has brought out the conflicting elements of faith of

individual with institutionalized religion. He also finds that the religious people are not as they are supposed to be. There is a tension between the teaching and the practise of the churchmen. The moral values of religion are in conflict with the temporal values in the plays.

Brecht indicates the role and relevance of the church either directly or indirectly and tries to establish the kingdom of God here and now. He concludes his plays with the hope of a better future of his Utopian Paradise. In *The Life of Galileo*, it is the dawn of a new age of science and new knowledge that is expressed in the words of Andrea: "we are really only at the beginning" (LG, 1964: p.98). In *Mother Courage and Her Children*, it is the messianic act of Kattrin that saves the innocents in the town, which Brecht remarks as a new beginning, the possibility of human miracles that will sustain the world out of war for the future generation. In *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, it is a new hope, given to Grusha by the judgment of Azdak that gives her back the child – indeed, a sign of hope.

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