

“Character Sketch of Mother Courage”

Submitted to: Ma’am Sarwat

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Mother Courage, the antiheroic protagonist of Bertolt Brecht’s *Mother Courage, and Her Children* who represents the capitalist machine of war, is one of the best-known characters in modern European drama. She is Brecht’s image of a formidable woman possessing several admirable qualities though also suffering from certain faults and weaknesses.

She is a representative of the brutalities, hypocrisy, corruption, capitalist forces operating in war. Her three children have been born in three different countries of Europe and with three different fathers. Brecht has taken extreme care to portray Mother Courage as an antithetical image to the traditional roles of a mother. She looks at war as an ongoing opportunity to make money and keep her head above water. She earned the nickname Mother Courage as she boldly ran through the bombardment to sell her loaves of bread before they perish. The title of the play itself creates the image of a formidable woman possessing several admirable qualities. She produces a mingled impression upon the readers of the play. The root cause of her suffering is in some of her faults, weaknesses and surroundings.

As the play progresses, Mother Courage’s character also undergoes changes that is portrayed by Brecht as anti- motherhood. The new Mother Courage is even more determined to profit from war. She has been presented as a shrewd, practical businesswoman and hard bargainer. In managing her canteen business, she is all the time worrying about the rise and falling prices. In scene II, she bargains about the price of a chicken which she wants to sell to the Swedish commander’s cook. This incident explores her inhumane and greedy nature as she feels happy because of the shortage of food caused by the continuing war. She wants to make maximum money out of the shortage of food. She is characterized by this need to survive, unlike more virtuous qualities presented within the play, such as Swiss Cheese’s honesty and Katrin’s kindness. Her unwavering commitment to her work can be interpreted as her tragic flaw or hamartia. It is a flaw that she habitually exhibits and a mistake that occurs three times in *The Mother*: the deaths of her children, as she is absent conducting business on all three occasions. Her nature becomes more repulsive when she refuses to give away her costly shirts to be torn into bandages for the wounded Protestants of the city which had been attacked and plundered by the Catholic forces. When Katrin threatens her mother for her

uncompassionate behavior, she snubs her daughter, calling her a lunatic. She has been termed as “hyenas of the battlefield” in the play.

Mother Courage is a deeply contradictory character: courageous, forthright, And intelligent, yet fatally unable to forgo her trade in order to protect her children. The chief contradiction in the character of Mother Courage is her strong desire for the continuance of this war, and at the same time, her hatred of it. When, for instance, the war has stopped because of the sudden death of king, she deplors the fact and tells the cook that the return of pence has “broken her neck”. She laments the end of the war because she may even lose her means of livelihood because it is only during the war that her canteen-business, which caters only to the soldiers, can be carried on. And when she tells the chaplain: “There isn’t much love lost between me and the war,” it means she hates the war. Apart from being the means of livelihood for her and her dumb daughter, the war is something which she detests and hates. She is by no means a militarist or a war-monger. She never takes part in the plunder of a town or village. She does not rob the wounded or the helpless persons in the course of the war. She is certainly not a “hyena of the battlefield ” as the Chaplain calls her. She wants the war to continue only because she earns her living from it. Brecht attempts, by the end of the play, to make her seem deeply unsympathetic, where she insists, she must & quot; get back into business, & quot; and the audience realize that she has learned nothing. The war has ruined her, but it has failed to teach her, and Brecht’s play desperately attempts to teach the audience by showing what Mother Courage never learns. This is also to say, in a degraded world, feelings are to be swept aside. She has a strong and sturdy common sense. She is a practical woman who harbors no illusions or false hopes. She knows that people get killed in the course of a war; and that is why in the opening scene she tries her utmost to prevent her sons being enlisted in the army. She needs her sons for running her own business because this business is her only source of her livelihood. The war and her children’s deaths do not change her life or her way of thinking, but they do validate the cynicism about people and the virtues in human nature she has expressed throughout the play. As a representative of capitalist war profiteering, Mother Courage’s main focus is, obviously, on making money. Lives, principles, and human emotions are far less important and do not interfere with her Unwavering commitment to profit. Mother Courage also represents the theme of motherhood in the play reflecting the anxiety and tension of a mother trying extremely hard to save her children from the war. But more apparently, she is the embodiment of inimical modern individuals who are more affiliated with commodities, money and the marketplace with no strong hold on relationships, emotions and feelings.

At the end of the play, with her children dead, Mother Courage continues with business as usual. The war and her children’s deaths do not change her life or her way of thinking, but they do validate the cynicism about people and the virtues in human nature she has expressed throughout the play. As a representative of capitalist war profiteering, Mother Courage’s main focus is, obviously, on making money. Lives, principles, and human emotions are far less important and do not interfere with her unwavering commitment to profit.