

A STUDY ON MOTHERS FROM BERTOLT BRECHT'S MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN AND RUTA SEPETYS' BETWEEN SHADES OF GRAY

Shilpa Nain

Lecturer Of English
S.D. Girls College
Chaudhary Ranbir Singh University, Haryana, India

Abstract: This research paper intends to put light on psychology of mothers, especially Anna Fierling and Elena Vilkas. The motive is to look minutely at the similarities and differences between the two mothers, who suffer through wars along with their children. A mother is defined as an angel in disguise, the perfect combination of tenderness and valorous. The mothers in the works: Mother Courage and Her Children and Between the Shades of Gray, respectively, are from different backgrounds and their journeys through wars elucidate their personas as mothers. These two characters provide distinct connotations about mothers and their roles in society. The paper discusses the mantle of these two similar yet way too different mothers who are affected by war, which helps to highlight their responses to various events. All this concludes to provide the different aspects of personalities of both the mothers and their effects on readers.

Keywords – Mother, psychology, personas, differences, similarities.

I. INTRODUCTION

Mother- a word that can be termed as the second name for god, a word that has meanings beyond the literal sense. The basic traits that all the mothers carry are the same, though others can vary from place to place and situation to situation. Be it any corner of the world and any condition, almost every mother will act or react in the basic similar manner apart from the personality she possesses as a human being. But sometimes the fallible hominid traits dominate the motherly attributes, leading to some deviations. This notion can be clearly observed in the analysis of two great works- Mother Courage and Her Children and Between Shades of Gray. Different critics have different notions about both the works and the characters in them. An overview of all those researches helps to distinguish the characters from each other through their representations. Both the works portray stories of two families who are tormented through wars. The journeys of the two mothers- Anna Fierling and Elena Vilkas- throughout the wars will be the major topic of discussion in this paper.

Mother Courage and Her Children and Between Shades of Gray are works by Bertolt Brecht and Ruta Sepetys, respectively. The former is a play that is set during the Thirty Years' War in Europe that took place in seventeenth century, while the latter is a novel that intends to sketch the period when Stalin took over Lithuania in 1941. The families in both the works suffer through different conditions during wars and the two mothers tend to render their personalities, beliefs and psyche through their actions that set them akin and divergent at the same time.

Anna Fierling

Anna Fierling, also known as Mother Courage is an important character whom Bertolt Brecht portrays in a very unique way. She is quite different from the typical mothers and her actions as a mother make her character stand out among others. She is a mother of three children, named- Eilif, the elder son; Swiss Cheese, the younger son and Kattrin, her dumb daughter.

War, Journey and Courage: Mother Courage's life is spent mostly in war and she, therefore, seems to have mastered the way of living during a war. She is not at all ready to give up. She has no particular place to live, no home of her own, nowhere to return if the war ends. She travels to various places during the war, selling goods and merchandise to the soldiers and others. She lives on war and it seems to be her source of income and thus, she does not want the war to end at any cost. She comments in scene VI:

"All your victories mean to me is losses."

Her journey has been a long and hard one but she does not look afraid or tired of it, she keeps on moving ahead, no matter what. Her journey starts from Dalecarlia, Sweden from where she travels to Wallhof and Poland. She travels across places like Poland, Moravia, Bavaria, Italy and returns through Bavaria to Magdeburg. Further, her expedition takes her to Halle via Ingolstadt and Fichtelgebirge, where, finally, the play ends. She travels a lot during the war, trying to be benefited from it in all the ways possible. The time when people were actually frightened of war and violence, Mother Courage seems to have taken it as an advantage for her, without being timid or reluctant of anything.

Her name, Mother Courage was bestowed to her for an act she did courageously, that no one else would even think or dream of doing. She mentions herself in scene I that she has got this name because,

“I was scared of going broke, sergeant, so I drove me cart through the bombardment of Riga with fifty loaves of bread aboard. They were going mouldy, it was high time, hadn’t any choice really.”

She is courageous and that can be observed at various places. She is not at all afraid of the war or even the soldiers. When the soldiers try to ask her for the papers of her wagon, she tends to argue with them without providing a satisfactory answer. She does not provide her license to the sergeant and even though she herself is at fault, she has the courage to fight with him. She even has the nerve to chide the sergeant without the fear of losing anything; she warns him when he tries to recruit Eilif in the regiment-

“I’ll slit you open, trash”.

But, interestingly, if observed deeply, one would find that Mother Courage isn’t courageous enough. The thing that we may mistake for courage is actually selfishness. It is not courage when she quietly accepts the departure of Eilif, she doesn’t try to protest much. On one hand, she was ready to “slit open” the soldier and then, when it was time, she does nothing to stop her son. It shows the ironical and contradictory character of hers. Her courage is not the actual courage in literal sense, it’s all business mindedness. She does take risks but mainly for the sake of her business. For a moment, people may find the death of Swiss Cheese and Courage’s denial of recognizing his body as courageous but deep down the audience cannot actually feel that much sympathetic towards her.

Love, Children and Selflessness: Love for Anna is something that “makes the world go round”. She warns Katrin about the consequences of falling in love. She advises,

“Don’t you start anything with them soldiers...Even with fellows not in the army it’s no bed of roses. He says he’d like to kiss the ground your feet walk on...and after that you’re his skivvy.”

She does not believe in love and stuff, which clearly reflects through her relationships and affairs with different men. Love and commitment are not Anna’s cup of tea. She had so many affairs that were so casual and passing ones that she does not even remember the names of her partners and the fathers of her children:

“His father always claimed he was called Kojocki or Mojocki or something.”

Thus, love affairs for Anna doesn’t matter much throughout the play, though her love for her children show some warmth in her. Her love and care for her children can be seen in her protective attitude. In the beginning, one believes that Mother Courage loves her children a lot and that she wants to protect her children from war and harm. That’s true at many moments. For instance, we see how in scene I she tries to protect Eilif and Swiss Cheese from being taken away by the recruiters. We can truly observe the motherly love when she denies the cook’s offer to go and settle with him, for the sake of her daughter. But these little moments aren’t enough so as to overcome the selfishness of this “mother”. She does love her children but maybe not more than her business. She uses her son Eilif for doing business and bargaining with the cook in scene II. Her son Swiss was at the death point and the time when a “typical mother” would give her own life to save her child, Mother Courage still tries to bargain at the cost of her son’s life. At the end also, when she gives the peasant the money for Katrin’s funeral, she counts the money and keeps some with her, wholly aware of the business and says:

“Got to get back in business again”

Selfishness prevails in Mother Courage in almost all situations; she cannot help herself from being selfish. Almost everywhere the selfish Anna Fierling dominates over Courage- the “mother” or the human being. All she has in mind is: her business and money. In the tough and harsh situations too, she’s not stopped from doing her business. When the sergeant tries to ask her for papers, she in return tries to sell her goods:

“I bet you could use a good pistol, or a belt buckle...”

In scene V, when the peasants are in need of help and everybody tries to help them, Mother Courage only thinks about money. The chaplain asks for some shirts and she is not even ready to share even a piece of cloth for someone’s help:

“I can’t give nowt. What with expenses, taxes, loan interest and bribes...got to think of meself. My officers’ shirts! Half a florin apiece! I’m ruined.”

Though she is selfish and business-minded, Mother Courage, maybe unintentionally, helps others and we can sometimes note the good side of hers too. She does survive through war but at the cost of all her three children whose fate, ironically, she has predicted in scene I herself.

Elena Vilkas

Elena Vilkas is a character who fits typically in the role of a mother. She is an educated woman from a noble family. This character illustrated by Ruta Sepetys is quite an opposite of Anna. She has all the qualities that a good mother and human being possess. She is a mother of two brave children- Lina Vilkas, her daughter and Jonas Vilkas, her son.

War, Journey and Courage: Elena’s life is going smooth when suddenly, she along with her family gets stuck in a war situation. She has a beautiful home that she, unfortunately, has to leave as the Soviet Union attacks Lithuania, where her family resides. Her journey through war is a harsh one; she is taken to various places along with her children. They are taken by trains to Altai Labor camp via Belarus, Russia,

Ural Mountains and Siberia. After spending around 270 days there, they are sent to Trofimovsk, then North Pole via Siberia, moving forward to Makarov Camp they reach Angara River and finally are settled at Arctic Circle. This journey is a long and cruel one for everyone. But Elena keeps moving with aspiration and courage, helping others and becomes a symbol of valour and love throughout the journey. Unlike Anna, she (Elena) does not seem to enjoy her journey or the war. She wants the war to end as soon as possible and hopes to return back home. Her hopes of returning back are alive till she lived. Her determination can be observed even after her death, in chapter-81, when Lina and Mrs. Rimas find her ‘untouched’ dress:

Inside her suitcase “were fresh, clean clothes. A light dress, silk stockings, shoes without scuffs, her tube of lipstick...a man’s shirt and tie...(she) was freezing. She could have worn these clothes. She kept them, to return to Lithuania in a clean set of clothes.”

Though Elena may seem soft, she is very brave and tackles the situations courageously. She protects her children throughout the journey. She is clever along with being valiant, she knows how to handle different situations. She makes others believe in themselves and helps them to survive through difficult conditions. Her courage isn’t wild like Anna but can be observed in her calmness. She is courageous enough to go against NKVD and not sign the document of twenty five years’ hard labour. She is threatened, given rude treatment, even her ration of bread is decreased but she does not let her strength be reduced, she fights back bravely. Soviets try to rend her and others, not only physically but mentally also. They send them for hard labour work. But Elena does not lose courage, she even encourages others to not lose hope and help each other, so that, they can fight against NKVD. She misses her home but that does not make her weak but strong enough to overcome the hardships that NKVD puts upon her and others. She remains optimistic in every situation and keeps others positive too. When Janina’s mother seems to lose every bit of hope that is left, Elena consoles her:

“We’re all going to be fine. We mustn’t lose our senses. It’s going to be all right. Really.”

Even in those hard times, she makes sure to keep everyone happy through little yet effective efforts. She advises everyone to celebrate Christmas and Lina’s birthday, not letting the NKVD steal from them, even the little happiness that still exists there.

Love, Children and Selflessness: Elena, not only as a mother but also as a human being, is full of love to shower on everyone. She is a committed wife who loves her husband a lot. She misses him and hopes to see him soon. She loves her two children very much and does everything to keep them protected and safe from NKVD and other troubles. She even gives away her favourite pocket watch (that her father gave her) to save her son, Jonas’ life. Even when she is dying of hunger herself she provides her ration of bread to her children so that they can survive better. When Lina is unable to work due to blisters on her hands, Elena does her (Lina’s) share of work too. Not only this, in such bad times too, she does not forget her daughter’s birthday and even manages to get a gift, trying her best to make her children feel happy.

Elena’s love is not just for her family but also for others. She is a selfless lady who takes pains herself to save lives of other people. She along with her husband helps her relatives to elope to America, while getting herself into trouble. She provides her ration to other people when she is starving herself. The Altaian woman, with whom she shares the hut along with her children, is a mean and rude lady but still Elena shares her food and other things with Ulyushka.

The bald man’s leg is broken and he is not able to work, which means that he does not get any ration. So, Elena and others share their food and ration with him every day, selflessly. She helps everyone in all the ways possible. She is the one whom everyone respects and obeys, and look up to when they need any kind of assistance. When she dies, everyone can be seen praising her selfless character and helping her children, Lina and Jonas, with everything.

“She had a beautiful spirit”, said the man who wound his watch.”

“Her cup overflowed with love for everyone, and everything around her, even the enemy.”

II. CONCLUSION

Observing both the characters, Anna and Elena, one can undoubtedly say that they are quite contrary in their approaches as human beings as well as mothers. They both encounter war situations but their reactions are quite opposite to each other. Where Elena can be termed as courageous, Mother Courage’s courage is not seen as courage in true sense. Elena’s love for her children and others is selfless whereas Anna has a different definition of love. Her love is selfish and self-centred. She loves others but not more than herself or her business. Where Elena seems to fit the typical definition of Mother, ‘Mother Courage’ seems to contradict with it a lot.

Thus, Ruta Sepetys’ Elena as a mother is a character with whom readers can feel connected to and be sympathetic towards it but Bertolt Brecht’s Mother Courage does not actually gather the sympathy of the audience even after losing so much due to her unique presentation of the character.

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