

THE GOOD PERSON OF SCHEZWAN

The play by Bertolt Brecht tries to exploit and modify every available convention in terms of the miracle play, the epic theatre, the theatre of the absurd and the theory of historical materialism. Using an extremely familiar and deeply grounded ethical notion of “human goodness”, the play tries to set up its own series of doubts and interrogations about it. In an Oriental setting, where the institution of prostitution has hardly been seen as the repository of any kind of goodness, rather of all kinds of evil; the author makes the possibility of a good person exist and even struggle to exist against all odds.

The available context:

- 1) The miracle plays used a parable or a moral fable to drive home a moral lesson; obviously in favour of the traditional good and against the traditional bad. These fables further demonstrated that the road to goodness is neither straight nor easy. Accordingly the play also puts its heroine in complicated, weary situations that seem irredeemable. The difference is that there seems no reward or deliverance in sight for Shen Te....so is goodness really its own reward?
- 2) The tradition of the epic theatre is very didactic...in the sense that unless men are good, they will come to harm and be defeated in life. (for instance... our own epics ..Ramayana and Mahabharata). Shen Te's goodness puts this belief into question...for her goodness seems to invite more harm, and the evil around her prosper and exploit her. The European audience has had a limited exposure to the Greek epics, yet the overall concept of good versus bad seems very hard to challenge. The play accepts the challenge, and in a familiar Brechtian model, subverts the very basics of this concept in a very androgynous,

Shakespearean way....one cannot be completely good, nor completely bad. Rather, it won't pay one to be such.

- 3) The radical change which characterizes Brechtian theatre is present in a very muted sense here. No systems are overturned; no tragic scenes overimposed....all desirable changes have to come from within. That change lies in the transformation from Shen Te to Shui Ta...from a puristic, self-defeating goodness to a holistic, worldly kind of goodness that is necessary to preserve oneself.
- 4) Historical materialism believes that all human and socio-cultural institutions are actually the product of economic activities. Religion, law, morality...are all impinging upon processes that engage the human intention and will for prosperity, rather than any immaterial form of goodness that cannot ensure human survival. Shen Te's life is a clear example...all her economic engagements are threatened by her philanthropic actions...she has to leave many in order to survive.

The opening scenes....1 and 2:

The opening scene presents Wang, the water-seller, who is in a situation where the homeless Gods, on a visit to earth, aren't able to find shelter for the night. Wang sets them up with a prostitute, Shen Te, who is all out to help the needy and the poor. The Gods reward her with a tobacco store, but the willingness to do good to others becomes her worst enemy. She keeps sheltering one and all, till she realizes she cannot go on this way for long. The questioning begins here itself, when she thinks even before the prologue ends:

“How can I be good when everything is so expensive?”

This sets the mood for the unfolding of events, where it shall be increasingly impressed upon the audience that it is pointless to be good in a situation when everything is at such a high stake. One might note that the date of the play is 1942; a period when the world has experienced the worst aftermath of the First World War, and is locked into a second. To give the play an Asian setting might be a neutralizing ploy for Brecht, so that the European concerns may be given a different perspective. Also, Asia did play a definitive role in the war, which of course did not spare its common citizens like Shen Te.

The primary concern in the play is an economic one; the struggle for survival and its various ramifications. Shen Te is a prostitute, but her own business doesn't seem to sustain her, and she strives to make her ends meet by the tobacco store. It is here that she realizes the need to abandon goodness, and don the guise of her cousin, Shui Ta. This split technique; a play within a play is necessitated to show the audience the roles one needs to play in order to survive, even if they aren't true to one's own nature. Shui Ta is everything that Shen Te is not; and he tries to set the order of things right by getting rid of the unwanted people in his cousin's life. He begins by announcing:

“My cousin regrets of course that she can't abide by the laws of hospitality for an unlimited period.”

He tries to set her cheaters right but soon admits that she'd have to carry on herself (obviously, the disguise can't go on forever). The only way available is to find her a husband. The gender equation is discussed in terms of necessity, not love. So even when Shen Te finds love in Sun, he begins by asking her for water and she pursues Wang to fulfill his needs. It is

apparent early on in the play that this love will not be able to sustain Shen Te, and that perhaps becomes an additive to the trouble already specified – love too, is a kind of goodness, and no amount of goodness can survive in a state where the primary concern is money.