

Conference Paper

Satire on Capitalism in Bertold Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle*

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Abstract

In the *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, Brecht employs satire to lambast rigid convention and conventional legal system. In the *Prologue*, two groups of peasants are disputing over the ownership of a piece of land. The dispute is settled shockingly. The original owners of the land relinquish their possession because the other group can make a better use of the land. The decision is ridiculous and cannot be accepted in capitalist country. But Brecht is clever enough to subdue the feeling of disappointment of the spectators. He employs satiric humor to make unnatural decision felt natural. The wedding of Grusha, the protagonist of the play, and a dying man evokes our laughter but the intention is to criticize and scorn capitalist religion. Satire continues when Azdak is made judge. He coins his verdicts in contradictory to conventional legal system. Victims of crime are punished and fined while the perpetrators are set free. The analysis applies qualitative research method as generated by Koul (1984), and Herbert (1990). The results indicate that Azdak's verdicts give rise to audience's laughters, and they deliberately impress the audience.

Keywords: capitalist, communist, criticize, legal, satire, verdicts

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Received: 13 March 2018
Accepted: 10 April 2018
Published: 19 April 2018

Publishing services provided by
Knowledge E

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Selection and Peer-review under the responsibility of the AICLL Conference Committee.

1. Introduction

Satire serves as a comedic and pedagogic form uniquely suited to provoking critical reflection. Its ability to underscore the absurdity, ignorance, and prejudice of commonly accepted behavior by means of comedic critical reflection offers an especially potent form of public critique, one that was much needed in the social environment. (McClennen. 2011: 1-2)

Liu (2013: 133) claims that *Caucasian Chalk Circle* is one of the most important works of the German playwright Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956). It is also one of the most widely performed modern plays in the West. However, this critically acclaimed play is not purely Brecht's "originality" but is indebted to an ancient Chinese play, Li Xingdao's *Hui Lan Ji* (The Story of the Circle of Chalk). However, to Westerners, the story of


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two mothers claiming one child is a well-known biblical story that showcases King Solomon's wisdom; therefore, critics generally think Brecht takes influence from both the biblical story and the Chinese source for his creation of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. However, Brecht only acknowledged the Chinese source; in addition, there is no clear evidence showing that Li Xingdao had known or was influenced by the biblical story for the writing of his play. Brecht acknowledged his adaptation in the prologue of the *Caucasian Chalk Circle* in the voice of the singer: "It is called 'The Chalk Circle' and comes from the Chinese. But we'll do it, of course, in a changed version" (Brecht, 1983: 126).

In the prologue, there is a dispute between two groups of peasants over the ownership of a valley. Government agent interferes and gives a good solution accepted by both sides. The original owners of the land relinquish their property to the others because they can make the best use of the land. The problem is solved easily not through long procedures of legal system. The solution above is strange and ridiculous. Brecht realizes that the decision cannot be accepted in capitalist country; therefore, he appeases the spectators' feeling of disappointment by introducing humors and comic situation in the scenes to come.

In act III, the wedding between Grusha and a dying man is full of humors and entertaining. The scenes in the wedding evoke spectators' laughters but the intention is to ridicule capitalist religion. The wedding is performed by a drunken and lecherous monk who is regular visitor of taverns.

Humorous satire continues when Azdak is made a judge. In every case he takes, he always sides criminal and punishes the victim of crime. The last case he takes is the case of Grusha, the protagonist of the play, versus Natella Abashvili, ex-governor's wife. Azdak delivers in favor of Grusha, the thief, and punishes Natella, the victim of theft.

2. Literature Review

The note as found in Sitepu and Siregar's proceeding (2017) exposes a clear description of *Caucasian Chalk Circle* on which they focus the discussion about ridiculing capitalism. They indicate that Brecht portrays capitalists as the objects of ridicule, and the judge, Azdak, who takes ridiculous verdicts over some cases that bring about audience's laughter. At the same time, Murua (2015) claims that in fact, Brecht, himself, knew the repercussions of his Communistic arguments that he was afraid of releasing this prologue while he was living in America. However, the clever way in which he intertwines his communistic beliefs with morality make him, truly, one of the greatest writers of the 19th Century. That is, precisely, the reason why Brecht uses a prologue. He,

cleverly, uses the prologue to preach his message of morality to his audience before he can deliver his main message.

In the prologue, the Delegate from Tiflis comes to hear and determine the case between the Goat Herders and the Fruit Growers. Justice is seen to be served when, first, each group is given a chance to explain why they deserve the farm. After their presentations, the Delegate decides in favor of the Fruit Farmers because they have more elaborate plans for the farm. Even though the Goat Herders are the original owner of the land, they do not have any meaningful plans for it. The verdict in this case is arrived at on the basis of reasonable consensus rather than strict law. The two parties are satisfied with the decision and they decide to partake in drinking together.

The people also seek justice through petitioning the Governor. However, this is not a good option because he does not heed to their cries and instead they are whipped and pushed back by the Iron shirts. The beggars and petitioners have various grievances including; too much tax, corrupt officials, arrested family members etc. When the Governor is overthrown by the Fat Prince, the people feel a sense of justice which is, however, short-lived.

The court is specifically established to dispense justice to all. However, in the text, the people have little faith in the court which is seen to always rule in favor of the rich. After the Governor is killed, even the City Judge is hung because he is also seen to be part of the injustices suffered by the people, Judge Azdak represents justice, especially to the poor. When he discovers that he has been harboring the Grand Duke, he tells Shauwa to take him to the City (Nuka) for judgment. Unfortunately, at Nuka, the city Judge has been hung and Azdak cannot get the justice he wants. Ironically, Azdak is appointed judge after he impresses the Iron shirts with his knowledge of the legal system and the injustices that the people have suffered.

Kizungu (2014) claims that *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is a communist critique of capitalism. It explores in length some demerits of capitalism including capitalistic materialism, social stratification, inter-social class warfare and the exploitation of the masses. In the play, Bertolt Brecht also delves into revolution of the masses; collapse of capitalism; and the consequent redistribution of resources. Capitalistic materialism persists throughout the play. Kizungu (2015) further says that Bertolt Brecht uses the play to criticize the society, its various institutions and practices. Satire is commonly used in plays because it has the advantage of criticizing without annoying the subjects and the audience. It achieves this through its use of humor and an indirect approach. The play satires capitalism, the ruling class, the armed forces, judiciary, social stratification, marriage and religion among other things. Capitalism is portrayed as the mother of all evils in a society: corruption, greed, murders, wars, inequality etc. Capitalism

encourages greed in a society. The greedy individuals senselessly look for wealth at the expense of others in the society.

3. Research Method

This paper discusses ridiculing capitalism in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* by Bertolt Brecht, and focuses on the ridiculing convention, religion and legal system. The research method used in this paper is qualitative research method that is conducted by studying the organized material to discover inherent facts. Qualitative research method is conducted by studying the organized material in order to discover inherent facts. The content analysis, inductive analysis, and logical analysis are mostly used in the analysis of qualitative material (Koul, 1984: 1990). Furthermore, research design deals with a logical problem and not a logistical problem [3]. This research will be presented in a descriptive form. The main data of this research is obtained from the play entitled *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* written by Bertolt Brecht. Besides, the data are also taken from books related to the analysis and the reliable websites on the internet to support the analysis.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1. Satire on convention

In the prologue, two groups of peasants are disputing over the ownership of a valley ruined after the World War II. Legally, the valley belongs to the peasant group on the right, but the group on the left persistently claims that they can make a better use of the land. See the following debates:

“THE OLD MAN *right*: The valley has belonged to us for centuries.

THE SOLDIER *left*: What does that mean – for centuries? Nothing belongs for anyone for centuries. When you were young you didn’t even belong to yourself, but to Prince Kazbeki.

THE OLD MAN *right*: According to the law the valley belongs to us.

THE GIRL TRACTOR DRIVER: The laws will have to be re-examined in any case, to see whether they are still valid.

The expert then interferes to convince that both sides get advantages.

“THE EXPERT: You can claim State support – both here and there. You know that.

The Expert accommodates the aspiration of both sides and cleverly leads to the solution of the dispute.

“THE EXPERT: Don’t get angry. It’s true that we have to consider a piece of land as a tool with which one produces something useful. But it’s also true that we must recognize the love for a particular piece of land. Before we continue the discussion I suggest that you explain to the comrades of the ‘Galinsk’ kolchos just what you intend to do with the disputed valley. (Brecht, 1984: 5)

THE OLD MAN right: Agreed.

THE OLD MAN left: Yes, let Kato speak.

THE EXPERT: Comrade Agriculturist!

THE AGRICULTURIST *rising. She is in military uniform*: Last winter, Comrades, while we were fighting here in these hills as partisans, we discussed how after the expulsion of the Germans we could increase our orchards to ten times their former size. I have prepared the plan for an irrigation project. With the help of a coffer-dam on our mountain lake, three hundred hectares of unfertile land can be irrigated. Our kolchos could then grow not only more fruit, but wine as well. The project, however, would pay only if the disputed valley of the ‘Galinsk’ kolchos could also be included. Here are the calculations. *She hands the expert a briefcase.*” (Brecht, 1984: 6)

Both sides, the peasants on the right and the peasants on the left give applause to the agriculturist, and they shakehand and embrace each other as the sign of their satisfaction to the decision. The peasants on the right who originally own the land willingly submit their possession for it can be better used by others for prosperity of all. The decision is a communist moral that cannot be accepted in capitalist country. But Brecht is clever enough to subdue the disappointment of spectators by employing humorous satires in the scenes to come.

4.2. Satire on religion

After the arrival of Grusha in her brother’s home, Aniko, the wife of Laverenti, keeps on asking about Grusha’s presence with a child and without a husband. She is repeatedly described as a religious person but she uses religion as an excuse for sending Grusha out of her home. See the following quotation:

LAVRENTI *quietly, quickly*: Has it got a father? *As she shakes her head*: I thought so. We must think up something. She's very pious.

THE SISTER IN LAW *returning*: These servants! *To Grusha*: You have a child?

GRUSHA: It's mine. *She collapses. Lavrenti helps her up.*

LAVRENTI: But you can't stay here long. You must realize she's very pious."
(Brecht, 1984: 44)

Because of the objection of Aniko to the presence of Grusha with the child, Laverenti has to find a husband to be the father of Michael. Observe the quotation below:

GRUSHA: But I can't marry another man! I must wait for Simon Chachava."
(Brecht, 1984: 48)

Grusha objects to her brother's idea but Lavrenti persuades her that she does not need a man in bed, but a man on paper.

At last, Grusha agrees to get married to a dying man so that she can become a widow. Again, here, Brecht makes fun on religion by creating a comical situation. The wedding between Grusha and the dying man is full of humor and entertaining but the intention is to criticize religion. The character of Aniko and the monk accentuate the hypocrisy and immorality among the members of church congregation.

4.3. Satire on legal system

In *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, the efforts of Azdak, the judge to crush the capitalists are blatant. He even crushes them by receiving the bribe from them but his verdict is always in favor of the poor, the down-trodden, the wretched and the marginalized. Azdak begins all his cases by saying "I accept" meaning that he is willing to be bribed openly.

The first case he takes is the dispute between an invalid and a doctor. The invalid claims that he paid for the doctor to study medicine and that he then had a stroke when he heard the doctor was practicing for free. He blames the stroke on the doctor and wants to be paid back the money he spent on the doctor's study. See the following quotation:

"AZDAK: In view of the large number of cases, the Court today will hear two cases simultaneously. Before I open the proceedings, a short announcement: I receive – *he stretches out his hand; only the blackmailer produces some money and hands it to him* – I reserve for myself the right to punish one of these parties here – *he glances at the invalid* – for contempt of court. You – *to the*

doctor – are a doctor, and you – *to the invalid* – are bringing a complaint against him. Is the doctor responsible for your condition?

THE INVALID: Yes. I had a stroke because of him.

AZDAK: That sounds like professional negligence.

THE INVALID: More than negligence. I gave this man money to study. So far he hasn't paid me back one penny. And when I heard he was treating a patient free, I had a stroke." (Brecht, 1984: 73)

The doctor is basically from a poor family; therefore, he practices free for poor patients. Azdak rules in favor of the doctor. See the following quotation:

"AZDAK: In that case I will pass judgment. The Court considers the blackmail proved. And you – *to the invalid* – are sentenced to a fine of 1000 piastres. If you get a second stroke the doctor will have to treat you free and if necessary amputate...." (Brecht, 1984: 74)

The next case is that of an inn-keeper who brings lawsuit against his stableman, whom he claims to have raped his daughter-in-law. He caught the stableman in action. See the following quotations:

THE INNKEEPER: Your worship, it's about the family honor. I wish to bring an action on behalf of my son, who's gone on business across the mountain. This is the offending stableman, and here's my unfortunate daughter-in-law. AZDAK *sitting down*: I receive. *Sighing, the innkeeper hands him some money*. Good. Now the formalities are disposed of. This is a case of rape?" (Brecht, 1984: 75)

As previously mentioned, the above quotation again shows that Azdak openly receives the bribe at the beginning of every case as the first formality.

As the interrogation continues, Azdak demands the additional bribe. See the following quotations:

"THE INNKEEPER: Your worship, I surprised this rascal in the stable in the act of laying our Ludovica in the straw.

AZDAK: Quite right, the stable. Beautiful horses. I particularly like the little roan.

THE INNKEEPER: The first thing I did of course was to berate Ludovica on behalf of my son.

AZDAK *seriously*: I said I liked the little roan.

THE INNKEEPER *coldly*: Really? – Ludovica admitted that the stableman took her against her will.” (Brecht, 1984: 76)

The inn-keeper does not head the demand of Azdak and refuses to give him a little roan. Azdak then has a public prosecutor drop a knife which he makes Ludovica pick it up. See the following quotation:

“AZDAK: Public Prosecutor, just drop your knife on the floor. *Shauva does so*. Ludovica, go and pick up the Public Prosecutor’s knife.

Ludovica, hips swaying, goes and picks up the knife.

Azdak points at her. Do you see that? The way it sways? The criminal element has been discovered. The rape has been proved. By eating too much, especially sweet things, by lying too long in warm water, by laziness and too soft a skin, you have raped the poor man. Do you imagine you can go around with a bottom like that and get away with it in Court? This is a case of deliberate assault with a dangerous weapon. You are sentenced to hand over to the Court the little roan which your father liked to ride on behalf of his son. And now, Ludovica, come with me to the stable so that the Court may investigate the scene of the crime.” (Brecht, 1984: 76 - 77)

In this case, Azdak also sides the stableman, the common man, and fines the inn-keeper, the capitalist. In the capitalist society, a victim of rape has never been fined and the perpetrator never gets rid of punishment. Azdak’s verdict strangely coins it on the other way round to ridicule the capitalist.

The next case is that of Granny, a poor old woman who had several miracles. She claims that she was miraculously given a cow, that she had a ham fly into her house through a window and that her landlord waived her rent. See the following quotations:

“AZDAK: The Public Prosecutor opens the proceedings.

SHAUVA: It’s about a cow. For five weeks the defendant has had a cow in her stable, the property of farmer Suru. She was also found to be in the possession of a stolen ham. And cows belonging to farmer Shutoff were killed after he had asked the defendant to pay the rent for a field.

THE FARMERS: It’s about my ham, Your Worship. – It’s about my cow, Your Worship. – It’s about my field, Your Worship.

AZDAK: Granny, what have you got to say to all this?

THE OLD WOMAN: Your Worship, one night towards morning, five weeks ago, there was a knock at my door, and outside stood a bearded man with

a cow. He said, 'Dear woman, I am the miracle-working St. Banditus. And because your son has been killed in the war, I bring you this cow as a keepsake. Take good care of it!'

THE FARMERS: The robber Irakli, Your Worship! – Her brother-in-law, Your Worship! The cattle thief, the incendiary! – He must be beheaded!

The OLD WOMAN answering Azdak's sign to continue: And then one morning the ham came flying in at my window. It hit me in the small of the back. I've been lame ever since. Look, Your Worship. *She limps a few steps. The bandit laughs.* I ask Your Worship: when was a poor old body ever given a ham except by a miracle? (Brecht, 1984: 78-79)

At last Azdak rules in Granny's favor and fines the farmers for not believing in miracles.

The case of Grusha is the climax of the play. When the war is over, Grusha has to return to the city to face a trial for having taken Governor's son.

Azdak starts a case by taking bribe. He does the same from the prosecutors who are working for Natella. They explain that Grusha has stolen Natella's child and refuses to hand it over. Grusha claims that Michael is her child and that she brought him up. The lawyer points out that Grusha does not claim to be a blood relative of Michael's.

Azdak calls Grusha to him and asks her why she will not give Michael up. Grusha remains silent and Azdak understands her persistence. He then orders Shauva to take a piece of chalk and draw a circle on the floor. Azdak tells them that whichever woman can pull the child out of the circle will get him. See the following quotations:

"AZDAK: Plaintiff and defendant! The Court has listened to your case, and has come to no decision as to who the real mother of the child is. I as Judge have the duty of choosing a mother for the child. I'll make a test. Shauve, get a piece of chalk and draw a circle on the floor. Shouva does so. Now place the child in the center. *Shauva puts Michael, who smiles at Grusha, in the centre of the circle.* Stand near the circle, both of you. *The Governor's wife and Grusha step up to the circle.* Now each of you takes the child by a hand. The true mother is she who has the strength to pull the child out of the circle, towards herself.

THE SECOND LAWYER *quickly*: High Court of Justice, I protest! I object that the fate of the great Abashvili estates, which are bound up with the child as the heir, should be made dependent on such a doubtful wrestling match. Moreover, my client does not command the same physical strength as this person, who is accustomed to physical work.

AZDAK: She looks pretty well fed to me. Pull!" (Brecht, 1984: 94)

Natella pulls hard and yanks the child out of the circle. Meanwhile, Grusha has refused to pull. Azdak orders them to the test one more time. Again Grusha lets go of the child's arm. Natella wins the competition but the child is given to Grusha. See the following:

"AZDAK rising: And in this manner the Court has established the true mother. *To Grusha:* Take your child be off with it. I advice you not to stay in town with him. *To the Governor's wife:* And you disappear before I fine you for fraud. Your estates fall to the city. A playground for children will be made out of them. They need one, and I have decided it shall be called after me – The Garden of Azdak." (Brecht, 1984: 95)

The verdict is quite shocking because the original mother is disowned from her child while the foster mother gets it.

Like the case in the Prologue, the original owners of the land are disowned of their properties. Here also the judge, Azdak, disowns the original mother and gives the child to the foster mother who can take care of it much better. The verdict is ridiculous but this time spectators do not have any objection to the verdict for their symphatize with the fate of Grusha

5. Conclusion

It is interesting to note that in every case Azdak takes, he always sides criminal and punishes the victim of crime. It starts with the case of a doctor versus an invalid. Azdak rules in favor of the doctor, the criminal, and punishes the invalid, the victim. Next is the case of stableman versus Ludovica. In the case, Azdak sides the stableman, the rapist, and punishes Ludovica, the victim of the rape. The case of Granny versus the farmers, Azdak rules in favor of granny, the criminal and punishes the farmers, the victims of the theft. The last case is Grusha versus Natella Abashvili. Azdak again sides Grusha, the baby thief, and punishes Natella, the victim of the theft. The case of Grusha versus Natella Abashvili is the climax of the play. Here, though Azdak makes a ridiculous verdict, the audience has no more objection, even they are satisfied and happy with Azdak's verdict. It means that Brecht is successful to convey communist messages to the audience.

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