

Q. 1. Examine Brecht's *The Good Woman of Szechwan* as a play reflecting the epic theatre concept promoted by him.

Or

Examine the statement that Brecht's play *The Good Woman of Szechwan* is more dialectical than paradoxical.

*The Good Woman of Szechwan* written during Brecht's exile in Scandinavia, tells the story of Shen Te, a young woman forced into prostitution by poverty who is rewarded handsomely after opening her home to three visiting gods. Disproving their contention that no goodness still exists on earth, Shen Te is given a small business by the deities, and from there she struggles to work honestly and to provide for the needy, earning her the moniker, "the Angel of the Slums." After falling victim to unscrupulous neighbours and a dishonest lover, however, Shen Te is forced to create an alter-ego — that of her business-savvy cousin, Mr. Shui Ta. Where Shen Te is trusting, selfless, and naive, Shui Ta is fierce, manipulative, and efficient. As inevitably happens in Brecht's drama — and, by extension, in our world — the forces of capital and history eventually overwhelm Shen Te, and she is forced to surrender her goodness or starve:

*Since not to eat is to die  
Who can long refuse to be bad?  
As I lay prostrate beneath the weight of good intentions  
Ruin stared me in the face  
It was when I was unjust that I ate good meat.*

*The Good Woman of Szechwan* is dialectical in its split between Shen Teh's self-fulfilment and Shui Ta's self-preservation. It is the inevitable clash between drive and fact and the paradox of ends and means. But for Shui Ta's profiteering meanness Shen Teh could be deprived of her charitable self.

In *The Good Woman of Szechwan* we have constant interruption that are brought about by musical interludes and all the songs work to alienate the audience from the play and to make them question the situation presented before them. They are made to question how Shen Teh's goodness leaves her only noble but also economically emaciated. Walter

Benjamin says that "the interruption of action is one the principal concerns of epic theatre. There in lies the formal achievement of Brecht's songs with their crude heart-rending refrains," and hence The water-seller's song 'In the Rain' comes just after the love scene between Shen Teh and Yang Sun, disrupting the audience from getting involved in the play and again bringing their attention to the dialectics between poverty and plenty.

Brecht says that "in the epic theatre moral arguments only took the second place. Its aim is less to moralize than to observe." So we see Shen Teh's goodness is constantly thwarted by social circumstances and harsh necessities of survival in a competitive society. For Shen Teh to survive it is necessary that Shui Ta should survive. The gods in the play are ignorant, humanized and a satire on the hegemony in Christianity questioning the absolutism of Christianity in the early twentieth century. Instead of having a single Godhead as found in Christianity, we are presented with three gods. But none of them can do anything to lift Shen Teh out of the drudgery that she is part of, even though she is good. In the trial scene the gods are seen nothing but imposters. The idea of justice is questioned, deconstructed and done away with. Virtue is neither rewarded nor vice punished. Instead vice is seen as a means to an end. Shui Ta is not punished and Shen Teh is rewarded for her goodness. Brecht here combines divine justice with legal justice by making the gods wear the attire of the magistrates to mock at divine justice.

Brecht believes that society can be changed through intellectual action and that is the reason that his plays are highly dialectical. We see the dialectical between good and bad as Shen Teh sings the 'Song of the Degenerateness of the Good and the Gods'. "The litererization of the theatre by means of verbal formulas, posters, captions is intended to make what is shown on the stage **unsensational**." The performance is not aimed to draw the audience into the play but to make them stand at the periphery so that they can question the bourgeoisie ideology and break free from it, so that the proletariat is emancipated and socialism can be constructed:

*The good*

*Cannot remain good for long in our country*

*Where cupboards are bare, housewives start to squabble.*

*Oh, the divine commandments*

*Are not much use against hunger.*

*So why can't the gods share out what they've created?*

*Come down and distribute the bounties of nature*

*And allow us, once hunger and thirst have been sated*

*To mix with each other in friendship and pleasure?*

Gods here are seen as privileging the aristocrats and Christianity is seen as a perpetrator of class difference. The motif of 'hunger' is again visible in the song. Though one cannot be satiated by following the

commandments, one needs to have money to buy food. It brings to the forefront the dialectics between spirituality and materialism. It makes the spectators question both the value of a bourgeois society and religion.

*In order to win one's mid-day meal  
One needs the toughness which elsewhere builds empires.  
Except twelve others be trampled down  
The unfortunate cannot be helped.  
So why can't the gods make a simple decision  
That goodness must conquer in spite of its weakness? -  
Then back up the good with an armoured division  
Command it to: 'fire!' and not tolerate meekness.*

Brecht being but a Marxist every theme is given a Marxist interpretation, even the idea of love and marriage. Shen Teh has to choose between Yang Sun and Mr Shu Fu. It is as Shui Ta she favours Shu Fu for he can provide her with a future but as Shen Teh her emotions stray her towards Yang Sun. In direct address to the audience Shen Teh sings:

*I would go with the man whom I love  
I would not reckon what it costs me.  
I would not consider what is wiser.  
I would not know whether he loves me.  
I would go with the man whom I love.*

Brecht in *The Good Woman of Szechwan* presents us with the Marxist theme, a dialectical debate between poverty and plenty; goodness and god; religion and materialism etc. The musical interludes present throughout the play, Shen Teh's changing clothes in front of the audience, direct address of Shen Teh and other characters to the audience, is an attempt to make sure that the play raises questions in the minds of the audience and breaks their identification with the bourgeois ideology.

In totality, Brecht's play, *The Good Woman of Szechwan* is an apt representation of his epic or intellectual theatre. It proposed that a play should not cause the spectator to identify emotionally with the characters or action before him or her, but should instead provoke rational self-reflection and a critical view of the action on the stage. Brecht thought that the experience of a climactic catharsis of emotion left an audience complacent. Instead, he wanted his audiences to adopt a critical perspective in order to recognise social injustice and exploitation and to be moved to go forth from the theatre and effect change in the world outside. For this purpose, Brecht employed the use of techniques that remind the spectator that the play is a representation of reality and not reality itself. By highlighting the constructed nature of the theatrical event, Brecht hoped to communicate that the audience's reality was equally constructed and, as such, was changeable. Instead of focusing on the universal elements of human situations and fate, Brecht is interested in depicting the attitude that people adopted towards each other in a specific situation.

✓ Q. 5. Examine the significance of the title, *The Good Woman of Szechwan* chosen by Brecht for his play.

*The Good Woman of Szechwan* is a play written by Bertolt Brecht. The play is an example of Brecht's "non-Aristotelian drama", a dramatic form intended to be staged with the methods of epic theatre. The play is a parable set in the Chinese city of Szechwan. It critically examines the problems of remaining good under the existing social and economic conditions. Brecht's famous parable, showing that in aggressive and unjust societies good can survive by means of evil was written in 1939-41, while he was in flight from the Nazis in Scandinavia. Brecht could not therefore express his anti-Nazi sentiments openly even though he lived in exile. He conceived of the play in the form of a parable in which underneath the simple diction lies the significance as well as complexity.

*The Good Woman of Szechwan* presents a severe critique of the hollowness of morality underlying the capitalist system. It illustrates Brecht's concept of the didactic theatre. "Obviously Brecht in this play was concerned with something more than sharp formulations of the 'Food is the first thing. Morals follow on' variety. Not only had he been reading Chinese philosophy, but his journal shows that he had begun holding discussions about Marxist ethics with the actor Hermann Greid and other friends. In the *Conversations between Exiles*, which he was writing in Finland around the same time, he deals with the concept of good and evil in a comic-paradoxical way, showing in a long 'Parade of the Vices and Virtues' how both these options can 'identify themselves as the servants of *Oppression*'. The play however is more schematic, as may be seen from Brecht's notes. Moreover it is dialectical rather than paradoxical, and by

splitting the central character down the middle into two irreconcilable parts. It can easily cut away the point, which is that in aggressive and unjust societies good can only survive by means of evil. Nor is it ever made clear enough that the roof of this ethical duplicity is not simply poverty, such as can afflict any form of society; indeed only 'The Song of Green Cheese' at the end of scene 6 suggests that a better society can be conceived at all, and it does so in the most unreal fairy-story terms. Brecht, in other words, had only himself to blame if audiences applauded him for modifying his previously 'political' approach, and instead tackling the eternal problem of 'humanity as such'. The feeling with which they are most likely to be left by the play is one of generalised discontent." [John Willett and Ralph Manheim]

The play opens with Wang, a water seller, explaining to the audience that he is on the city outskirts awaiting the foretold appearance of several important gods. Soon the gods arrive and ask Wang to find them shelter for the night. They are tired, having travelled far and wide in search of good people who still live according to the principles that they, the gods, have handed down. Instead they have found only greed, evil, dishonesty, and selfishness. The same turns out to be true in Szechwan: no one will take them in, no one has the time or means to care for others - no one except the poor young prostitute Shen Teh, whose pure inherent charity cannot allow her to turn away anyone in need. Shen Teh was going to see a customer, but decided to help out instead, however confusion follows leaving Wang fleeing from the "illustrious Ones" (The Three Gods), leaving his water carrying-pole behind.

Shen Teh is rewarded for her hospitality, as the gods take it as a sure sign of goodness. They give her money and she buys a humble tobacco shop which they intend as both gift and test: will Shen Teh be able to maintain her goodness with these newfound means, however slight they may be? If she succeeds, the gods' confidence in humanity would be restored. Though at first Shen Teh seems to live up to the gods' expectations, her generosity quickly turns her small shop into a messy, overcrowded poorhouse which attracts crime and police supervision. In a sense, Shen Teh quickly fails the test, as she is forced to introduce the invented cousin Shui Ta as overseer and protector of her interests. Shen Teh dons a costume of male clothing, a mask, and a forceful voice to take on the role of Shui Ta. Shui Ta arrives at the shop, coldly explains that his cousin has gone out of town on a short trip, curtly turns out the hangers-on, and quickly restores order to the shop.

At first, Shui Ta only appears when Shen Teh is in a particularly desperate situation, but as the action of the play develops, Shen Teh becomes unable to keep up with the demands made on her and is overwhelmed by the promises she makes to others. Therefore she is compelled to call on her cousin's services for longer periods until at last her

true persona seems to be consumed by her cousin's severity. Where Shen Teh is soft, compassionate, and vulnerable, Shui Ta is unemotional and pragmatic, even vicious; it seems that only Shui Ta is made to survive in the world in which they live. In what seems no time at all, he has built her humble shop into a full-scale tobacco factory with many employees.

Shen Teh also meets an unemployed mail pilot, Yang Sun, whom she quickly falls in love with after preventing him from hanging himself. However, Yang Sun doesn't return Shen Teh's feelings but simply uses her for money and Shen Teh quickly falls pregnant with his child. Here again her goodness leads to disaster. Later still, obsessed with the welfare of her unborn child by Sun, she can afford no goodness to anyone else.

*Henceforth I  
Shall fight at least for my own, if I have to be  
Sharp as a tiger. Yes, from the hour  
When I saw this thing I shall cut myself off  
From them all, never resting  
Till I have at least saved my son, if only him.  
What I learnt from my schooling, the gutter  
By violence and trickery now  
Shall serve you my son: to you  
I would be kind: a savage beast  
To all others need be. And  
It need be.*

She finds no way out but to disguise herself as a hard-headed imaginary male cousin Shui Ta. She wants to do good to herself as well as to others. Her feminine weaknesses, charity and love, must be limited by masculine toughness. She is driven to play a dual role - the masculine complimenting the feminine. As Shui Ta she helps both the poor and her lover by setting up a factory which provides work and wages. But in doing so, she foregoes all her charity and her mental plight becomes worse.

Eventually one of the employees hears Shen Teh crying, but when he enters only Shui Ta is present. The employee demands to know what he has done with Shen Teh, and when he cannot prove where she is, he is taken to court on the charge of having hidden or possibly murdered his cousin. The townspeople also discover a bundle of Shen Teh's clothing under Shui Ta's desk, which makes them even more suspicious. During the process of her trial, the gods appear in the robes of the judges, and Shui Ta says that he will make a confession if the room is cleared except for the judges. When the townspeople have gone, Shen Teh reveals herself to the gods, who are confronted by the dilemma that their seemingly arbitrary divine behaviour has caused: they have created impossible circumstances for those who wish to live "good" lives, yet they refuse to intervene directly to protect their followers from the vulnerability that this "goodness" engenders.

The gods are delighted, to see Shen Teh for the good woman is still on earth. But when Shen Te points out that her good actions have had bad consequences, they merely tell her to go on being good. When she further protests that she cannot survive without the hard-headed Shui Ta, they decree that she may use Shui Ta sparingly, say, once a month. Ascending into heaven on a pink cloud, the gods leave the troubled Shen Te alone.

The metaphysical concept of a perfect God (or gods) creating an imperfect world, leaving men to do their best in such a world, explains the ways of the three gods. On the other hand, Shen Te expects the gods not only to commend her goodness but, to help her impose goodness on the world. Faced with the complete indifference of the gods to human problems, Shen Te is left with the unresolved problem of how a good person is to survive in a bad world. *The Good Woman of Szechwan* presents a severe critique of the hollowness of morality underlying the capitalist system. It illustrates Brecht's concept of the didactic theatre. "Obviously Brecht in this play was concerned with something more than sharp formulations of the 'Food is the first thing. Morals follow on' variety. Not only had he been reading Chinese philosophy, but his journal shows that he had begun holding discussions about Marxist ethics with the actor Hermann Greid and other friends. In the *Conversations between Exiles*, which he was writing in Finland around the same time, he deals with the concept of good and evil in a comic-paradoxical way, showing in a long 'Parade of the Vices and Virtues' how both these options can 'identify themselves as the servants of *Oppression*'. The play however is more schematic, as may be seen from Brecht's notes. Moreover it is dialectical rather than paradoxical, and by splitting the central character down the middle into two irreconcilable parts it can easily cut away the point, which is that in aggressive and unjust societies good can only survive by means of evil. Nor is it ever made clear enough that the roof of this ethical duplicity is not simply poverty, such as can afflict any form of society; indeed only 'The Song of Green Cheese' at the end of scene 6 suggests that a better society can be conceived at all, and it does so in the most unreal fairy-story terms. Brecht, in other words, had only himself to blame if audiences applauded him for modifying his previously 'political' approach, and instead tackling the eternal problem of 'humanity as such' The feeling with which they are most likely to be left by the play is one of generalised discontent." [John Willett and Ralph Manheim]

At the end, following a hasty and ironic (though quite literal) *deus ex machina*, the narrator throws the responsibility of finding a solution to the play's problem onto the shoulders of the audience. It is for the spectator to figure out how a good person can possibly come to a good end in a world that, in essence, is *not* good. The play relies on the dialectical possibilities of this problem, and on the assumption that the spectator will be moved to see that the current structure of society must be changed in order to resolve the problem.

Thus the title of Brecht's play examines the travails of Shen Teh, the good woman of Szechwan who has earned the nickname 'The Angel of the Slums' by her concern for the poor and the downtrodden neighbours around her to remain good in the chilly world created by the gods. In order to continue doing her good deeds she has to invent an alter ego, a male cousin Shui Ta to survive in aggressive and unjust societies. Even the three gods who have hailed her as 'the one good woman of Szechwan' let her summon her cousin once a month. This is a clear indication that they tacitly understand that it is very difficult for a good person to survive without resorting to evil means in a world full of polarities created by them:

*The Third God: Alas, water-seller, our commandments seem to be fatal! I fear all the moral principles that we have evolved will have to be cancelled. People have enough to do save their bare lives. Good precepts bring them to the edge of the precipice; good deeds drag them over. To the other gods: The world is unfit to live in, you have got to admit it!*