

A Comparative Study of Estrangement and Defamiliarization in German and Two Persian Performances of *Mother Courage and Her Children*

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Extended Abstract

1. Introduction

In this research, the definition of epic theater from Bertolt Brecht's point of view and the elements of alienation, estrangement, or defamiliarization are discussed. Then, three different performances of the play *Mother Courage and Her Children* by Brecht are analyzed. The first is the German performance by Brecht's wife, Helena Weigel. The second and third performances are works by Mehdi Shejaei and Amir Dejakam, staged in Iran.

2. Aim

The purpose of this research is to investigate how to analyze this work and implement elements of estrangement. The questions raised are which strategies are used in all three performances, and how they highlight differences or similarities in the way of conveying the content and bringing these elements to the stage?

Hypotheses: the time periods of the performances and cultural differences, or the difference in artistic view and working style of the directors and actors, will bring different drama structures to the stage, and the transfer of content will also be done differently. The most important element that will be examined and compared in three performances from the point of view of comparative literature and intercultural adaptation is the method of alienation or defamiliarization, which is one of the most important features of narrative theater and Brecht's theory.

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To write this article, the original text of the play in German, the Persian translation by Mustafa Rahimi, and the published films of the three performances were used. The analysis performed on the films, along with the library analysis of the theoretical topics, is a short part of the result of a point-by-point examination of the performed scenes and their comparison with the original text.

However, no scientific material was found in which the different performances of *Mother Courage's* play in Germany and Iran were discussed and compared.

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Epic theater, alienation, defamiliarization, estrangement.

In the 1920s, Brecht developed “epic theater” against classical Aristotelian theater. Its characteristic feature is “Realismus.” The main characteristic of the epic theater is the estrangement or alienation of the dramatic event, which prevents the actor from completely immersing himself in his role and gives the audience the ability to observe narrowly and critically, with the aim of making possible changes in social conditions.

According to Brecht, the definition of “alienation” is as follows: changing familiar phenomena; a literary method, which consciously creates a fundamental distance between literary reality and everyday reality or literary language and everyday language. As a result, normal and familiar relationships suddenly seem incomprehensible and estranged.

Brecht used various strategies to achieve his goal and estrangement, including removing the classic structure of the play and multiple scenes. The scenes follow each other, and the ending of the play remains “open”. The emphasis is on the audience to figure out the end of the story or its meaning. The actors do not sink into the characters of the story, but keep a distance from their roles, so that the audience does not identify with them or undergo inner cleansing and self-cultivation. The process of performance on stage is announced by a critical and admonishing narrator, directly addressing the audience, performing ballads, showing films, placards, etc, in a way that is often unexpected and surprising for the audience.

4. Discussion

3 Performances of «Mother Courage and Her Children»

Mother Courage and Her Children is a historical account of the Thirty Years' War, in which the fate of the traveling saleswoman "Courage" whose real name is Anna Fearling and her three children, who are killed during several years of war, is brought to the stage. Mother Courage intends to protect her children, but she loses them due to her strong tendency to trade. Brecht wrote this anti-war play in 1939 considering the defeat of the Spanish Civil War and Europe being on the brink of World War II.

A Farsi translation of the play *Mother Courage* was prepared by Mustafa Rahimi in 1966.

a. The German version of *Mother Courage*

Brecht wrote *Mother Courage* during his exile in Sweden. It was first performed in 1941 in Zurich and its first performance in Germany after the end of World War II was in January 1949 at the German Theater in Berlin.

Estrangement is shown in *Mother Courage* in different ways. The play's subtitle, "Chronicle of the Thirty Years' War" creates distance, as does the use of local dialect in the dialogues and numerous quotations from Luther's Bible. Another technique of Brecht is the use of meaningless and careless speeches and conversations during the play. The stage is open or semi-open and has no curtain. All the events, even the change of stage decor, are done in front of the audience. In the performance in which Helena Weigel played the role of Mother Courage, a circular and rotating stage was used. It gave a sense of movement and depth to the scene, and it was easily possible to change the scene or perform two parallel scenes.

b. Performance of Mehdi Shojaei's Version

Shojaei (2013) staged a different performance of *Mother Courage*. The reason was the reviews of past performances. He slightly changed the character of *Mother Courage*, who in his show is firstly a mother, and then a little dealer and this is the main difference between this show and Brecht's work.

c. Performance of Amir Dejakam's Version

Actor and theater director Delara Noushin translated Eric Bentley's English version into Farsi for the performance of Amir Dejakam (2015). Bentley took notes on Brecht's rehearsals and performances and later published them. The goal was to

provide a fluent translation in modern language. Dejakam's interpretation of the play *Mother Courage and Her Children* is a tragedy-comedy.

5. Conclusion

Examining three performances of the play *Mother Courage and Her Children* shows some differences in the methods used in estrangement, alienation, or defamiliarization. The German performance has many details, a complete decor and is in accordance with the text of the play and Brecht's idea of epic theater and defamiliarizing and alienation elements. The dialogues and performances of the actors are also very close to the original text. Shojai's performance is simpler, with some characters and scenes removed, and with very simple staging and short dialogues. The performance is very serious and has no humorous aspects. Mother Courage is more concerned about the condition of her children than looking for a deal. Dejakam uses a new translation together with his own ideas. His performance is mostly humorous and full of exaggerations. In the most painful moments, it makes the audience laugh, which is a way of defamiliarization.

Elements of alienation can be seen in all three performances. The differences go back to the time periods of the performances and the different perspectives of the Iranian directors compared to the performance in Germany a few decades ago.

Keywords: estrangement, defamiliarization, epic play, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, Bertolt Brecht

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