

## **Riders to the Sea... to the Spanish Civil War: Synge and Brecht in Two Perspectives**

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On 30 January 1933, Adolf Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany. Reactionary forces were immediately at work. Reichstag was set on fire, books by non-German authors were burnt, the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) was banned and the communists and Jews were persecuted. In such a situation, like many of his fellow countrymen, Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) too had to seek shelter elsewhere. He fled from Germany on 28 February 1933 (the day following the Reichstag fire) taking his wife Helene Weigel and daughter Barbara to Prague. Later his son Stefan was clandestinely brought there. But Prague was soon found to be unsafe. After living for some time in Vienna, Zurich and Paris, Brecht settled down, for some years, in Denmark before moving on to the USA.

Right from the beginning of his exile, Brecht had put up a strong anti-Nazi stance in his poems and plays. Of course, the impetus became stronger after his second visit to Moscow in 1935 to attend a conference of theatre directors at Erwin Piscator (1893-1966)'s invitation. It was at that time that Brecht became acquainted with the anti-Fascist role of the International Organization of Revolutionary Theatres (MORT) headed by Piscator.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the adoption of the Popular Front doctrine at the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International in 1935 and the consequent unification of all the progressive forces urged him to raise his voice against Fascism. Thus, in a span of more than fourteen years, Brecht touched upon,

besides other themes, Nazism in a series of plays where he not only depicted the misery of the people living under a dictator like Hitler but also advocated the need to do away with such an oppressive system. It was a part of this endeavour that also produced a strong anti-Fascist play, *Sen?ora Carrar's Rifles* — an adaptation of John Middleton Synge (1871-1909)'s *Riders to the Sea* (1904) — based on the Spanish Civil War (17 July 1936 - 1 April 1939).<sup>2</sup>

The Spanish Civil War began after a declaration of opposition by a group of right-wing generals against the Government of the Second Spanish Republic (established in 1931) led by President Manuel Azaña. The rebel coup, supported by a number of conservative groups, was partially successful and Spain, as a result, was militarily and politically divided. From that moment onwards, general Francisco Franco, fought a prolonged war with the government while loyalist supporters of the left-wing Republican Government sought to restore the democratic regime. The generals (*nacionales*) were backed by Hitler and Mussolini while the erstwhile USSR lent its support to the Republican government. Many people from other countries (fifty three in total) volunteered to take up arms and fight against the rebel forces. The International Brigades were military units made up of volunteers from different countries, who travelled to Spain. As the Civil War was a war of ideology, intellectuals too joined these Brigades and many have died (among them are Christopher Caudwell and Ralph Fox) fighting for the Republican cause. The War became famous for the passion and political division it generated. Tens of thousands of civilians on both sides were killed and the war eventually ended with the victory of the conservative Nationalists, the overthrow of the democratic government, and the exile of thousands of left-leaning Spaniards.

Besides direct participation in the Civil War, the campaign against the Fascist forces also demanded a whole-hearted propagation of ideas from the left-wing intelligentsia in support of the Republican cause. It was to rally the German exiles living in Paris to oppose Franco's troops that the Bulgarian theatre-director, Slatan Dudow wrote to Brecht in September 1936 asking the latter to come out with a short play about the Spanish Civil War. Though Brecht was, at that time, busy in his Danish house working on *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich*, he, feeling the urgency of the matter, responded to Dudow's request. Within a year's time, using the model of Synge's one-acter and collecting reports and pictures from newspapers, Brecht finished the first draft. But when Franco took Bilbao in June 1937 and was

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on his way to conquer the whole north-west corner of Spain the need arose to alter both the locale (from the Basque coast to that of Andalusia in the far south) as well as the title (from *Generals over Bilbao* to *Sen?ora Carrar's Rifles*) of the play. The present version was completed on 24 August 1937 and was first performed in Paris on 16 October the same year. It is important to note that *Senora Carrar's Rifles* is Brecht's first play written on a contemporary political crisis.

Brecht wanted Helene Weigel to go to Paris to act in the title role and the play to be performed in the conventional realistic manner. Dudow retained the playwright's wishes and engaged Heinz Lohmar as the set designer. Owing to the simplicity of presentation the production was an instant success; the Communist or Popular Front theatre groups took it up in several countries. The performance continued even after the fall of the Republic in Spain. To match the new situation Brecht, however, provided a Prologue and an Epilogue in 1939 showing the main action in flashback, thus widening the import of the play by emphasizing the necessity to act promptly (something that Carrar did not do) against all oppressive systems. Later, between 1947 and 1967, the play was performed fifty-four times in various cities of the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) — a record that no other play written by Brecht could break.

In fact, *Sen?ora Carrar's Rifles* eventually turned out to be one of Brecht's most popular plays. The reason is obvious: it is his only play that is traditional in terms of non-epic dramatic structure where the linear plot gradually moves towards the climax. Brecht had himself, in a note attached to the second volume of the 1938 edition of his collected plays, called this 'little play . . . Aristotelian (empathy-) drama'. Right after its first production *Sen?ora Carrar's Rifles* received praises from the East European critics who thought the play conformed to the concept of 'socialist realism'. By then the doctrine of socialist realism had gained official approval in the then USSR and was adopted by other communist countries. But Brecht, like many others, preferred experimentations in the field of art (which helped him become the most important exponent of epic theatre). As a result, he was quick to mention (in the same note where he cited the play 'Aristotelian') the "drawbacks of this technique can to some extent be made up for by performing the play together with a documentary film showing the events in Spain, or with a propaganda manifestation of any sort."

Watching the Danish premiere of *Sen?ora Carrar's Rifles* directed by Ruth Berlau in Copenhagen on 19 December 1937, Brecht realized that Dagmar Andreassen (who headed the cast) could not match the highly qualified professional Weigel.<sup>3</sup> The difference in their respective style of acting also led him to make some useful observations about the principle of acting in epic theatre. In comparison to Weigel's style — in which she “managed by every attitude and every sentence to permit, if not force the audience to take a line . . . by continually taking a line herself” — Andreassen's “way of acting had the audience passively following the story.” The weakness of the form was somewhat covered up by Weigel's acting and Lohmar's set in Paris but Brecht realized that the case would certainly be different in other productions.

The question arises: why did then Brecht at all write a play that is unlike his other plays? As stated earlier: Brecht readily responded to Dudow's appeal realizing the exigency of coming out with a play dealing with the Civil War in order to build up public opinion against Franco. How the plight of the people living under Fascism affected him and ultimately drove him to write the play becomes clear in the following note he wrote as an exile in 1938:

So what leads me to concern myself with the struggle of the Spanish people against its generals? But you shouldn't forget why I am sitting here. How can I clear my writing of everything that has so affected my life? And my writing too? For I am sitting here as an exile, and one who has been deprived above all else of his listeners and readers — the people whose language I write in and who moreover are not just the customers for my writings but the objects of my most profound interest. I can only write for people I am interested in. Then imaginative writing becomes just like writing letters. And at present the people in question are being subjected to unspeakable sufferings. How am I to keep that out of my writing? ... However, if mankind is destroyed there will not be any more art. Stringing beautiful words together is not art. How is art to move people if it is not itself moved by what happens to them? If I harden my heart to people's sufferings how can their hearts be uplifted by what I write? And if I make no effort to find them some way out of their suffering, how are they to find their way into my works? This little play we are talking about deals with an Andalusian fisherman's wife and her fight against the generals. I've tried to show how difficult it is for her to decide to fight them:

how only the most extreme necessity makes her take up a rifle. It is an appeal to the oppressed to revolt against their oppressors in the name of humanity. For humanity has to become warlike in times like these if it is not to be wiped out. And the same time it is a letter to the fisherman's wife to assure her that not everybody who speaks the German language is in favour of the generals and is despatching bombs and tanks to her country. This letter I write in the name of many Germans both inside and outside Germany's frontiers. They are the majority of Germans, I am sure.<sup>3</sup>

Thus *Sen?ora Carrar's Rifles* is an example of Brecht's political commitment — the outcome of his spontaneous urge to contribute to the immediate fight against Fascism as well as an impassioned gesture to express solidarity with the people suffering in Spain. He had little time at his disposal to conceive a play that would involve the richer devices of epic theatre. Therefore, having a readymade model — his adaptation of Maxim Gorky (1868-1936)'s *Mother* (1906) in 1932 — near his hand he set out to write *Sen?ora Carrar's Rifles* which involved a temporary neglect of his dramatic theories. Brecht created Carrar in the mould of Pelagea Vlassova and developed the plot making use of Synge's *Riders to the Sea*.<sup>4</sup>

*Riders to the Sea* depicts the life of the down-to-earth inhabitants of the Aran islands fighting a losing battle against nature (symbolized by the sea). After losing her husband and five sons to the sea, Maurya is concerned over Bartley's fate as he is still alive. But even he cannot resist the temptation to go to the Galway Fair involving a few days' sailing on the perilous sea. Maurya tries, in vain, to dissuade him for fear of losing her only surviving son. When, anxious over the fate of Bartley, she goes limping to the spring well to hand him over the cloth with the bread, she finds the dead Michael riding the grey pony behind Bartley on the red mare. She foresees Bartley's death much before it actually takes place.

Maurya had earlier lamented the death of all the males in her family. But the death of Bartley comes as a release for her. She ultimately finds consolation: she has no longer any need to be afraid of the sea as she has no son alive. Both Michael and Bartley die in their youth much before accomplishing their destiny. The helpless Maurya has no option but to accept the reality. But what is interesting to note is that Synge, in *Riders to the Sea*, has preached a fatalist philosophy reminiscent of Sophocles' *King Oedipus*. But it should be remembered that

Sophocles' play deals with a legend that had its origin at a time when mankind was in its early stage of development and was, therefore, at the mercy of 'fate'. The dignity achieved by Oedipus fighting against an inscrutable destiny seems to be imposed in a play written at the beginning of the twentieth century.

It is in this aspect that Brecht has turned Synge on his head. To find out how he managed to convert a play focussing on resignation into a play inspiring revolutionary activities let us now turn to *Sen?ora Carrar's Rifles*.

Teresa Carrar, a fisherwoman of forty, wants her sons to go fishing instead of fighting against Franco's troops. After her husband was shot dead two years back in an uprising in Oviedo she has kept an eye on her two surviving sons. That is the reason why she, without giving the message to her sons about a meeting held to send the able-bodied men to the front, sends her eldest son Juan out to catch fish. She even keeps watch on his boat standing at the open window. Her brother Pedro Jaqueras, her youngest son José and Juan's girlfriend Manuela — all fail to make her realize how important it is to resist the rebel forces. As a pious Christian, Carrar had faith in non-violence. Like the local priest, Father Francisco, she thought they would be safe if they remained neutral. It was this belief that prompted Carrar to keep her husband's rifles away from her sons. When Pedro and José try to take the rifles she tries to stop her son, even pretends to have been hurt. The death of Inez (the daughter of the elderly neighbour Mrs Pérez) who left the job of a teacher and went to fight for the Republican government no doubt touches Carrar but does not help to change her stance. Her desperation reaches an extreme when she finds Juan's boat missing. In her rage, she labels the neighbours murderers as she feels that they must have tempted her son to join the militia. But when Juan's dead body arrives Carrar comes to know that the Fascists have shot him while he was fishing. The idea ultimately dawns on her that there is no other alternative but to fight against the oppressive forces. Pedro had told her that non-intervention meant objectively approving the torture the generals inflicted on the Spanish people. Carrar, after the death of her eldest son, grasps the truth. At the end, she not only allows her brother and José to take the rifles but also marches with them towards the front.

There is a perceptible change in the attitude of both Maurya and Carrar. The two central characters, in the course of respective plays, move from one extreme to another. But what is significant is that their movement has been in diametrically

opposite directions: Maurya, at the end, becomes passive while Carrar turns active. Maurya resignedly accepts the situation she is thrown into, thereby nullifying the role of human endeavour but Carrar, on the contrary, makes a deliberate effort to change her surroundings. It has also been pointed out that there is “a certain crudeness and simplistic psychology” in *Sen?ora Carrar’s Rifles* where “the leading character diametrically shifts positions within a few minutes, not out of any deep insight but emotionally motivated by a mixture of grief and rage.”<sup>5</sup> A minute reading of the play would, however, reveal that Carrar did not undergo a sudden change. In fact, like Father Francisco, she was very much aware of the atrocious nature of Fascism (a fact borne out by her speech during Mrs Pérez’s visit). Ignoring the complexity of Carrar would be akin to missing Brecht’s point. What Brecht seems to have suggested is that Carrar, in spite of being conscious of the necessity to fight against Franco, remains inactive till she loses her son. The play, besides, praising Carrar for her ultimate decision is also a chastisement (something that Brecht emphasizes in the Prologue added in 1939) for her selfish attitude. Interestingly, Maurya too exhibits signs of selfishness during the realization of release from worrying about her sons (“I won’t care what way the sea is when the other women will be keening.”). But, cutting off Maurya from her community, Synge has focussed on her personal tragedy. Brecht, on the other hand, has used the personal crisis of Carrar as the point of departure. As Pelagea Vlassova had engaged herself in revolutionary activities out of love for her son Pavel, Carrar too plunges into the fight against Fascism for Juan. Both of them have realized, through experience, the horrors of an oppressive socio-economic set up. And it is indeed “grief and rage” that has primarily impelled these poor and almost illiterate women to dream and fight for a just world.

### References

1. For a detailed study of Piscator’s work see Willett, *Piscator*, 121-141.
2. For the play, Brecht’s comments and editorial notes see Brecht.
3. See know about the Danish production see Berlau, 33-35.
4. See Synge.
5. Hill, 90.

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