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P(ISSN) : 3007-0031

E(ISSN) : 3007-004X

<https://rc-archive.com/index.php/Journal/about>



## The Object Outside the Self: A Study of Commodification in Brecht's *The Good Woman of Setzuan*

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**Publisher :** EDUCATION GENIUS SOLUTIONS

**Review Type:** Double Blind Peer Review

## ABSTRACT

Financial instability and economic inequality are among the most pervasive consequences of the capitalist system. This study examines the phenomenon of commodification in Brecht's play *The Good Woman of Setzuan* to explore socio-economic factors that lead to the transformation of human values, relationships, and identities into trade items. Furthermore, its focus is on exploring the destructive impacts of commodification on the lives of characters within the play. Guided by Marx's concept of commodification, which serves as a theoretical framework, this study employs the method of Textual Analysis to critically evaluate the play. The findings reveal that the play presents a corrupt capitalist society in which almost everything, like love, human relationships, human values, and even human beings, is commoditized. The capitalist structures in the play give birth to commodification and put price tags on everything. The characters sell and buy everything. The analysis reveals that commodification has negative effects on the characters' lives. It not only gives rise to a range of social problems, including prostitution, violence, deceit, selfishness, starvation, unemployment, but also causes the erosion of empathy and moral integrity.

**Keywords:** Capitalist system, Commodification, Economic inequality, Financial instability, Social issues

### Introduction

Financial instability and economic inequality are among the most pressing global issues produced by the capitalist system. Capitalism, being a profit-driven structure, prioritizes accumulation over humanity. It leads to systematic inequalities across religion, race, and class. Marxist critics have long been criticizing the inherent contradictions and failure of morality, particularly the process of commodification, which is central to Marxist theory (Marx, 1867/1990). Capitalist societies reduce all aspects of human life such as nature, labor, and even human emotions, to objects with exchange-value, which is assessed and publicized within the logic of the market (Harvey, 2005). Consequently, everything transforms into an item of trade.

In the neoliberal era, everything was commodity-like, like water, air, education, knowledge, human beings, animals, human relationships, and even love and emotions. It was a global market where anything could be bought and sold. Things were valued according to their market value. The commodification of human beings and the effective experiences refer to the penetration of capitalism in individual and social life (Žižek, 2009). However, this maddening pursuit of economic stability brings an imbalance in society. It exacerbates the exploitation of the marginalized groups, widening the gap between haves and have-nots (Marx, 1990), leading to social and economic inequality, violation of basic human dignity and rights, fragility of human relationships, and intensifying alienation in both public and private spheres (Eagleton,

2011).

Capitalism has remained an important matter of discussion for modern and contemporary literary writings. Several writers use their pens to critique the dehumanizing effects associated with the capitalist structures. Among them, Brecht (1898-1956), a renowned German playwright, emerged as a key figure who combined aesthetic innovation with political critique. Through his Epic theatre, Brecht not only entertains but also provokes critical reflection and social change. Influenced by Marxist ideology, he used his plays to expose the ideological contradictions and injustices embedded in capitalist societies. He exposes socio-economic forces that shape individual and collective experience.

The process of commodification reduces human relationships, morality, and even identity to market value. Marx (1867/1990) describes this process as the transformation of social relations into "value relations,". The individuals are not only alienated due to the reward of labor but also from their sense of selves. In this context, the "object outside the self" refers to the external economic and material forces that form, change, and often ruin individuals' internal moral compass.

In the play *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, Shen Te struggles to remain "good" while the capitalist system leads to self-fragmentation and moral compromise for survival. Brecht dramatizes the duality as a repercussion of commodification, echoing Marx's (1844/1975) view that humans become objects in the service of profit (Eagleton, 2011). This study aims to examine how Brecht employs theatrical techniques and characters' duality to unveil the tacit dehumanizing effects of commodification, and how he positions the self as an arena for competing material and moral forces.

This research is qualitative, so the method of Textual Analysis is used to explore the phenomenon of commodification in the play. Marxist theory of commodification serves as a theoretical framework. It is significant to comprehend the negative impacts of commodification on human lives. Furthermore, the present research enhances the understanding of the exploitative nature of the capitalist system. It also presents insights into moral dilemmas in the face of economic battle.

### **Research Objectives**

This study aims to critically examine the phenomenon of commodification in Brecht's *The Good Woman of Setzuan* (1938). The research objectives devised for the study are:

- To identify the underlying capitalist forces and conditions that lead to the transformation of people, values, and relationships into objects of trade.
- To analyze the fragmentation of the self (Shen Te/Shui Ta) as a representation of the alienated subjects under capitalist conditions.
- To explore the psychological, moral, and social consequences of

commodification on the lives of the characters, particularly how it shapes their identities and ethical choices.

### **Literature Review**

Several scholars have discussed the idea of commodification. Marx (1967) centres his discussion on the commodity and commodification to explore the dynamics of the capitalist system. According to him, "A commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another" (p. 35). For him, commodification is a distinguished feature of capitalism.

Jameson (2009) digs into Schopenhauer's concept of thingification and relates it to Marx's concept of commodification. Schopenhauer suggests that "we must... be able to imagine the world without object form to develop a more precise awareness of the role that form plays in our world" (p. 258). Furthermore, he compares Hegel's view on objectification with Marx's view on it. Hegel considers "objectification and externalisation was a positive and essential moment of human history and progress" (p. 259). However, Marx relates objectification or commodification to exploitation.

Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) define objectification as a way of converting human beings into mere objects to fulfill someone else's desire. Lukacs (1988) expounds his theory of reification, which is based on Marx's concept of commodity fetishism. He claims that we can comprehend the existence of commodities as "a universal category of the entire social being" (p. 203). Appadurai (1986) suggests that the meanings or values of things are inherent in themselves. He perceives a commodity as a changeable phenomenon. According to him, "the commodity is not one kind of thing rather than another, but one phase in the life of some things" (p. 17). Things can enter the sphere of commodity at different points in their life.

Polanyi (1944) talks about the evolution of the market economy. He avers that the market economy or the capitalist system has dominated the world completely. This system promotes the commodification of natural resources and human beings. It has harmful effects on society. He stresses the need to prioritise social relations over the market economy. Hermann (2021) examines the damaging effects of commodification in different spheres of life, like farming, health, and education. According to him, the commodity system is largely based on profits and gains. It robs the lower classes of basic facilities of health, shelter, and education. For him, "commodity production has become an obstacle to urgently needed social and ecological transformation" (p. 38). He argues that the natural way of life is destroyed by commodification because "it transforms nature into a scarce good" (p. 134). He differentiates between exchange value and market value. Market value is "open to market manipulation" (p. 26). He suggests an economic system based on use value to replace the corrupt and

exploitative capitalist system. He states that “local producers selling their products... without being threatened by price competition usually care about the usefulness and the quality of their goods and services” (p. 144).

Different researchers have used theories of commodification to examine different literary texts. These researchers' attempts to examine the phenomenon of commodification in capitalist societies and its effects in the light of different Literary works. Senn (2019) studies Fitzgerald's *The Popular Girl* to examine redemption and commodification. The research unfolds that “The story, through its characterization, language, and plot, plays out the concept of “Commodification...” (p. 151). In the story, almost everything is monetized like relationships, happiness and even compliments. Furthermore, the story reflects Fitzgerald's own “struggle with the commodification of his art and life...” (p. 159).

Miles (2016) examines Faulkner's *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* to investigate the idea of commodification, money, and labour. The study discloses that the novel “focuses on disturbing characteristics of commodification and the role that food in particular plays in encapsulating the dehumanizing nature of global capitalism's mass production” (p. 69-70). Food is treated as a commodity in the novel, with catastrophic effects on the characters' lives. Grass (2012) evaluates Dickens' *Great Expectations* to explore the phenomenon of identity and commodity. The study perceives that the novel incorporates Victorian capitalism. The study finds that the novel centres “upon the consequences of making identity into a commodity for the market” (p. 618).

Kendrick (2018) studies Dekker and Middleton's *The Roaring Girl* to weigh the role of perception, realism, and commodification in the play. The study focuses on the character of Moll, who rejects all the attempts to value her body as a commodity. The study finds that “In an increasingly commercial London, Moll's way of perceiving the social world is grounded in the complexities of lived experience, in defiance of an emerging regime that privileges commodity value above all else” (p. 99). Hawkes (2000) takes John Bunyan's fiction to inquire into the concept of commodification and subjectivity. The study focuses on Bunyan's *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman*. In this work, traditional values are commoditised by Mr. Badman. The study finds that “Bunyan's work depicts the process whereby Aristotelian essentialism was elbowed aside by the symbolic identities produced by exchange value, and Mr. Badman is his most extended comment upon this process” (p. 51).

Brecht's works have also been studied using Marxist theories. Wilson (2018) studies Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* from a Marxist perspective. The study finds that in the play, the capitalist system and religious morals are criticised to highlight their hidden evils. Brecht perceives the capitalist system and religious morals as a source of exploitation of the Poor. The play also highlights how the

maddening pursuit of economic well-being gives birth to different ills like killing, prostitution, and stealing. The study further discusses Brecht's theatre concerning Marxist ideals. The researcher states about Brecht that "...he uses a dialectic theatre that intellectually engages his audience through methods that echo Marx's theory, man and society should be re-examined to create an equal society" (p. 315).

Daram and Ahmadinia (2014) analyse Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* using the Marxist concept of Alienation. The study focuses on the struggles of the protagonist, Mother Courage. She experiences personal and political alienation in the process of earning more and more. She is shown as a part of the world where "... mankind sinks to the level of a wretched commodity, since the harder Courage labours and the more she produces the more miserable she becomes" (p. 37).

Another researcher, Ali (2018), examines the role of religion in *Mother Courage and Her Children* from a Marxist perspective. The study argues that religion is seen as an ideology that both explains and justifies the existing order..." (p. 17). Religion is used as a tool to support and justify the exploitative capitalist system. Sitepu and Siregar (2017) study Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* to examine the mockery of capitalism in the play. The play ridicules religion, the judicial system, and conventions. "It explores in length some demerits of capitalism, including capitalistic materialism, social stratification, inter-social class warfare, and the exploitation of the masses" (p. 695). Azad (2019) reviews Brecht's *The Good Woman of Setzuan* to analyse the main character Shen Te as an alter ego of Shui Ta. The study highlights Shen Te's struggles in the face of historical materialism and patriarchal capitalism. The study further sheds light on Brecht's use of epic theatre to bring social change in society by identifying social evils. The study concludes that the play interrogates whether it is possible to be good and remain good in an evil society.

The above discussion sheds light on the concept of commodification and its involvement in different spheres of life. It helps to understand the utilisation of the theories of commodification to interpret literary texts. The above discussion shows that Brecht's works have been studied from different perspectives. However, Brecht's *The Good Woman of Setzuan* has not yet been discussed to explore the phenomenon of commodification. This study focuses on the role of commodification in the play.

### **Research Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, employing Textual Analysis as the primary method to examine the phenomenon of commodification in Brecht's *The Good Woman of Setzuan*. Textual analysis is an established method in literary studies that enables researchers to critically interpret texts by examining language, structure, themes, and ideology (McKee, 2003).

It is the sociology of interpretation. It assists in a nuanced reading of the play and uncovers the socio-economic critiques set in Brecht's dramaturgy.

### **Research Framework**

This study is grounded in Marxist literary theory, focusing on Marx's concept of commodification, as outlined in *Capital* (1867/1990). Marxist criticism offers a critique of the material conditions of society, which reduces human values and relationships to commodities within capitalist systems (Eagleton, 1976; Jameson, 1981). Through this lens, the study investigates how Brecht dramatizes the internalization of market logic and its dehumanizing effects on the individual.

Marxist philosophy principally focuses on the damage done by the capitalist system. Marx perceives human history as a manifestation of class struggle. In a capitalist society, it is reflected through the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. By having access to the means of production, the bourgeoisie exploits the working class (proletariat). Marxist philosophy centres on the "real forces, the economic systems that structure human societies" (Tyson, 2006, p. 53). Theory of commodification is central to Marx's debate on the capitalist system. Marx looks at both the use-value and the exchange-value of a commodity. Use-value of a commodity is related to its utility or serviceability. However, its exchange value is "the money or other commodities for which it can be traded" (p. 62). According to Marx, the commodification of objects occurs when the use-value of an object is surpassed by the exchange-value. "...products are transformed into commodities, whose use values become the 'material depositories' of a new quality exchange value" (Meek, 1973, p. 162). Marxism highlights the negative consequences of commodification.

It gives birth to alienation or estranged labour where the producer or labourer feels alienated from his/her humanity by losing the right to their product or labour. Marx (1990) uses the term "Commodity Fetishism" to reveal the destructive nature of commodification. It is a false notion that a commodity is an inherited value. It hides or ignores the true labour behind the commodity. As a result, the social relations remain hidden under the guise of the relationship between things or objects. "The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things" (Marx, 1990, p. 164-65). Marx argues that "... This is the time when the very things which till then had been communicated, but never exchanged; given, but never sold; acquired, but never bought virtue, love, conviction, knowledge, conscience, etc., when everything, in short, passed into commerce" (Hirsch, 1976, p. 105).

### **Discussion and Findings**

Brecht mostly deals with issues like the exploitation of the poor or

working classes in capitalist societies, prostitution, politics, gender, and morality. In most of his works, his characters are struggling for economic stability and survival in corrupt capitalist societies. He presents a world full of evils like robbery, cheating, hypocrisy, prostitution, killing, selfishness, and exploitation. His characters are only striving for profits. As a result, they lose connection with their basic humanity. This discussion centres on Brecht's *The Good Woman of Setzuan* to investigate commodification and its effects on characters' lives.

In the play, almost everything is perceived as commodity-like: love, the human body, water, goodness, and relationships. This commodification is affecting the characters' lives badly by depriving them of their basic humanity. Shen Teh is completely helpless in the corrupt capitalist society where everything is tied to financial gain. She fails to get any true emotional relationship and feels alienated.

In the prologue, Wong introduces himself as a water seller. "I sell water here in the city of Setzuan" (p. 17). The natural resource water is treated as a commodity here. Shen Teh is selling her body in prostitution. "I sell myself for a living" (p. 24). The human body is reduced to a mere commodity that can be sold for money. Nobody is ready to host the Gods because this act has no financial gain. The Gods pay back Shen Teh's hospitality with money. It can be observed how human values are monetized.

Goodness is no longer valued in the capitalist system. Shen Teh's act of giving a free cigarette to an unemployed man is criticized by other characters around her. Her goodness is in direct conflict with the capitalist system, where everything ought to be sold and bought, but not given as a gift. As Wife says to Shen Teh, "...If you're going to keep this shop, you'll have to learn to say no" (p. 29).

The society that is largely based on commodification makes everyone selfish and alienates people from humanity. We can take the example of the Carpenter who is not ready to have any mercy on Shen Teh. He says that, "...pay up or I take the shelves back!" (p. 30). Shen Teh fails to sustain her inner goodness. Goodness is something that is not in demand in the market. As the first God says to Wong, "...show interest in her goodness—for no one can be good for long if goodness is not in demand" (p. 38). Shen Teh is forced to create her alter ego, Shui Ta, to protect herself from ruin. The materialistic world drags her into the circle of evil.

The characters introduce themselves in terms of their professions, like Wong, a water seller, Shen Teh, a prostitute, and Ma Fu, a tobacco dealer. Human beings are represented by their means of income instead of their humanity. The characters in the play are robbed of their goodness by the corrupt capitalist system. They become embodiments of selfishness and evil. Husband and Brother are fighting and abusing each other. Husband asks Boy to steal from a bakery shop. The characters are forced to steal food



to satisfy their hunger.

The bargaining between Shui Ta and the Carpenter about shelves reflects how one commodity is exchanged for another commodity. However, in this process, the true labour behind the product is completely ignored. Everything has entered the sphere of business. As first, God says, "I find business quite unintelligible. But everybody's doing it..." (p. 64).

The policeman suggests that Shui Ta should find a husband for Shen Teh. Shen Teh is supposed to sell herself to some wealthy man by marrying him. In return, her husband will pay her shop's rent. It can be witnessed that the institution of marriage is also based on profit or financial gain. As the policeman says, "...we need capital. And how do we acquire capital? We get married" (p. 50). The idea of giving advertisements for marriage also symbolises the inclusion of relationships in the business world. Shen Teh is described as a commodity in the advertisement.

Capitalism gives birth to multiple social issues. Unemployment is one of them. There are a number of characters in the play who are unemployed and are involved in different crimes. They have lost friends, as Yang Sun has lost his friends due to his unemployment. In order to regain his job, he has to bribe someone in a position. The character's job is treated as a commodity here, which can be exchanged for money. The use value of things is replaced by exchange value. Capitalism divides society into classes and gives birth to inequality. As Shen Teh says in her song, "In our country/ A useful man needs luck" (p. 74). In her song, she is asking the gods for help to uproot this inequality.

In the business world, everyone is preoccupied with the idea of profit. The characters are hurting each other physically and emotionally to get personal benefits. Shu Fu hurts Wong with the curling iron, who tries to sell water in front of Shu Fu's shop. Shu Fu punishes the water seller for distracting his customers. Wong decides to go to the judge instead of going to the doctor. He wants to take his case to court to demand a monetary fine from Shu Fu. Basic human values like forgiveness can be bought by paying a certain amount of money. So, human values are also no longer out of the sphere of the market.

Yang Sun cheats Shen Teh. He shows love for Shen Teh to get money from her. Shen Teh wants love, and Yang Sun is ready to sell his love to her. As he says, "...Tell her I'll marry her, then bring me the three hundred..." (p. 80). In the capitalist world, love also serves as a commodity. Yang Sun refuses to marry Shen Teh on their wedding day as she fails to give him money. It signifies that one can't get love if he/she doesn't have money to pay for it.

Shu Fu offers a blank check to Shen Teh. He wants to buy Shen Teh's love by offering her this check. It can be observed that emotions and feelings can also be bought and sold as commodities. Shui Ta sells his manager, Yang Sun, to Mrs. Mi Tzu. Mrs. Mi Tzu demands Yang Sun for his intelligence. So, human bodies, emotions,

feelings, values, abilities, and labour are all mere commodities in the play. As Mrs. Shin says, "We all have our price" (p. 118).

Kindness and goodness are equivalent to ruination in the play. Shen Teh tries her best to maintain her goodness by helping people around her. However, she finds it hard to stay good in the corrupt capitalist system where everything is monetized. Her alter ego, Shui Ta, helps her to survive in the capitalist society. Shui Ta is an embodiment of selfishness, rudeness, and exploitation. He is a businessman in the true sense who strives to make more and more profit. It signifies that in the capitalist system, there is no place for kindness and sympathy. In Shen Teh's words, "To be good and yet to live was a thunderbolt" (p. 136). The characters are trapped in a miserable place which is full of hunger, selfishness, exploitation, unemployment, and crime. First God states that, "... The world is a terrible place!" (p. 126). Children are starving. The carpenter's child is eating scraps from the trash. The play presents a society where everything is commoditized.

### **Conclusion**

To sum up, the play presents a dominant capitalist society where almost everything is commoditised. The capitalist system gives birth to commodification and puts price tags on everything. In the play, the characters are selling and buying everything, like love, human relationships, human values, and even human emotions. This commodification has negative effects on the characters' lives. It gives birth to multiple social issues like prostitution, cheating, killing, selfishness, starvation, unemployment, and loss of goodness and kindness. Brecht highlights the exploitative nature of the capitalist system and demands the reader to think about the solutions.

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