Ridiculing Capitalism in Bertold Brecht’s Caucasian Chalk Circle

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Abstract

Brecht’s Caucasian Chalk Circle is pervasive with ridicule. The ridicule is conveyed subtly and interestingly that capitalists do not realize that they are the objects of ridicule. The dispute between two groups of peasants is settled ridiculously. The original owners are disowned because the other can make a better use of the land that may lead to prosperity for all. In the physical contest of the Caucasian Chalk Circle, the judge also disowns the original mother and submits the baby to the foster mother. In the next other cases, the judge coins the verdicts which are contradictory to capitalist legal system. In the case of the doctor and his patient, the case of old woman and famers, and the case of stableman and inn keeper, the judge sides the poor or down-trodden people. In court proceedings, Azdak, ridiculous judge, makes ridiculous verdict that evokes our laughter. The humor in court is so interesting that the capitalists also laugh without realizing that they are laughing at themselves.

Keywords: ridiculing, communist, communal interest, religion, legal system.

Introduction

Liu (2013, p. 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 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, p. 126).

Okach (2015) states that Capitalism is an economic and political system in which a country’s trade and industry are controlled by private owners for profit, rather than by state while communism is a political theory derived from Karl Marx, advocating
class wars and leading to a society in which all property is publicly owned and each person works and is paid according to their abilities and needs. In the Caucasian Chalk Circle, Bertolt subliminally alludes to communism as a kind of property ownership. First of all, the two communities, i.e Rosa Luxembourg and Galinsk exist as the groups who have interests in the disputed Luxembourg land. It is important to regard them as the distinct groups and not as an individual since communism propagates for community ownership as opposed to an individual. Secondly, the manner in which the case is handled is for the welfare of the community in extension, a community which is committed to utilizing the resource well. In his argument Bertolt opens to light the economic essence of property as opposed to ancestral inclination. Therefore, the disputed piece of land is given to the group that has elaborate plans in utilizing the Rosa Luxembourg farm.

The solution above is strange and ridiculous. Brecht realises that it is not accepted in the capitalist country; therefore, he appeases reader’s feeling of disappointment by introducing humor and comic situations. He introduces humor and comic situation in the wedding scene of Grusha and a dying man that evokes readers’ laughter but his intention is actually to ridicule capitalist religion. The wedding is performed by a drunken and lecherous monk who is a regular visitor of taverns. Karl Marx, the father of communism, said, “Communism begins from the outset with atheism” (He said this in Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right). Lenin proclaimed that a communist regime must show itself to be merciless toward the question of religion. There was no place for the church in Lenin’s regime. This led to anti-religious decrees and propaganda (http://www.nocommunism.com).

Caucasian Chalk Circle is instilled with Marxist principle in which government controls over all resources and abolition of private property in order to gain equality and prosperity for all. The principle is contradictory to Capitalism which put the emphasis on privatization and individuality. The writer here tries to divulge overtone of ‘ridiculing capitalism’ pervasive in the play. The ridicule starts with “Prologue”. In the “Prologue” there is a dispute between two groups of the peasants over a valley. Government agent interferes and gives a good solution accepted by both sides. The original owners of the land relinguish their property to the others because they can make a better use of the land.

The last part of the discussion is ridiculing the legal system. Azdak is made judge. His verdicts are coined to oppose the conventional verdicts of capitalist. In every case, he always decides in favour of common people and punishes rich people or capitalists.

**Literature Review**

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 Communist beliefs with morality make him, truly, one of the greatest writers of the 19th Century. That is, precisely, the reason why Bretch 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 favour 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 don’t 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 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 favour 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 harbouring 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 humour and an indirect approach. The play satirises 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.

**Research Method**

This paper discuses 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, p. 1990). Furthermore, research design deals with a logical problem and not a logistical problem (Herbert, 1990). 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.

**Result and Discussion**

**Ridiculing Convention**

In the prologue, we are introduced to two groups of disputing farmers over a valley ruined after the World War II. Originally, the valley belongs to the farmer group on the right but the group on the left claimed 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, p. 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, p. 6)

The Agriculturist explains her project convincingly. Both sides (the peasants on the right and the peasants on the left) give applause to the agriculturist and they shake hands and embrace each other as the sign of their agreement and satisfaction.

The peasants on the right, who originally own the land, submit their possession because it can be best used by others for prosperity of all.

Ridiculing Religion
The abuse of religion is clearly exposed in act three. 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, p. 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, p. 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 marriage between Grusha and the dying man performed by a corrupt monk is really a Mockery of Religion.

There is also a parody of an ecclesiastic character. The monk is described as a money-minded man. After performing the wedding ceremony, immediately the monk asks if the mother-in-law would like him to perform an extreme action, a sacrament in which the dead is anointed. By doing so he would get some additional money.

The criticism above on the figures of Aniko and the monk accentuates the hypocrisy and immorality among the congregation of the church.

Ridiculing 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, p. 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, p. 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, p. 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, p. 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 Ludovice 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, pp. 76-77)

In this case also Azdak sides the stableman, the common man and fines the innkeeper 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, pp. 78-79)

At last Adzak 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!” (Page 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, p. 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. This is a ridiculous overtone against the capitalist country.

Conclusion
In the very out set, we confront the overtone of breaking convention. In the “Prologue” the original owners of the valley relinquish their land to the others because they can make a better use of the land. The peasant then hold a party to express their happiness and satisfaction over the solution of their problem. The party is a celebration of the communal victory over individual that will never happen in the Capitalist Country.

In the next scenes, the overtone of breaking convention heightens the ridiculing the legal system. It starts with the case of a Doctor and an invalid, the case of an
inkeeper and a stableman, the case of a poor woman and the farmers, and the climax, the case of Grusha and Natella. Azdak, the judge, decides in favor of the common people and punishes the rich (the capitalists) in order to ridicule them.

References