

## The Swamp of Self-deception in Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and her Children*

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### Abstract

*This study tries to analyze the irretrievable aftermath of self-deception in Bertolt Brecht's Mother Courage and her children, which pushes one into the oozy quagmire of helplessness. Many of Mother Courage are in fact the main victim of their own deeds, hence this study develops and discusses the white causes and the black results of the dusty self-deception and the unstable permanence of spurious calmness gained through deception. The play reaches its conclusion by pointing that the sole way to get away from the shackles of self-deception is keeping distance from the disastrous sense of greed. It further emphasizes that we should respect and identify our values and have a strong sense of self-esteem, which bestows apt stability, peace and harmony to our life.*

**Key Words:** Brecht, Mother Courage, self-deception, self-esteem

### Introduction

The disease of self-deception has been buried in today's world's frigid heart, and is breathing within the warm moments of colorful life. A beautiful life in which there is a burning desire to live without anything which tastes and smells like this blind human storm. Indeed, living with the illness of deceiving *self* is like living in a solitary cell where one is groping hopelessly for hope and calmness but finds none. This is when nobody is able to alleviate the agony of these captives but themselves with pure honesty. Brecht drew and painted a character named Mother Courage that is the representative of those who are unkindly willing to immolate the most beautiful virtues to attain their aim, yet at the end they sense they were the ones who were burnt in the coldness of their deception's burning fire due to losing what they loved. This study starts with an introduction of self-deception, which is followed by an analysis of *Mother Courage and her children* focusing on the aspect of self-deception and the sense of being sacrificed in this matter, and finally moves to its conclusion.

### Self-deception

Deception is a dirty art of creating a false sense of trust and belief in others. Indeed, it is the art of legitimizing and beautifying the dishonest notions and thoughts in order to gain the utmost. Self-deception is the sense of yielding to certain circumstances, where one lacks the challenging spirit. Indeed, self-deception may not be more than a temporary tranquilizer. As Goleman (1998,) asserts:

Self-deception operates both at the level of the individual mind, and in the collective awareness of the group. To belong to a group of any sort, the tactic price of membership is to agree not to notice one's own feelings of uneasiness and misgiving, and certainly not to question anything that challenges the group's way of doing things. (p.12)

At the first glimpse which is like a spark in the heart of night, it may appear easy to define self-deception; it is a complex issue, however, when thinking thoughtfully again about how one is able to tell lies to himself and somehow believes it while he knows for a fact that he is telling lies.

We need to be aware of the nature of deception to be able to give a fair definition of the unsteady world of self-deception. There is not a single way or method of deceiving or being deceived. There are unknowingly numerous ways of deceptive ways of deception, as Von Hippel & Trivers assert that:

There are many ways to deceive other people. An obvious choice is to tell an outright lie, but it is also possible to deceive others by avoiding the truth, obfuscating the truth, exaggerating the truth, or casting doubt on the truth. (2011, p. 1)

These five forms of deception provide the facts that they can also be five forms of self-deception. Thus, deceiving the *self* is a process of denying or exaggerating or underestimating facts or concealing some parts of the truth to convince one's *self* by presenting a false shadow of truth.

Mitchell says "Self-deception involves a blind or unexamined acceptance of a belief that can easily be seen as "spurious" if the person were to inspect the belief impartially or from the perspective of the generalized other" (qtd. in Sahdra & Thagard, 2003, p. 214)

If we accept these comments as apt definitions of unsightly self-deception, we may still encounter an easily convoluted question that how we grimly surrender our soul to deception. This is an important question which has received different answers by different thinkers, as Sahdra & Thagard (2003, p. 213) assert: "Researchers have attempted to answer these questions in various ways."

As mentioned before, there is no unique idea about how we deceive ourselves, yet there is a view introduced by Mele which matches self-deception in *Mother Courage and her children* as he divides self-deception in two categories: "Elsewhere, I have distinguished between what I call *straight* and *twisted* cases of self-deception." (2006, p. 110), then he explains that how people in straight cases deceive themselves: "In straight cases, which have dominated the literature, people are self-deceived in believing something that they want to be true – for example, that their children are not using illegal drugs." (ibid)

In straight cases we may seek something we have lost, for calmness, for personal security and for personal protection. We may want to protect ourselves from other's criticism, but we have forgotten that we are seeking these beautiful virtues in a world where beauty itself seems to be contaminated.

When we deceive ourselves we may feel the temporary trance of tranquilization, but the reality in this case is cruel and wicked; we will soon come to know that these gifts of deceiving ourselves are extremely hollow and meaningless, yet unfortunately we may again remind ourselves of those logically irrational reasons to assault the fact and regain that sham tranquility and again and again we give in to self-deception. The more we get involved in it, the more we get drowned in the dark ocean of self-deception in which there is no rescuer. Given the fact that our given reasons are glaringly obvious alibi, we can consider that we know the naked truth, simultaneously we are denying it. As Sartre says "I must know the truth very exactly in order to conceal it." (qtd. in Kopylov & Noor, 2010, p. 6)

### ***The Swamp of Self-deception***

At the beginning of the play, The Recruiting Officer is talking to The Sergeant and complaining about how difficult it is to recruit a soldier for war; he claims that when he wants to hire a soldier, he needs to get him drunk and pay for his drink to gain his trust. Although, he knows war does not bring any happiness, he does not talk about its hideous aspects. Thus, it is obvious that he is deceiving the soldier, while he knows what the fact is. But when he does so, he is not happy, as we read:

The Recruiting Officer: "There's no loyalty left in the world, no trust, no faith, no sense of honor. I'm losing my confidence in mankind, Sergeant." (Brecht, 1985, p. 3-henceforth Brecht)

Through The Recruiting Officer's speech, Brecht shows us that we cover up the mirror of our conscience with a layer of dust to be able to deceive others. When we want to deceive somebody, our clean conscience tries to stop us, but we turn our back to it and bring ourselves some excuses to justify our deeds, as The Recruiting Officer says he should have four platoons by the twelfth. Therefore, at first we have tricked nobody but ourselves, and at last our anxiously pumping heart shouts that we have done something wrong, we are poked by the sense of tormenting guilt; we may feel that we are making a hell out of this world, and this is the time when we admit that we have gone the wrong way; this is the time we may consider life more painful than death and so wish to die:

The Recruiting Officer: "You know what I keep thinking about, Sergeant? Suicide." (ibid).

There are times when a person may be keen to fulfill a desire but somehow, he understands that he is being cheated by someone. Consequently, he might make up his mind to keep distance from him. But what if the deceiver makes a tempting suggestion, will that person probably not turn a blind eye to his conscience? Will he not trust the fraudster again? This is common in self-deception as we read at scene one, Mother Courage comes to know that The Recruiting Officer is trying to recruit Eilif, while she is introducing her family to The Sergeant, therefore, she decides to move on, but The Recruiting Officer offers a business:

The Recruiting Officer: Get her involved in a business transaction. *Aloud:* That belt, Sergeant, you could at least take a look at it. These good people live by trade, don't they? Hey, all of you, the Sergeant wants to buy the belt!

Mother Courage: Half a gilder. A belt like that is worth two guilders. *She clambers down again from the wagon.* (p. 11)

Although she knows she was about to be deceived by The Recruiting Officer, she does overlook it, and this is the time that she deceives herself to satisfy her desire and achieve her goal, which is making money. Achievement of goals is one of the three functions of self-deception, as Manrique comments:

*Achievement of goals.* When a belief interferes with a goal (e.g., showing some undesirable aspect of the goal), self-deception can play an instrumental role to achieve it by focusing attention on other, more acceptable, elements. In this case self-deception can be a variety of wishful thinking. (2007, p. 132)

As we see, in fact, Mother Courage loses what she loves because of focusing on the superficial aspect of her goal rather than giving importance to the deceptive aspect of the business deal and the concerned party, which can be disruptive in a long run. Manrique brings us an instance which makes it clearer:

An example of this is a case in which I wish to read the newspaper but I believe I should not do it during my working time. I focus my attention on the importance of being well-informed and form the belief that reading the paper is something really worth the time. After spending most of the morning doing so, I realize that the latter belief was the outcome of a self-deceiving maneuver in order to disregard the initial interfering belief. (ibid)

A reason for self-deception might sometimes be that the self-deceiver wants to protect his image from being criticized by others, or to calm himself down and maintain his happiness. For example when the soldier in Thomas Hardy's poem kills a soldier of the enemy, he thinks they would have been friends if they had met somewhere else. He seeks for calmness, therefore, he brings a reason and says: "I shot him dead because- Because he was my foe, Just so: my foe of course he was" (Arp, & Johnson, 2006, p. 670)

He repeats the reason to satisfy and convince the *self* and to pacify his heart, and to forget the crime he has done. Or as Pedrini comments: "A mother believes that her son is innocent of a crime for which he has been convicted after a full confession." (2006, p. 148), This mother can do nothing to soothe herself except self-deception. Seeking calmness, protecting the self, and maintaining happiness are some of the human needs, but the wrong thing we sometimes do is that we think if we deceive ourselves the fact will change and we will be led to a calm world free from worries and tensions. When Mother Courage is speaking with Yvette at the scene three, if we accept Yvette to be sick, then Yvette somehow deceives herself about her illness:

Mother Courage: Don't you know you shouldn't drink in the morning with your illness?

Yvette: Who says I'm ill? That's libel!

Mother Courage: They all say so.

Yvette: They're all liars. I'm desperate, Mother Courage. They all avoid me like a stinking fish. Because of those lies.....That's why I drink in the morning.(Brecht, p. 21).

Yvette likes to regain her happiness and protect herself; this is why she explains to Mother Courage the reason of drinking beer in the morning. Manrique believes that protecting *self* is another function of self-deception: "*Protect the self.* Self-deception can underlie psychological defences that preserve self-image, prevent harm to self-esteem, etc." (2007, p. 132) As he asserts, self-deceit can serve the needs of remaining calm and not concerned, then he further claims:

A classical example is that of an oncologist that disavows the belief that she has a tumour, despite having observed a number of symptoms that provide clear evidence to the contrary. Presumably the knowledge is too painful to be consciously accepted. (ibid)

Simultaneously, Sahdra and Thagard present a theory for self-deception called psychological theory of subjective well-being, which matches this effort for maintaining the happiness and protecting the self through the conversation of Mother Courage with Yvette. According to this theory, “certain individuals tend to use self-deception in order to maintain their happiness.” (Sahdra &Thagard, 2003, p. 223). Scene three is the time that the honest son of Mother Courage is killed. Mother Courage tries to save Swiss Cheese, the Paymaster, who is taken into custody by a catholic sergeant while trying to save the regimental cash-box. The regiment is ready to free Swiss Cheese if they pay him two hundred gilders. Mother Courage can provide an amount of two hundred gilders by selling her wagon and the stock in it. She oscillates in her decision since she believes that this is the sole source of her earning to run her family life. However, soon afterwards, she convinces herself to sell her wagon to save Swiss Cheese, as she says: “Tell him, I’ll pay two hundred. Run! *Yvette runs. Mother Courage sits, silent. The Chaplain has stopped doing the glasses. I believe – I’ve haggled too long.*” (Brecht, p. 39). But unfortunately, it is too late, since Swiss Cheese has already been executed. In fact, Mother Courage deceives herself by holding tight to the loose false beliefs that she can save her honest and beloved son without paying a big amount of money, though she is aware of the prevalent corrupt system. This is what a self-deceiver may do, as Pedrini believes:

There is room for much stronger claims within the intentionalist field, e.g. that the self-deceiver believes what he ‘knew’ it was not so; or that the self-deceiver continues to believe the falsity of the self-deceptive proposition while believing its truth as well – he still ‘knows’ it; or, even, that the self-deceiver believes its truth ‘just because’ he never ceases to believe its falsity. (Pedrini, 2006, p. 152)

Overall, a person who deceives himself no doubt, he will willingly deceive others as well to gain their trust. He thinks if the others believe in him, he has been saying the truth and those lies can take a much stronger disguised nature, so he will assert his reasons to others. This is what we see at scene five, when Mother Courage is asked for some linen for bandaging the wounded soldiers and farmers, but she refuses to do so:

Mother Courage: I have none. I sold all my bandages to the regiment. I’m not tearing up my officers’ shirts for these people.

The Chaplain, *calling over his shoulder*: I said I need linen!

Mother Courage, *stopping Katrin from entering the wagon*: Not a thing! They have nothing and they pay nothing. (Brecht, p. 45).

Despite the fact that Mother Courage is a human being—each human being knows for the fact that money is not more valuable than life. She deceives herself that making money is the only goal of life. Then she brings those meaningless reasons for others to convince them and to prove herself right, but when she sees no one cares about those explanations, she has no other alternative except telling the truth:

Mother Courage: I can’t give you any....I’m giving nothing, I daren’t, I have myself to think of. (p. 46).

This kind of confession sometimes occurs when a self-deceiver feels he has reached the end of the line. When we focus on the play, we can see that so many times Mother Courage calls the war as a gift and a business source, yet before scene seven she loses two of her children, her daughter is hurt in her eye, and she has already experienced lots of hardships, and each time she convinces herself to start again a business in war, but at the end of scene six when the Chaplain says the burial of Commander is a historical moment she says:

Mother Courage: It’s a historic moment to me when they hit my daughter over the eye. She’s all but finished now, she’ll never get a husband, and she is so mad about children! Even her dumbness comes from the war. A soldier stuck something in her mouth when she was little. I’ll not see Swiss Cheese again, and where my Eilif is the Good Lord knows. Curse the war! (p. 55)

After all Mother Courage again makes herself forget what has happened to her, she goes to the cold days of war for making money, she goes the way that has not brought her anything for her happiness, and this is what a self-deceiver may really do, maybe for calming himself down and for forgetting the pain of his own deeds. Not only does she not improve, but also she loses the best remaining parts of her life, including her daughter while she is doing business.

When her innocent dumb daughter is killed, she tries to prove that The Peasants is guilty of her death, despite the fact that her deception killed her:

“Mother Courage: Maybe she’s fallen asleep.... You shouldn’t have told her about the children.  
The Peasants: If you hadn’t gone off to the town to get your cut, maybe it wouldn’t have happened.” (p.80).

### **Conclusion**

Too many times people perhaps trick, fool, mislead, or deceive themselves due to their own explanations. They even do not like to review those hollow and unreasonable reasons, because they themselves know that they are running away from the pure reality. Remember the lover whose sweetheart does not like him anymore, a mother who does not want to face the fact that her son is addicted, another mother who loses all her three children in war and still wishes to make money out of it, and so many other examples; they all do not want to encounter the fact or other’s criticism. They all want to turn a blind eye to the environment surrounding them and its circumstances; they have gone into a deep hypnotic trance of self-deception, which can be disastrous.

Indeed, Mother Courage is a helpless victim of different untoward circumstances, which are the outcome of the contradictions in her character. Her adamant insistence on continuing her business in the war leads to the sad loss of her all children. As a matter of fact, Mother Courage has taken for granted that she finds life in the war, indeed this self-deception and naïve views on the war bring tears and sobs to her disastrous tragic world. If we create the sense of trust and self-esteem within us, then we can hardly surrender ourselves to the apprehensive self-deceptive thoughts and plans, as Twerski (1997) asserts:

Most emotional problems that are not of physical origin are related, in one way or another, to low self-esteem. Low Self-esteem refers to the negative feelings people have about themselves that are not justified by fact. In other words, while some people have a distorted self-perception that includes grandiose delusions about themselves, people with low self-esteem have delusions of inferiority, incompetence, and worthlessness. Strangely enough, these feelings of inadequacy are often particularly intense in people who are the most gifted. If our perceptions of ourselves are incorrect, we will probably be prone to maladjustment. We can only adjust to reality if we have an accurate perception of it. We create a major component of our own reality, and if we have an unrealistic view of ourselves, we have distorted reality. (24)

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