

Distinction between Feminism and Womanhood through Social Realism in War: Women's Voices, Agency, and Resistance

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Abstract:

The research paper explores the interrelationship between social realism and the theme of motherhood in the works of Bertolt Brecht and Cynthia Ozick, both set against the backdrop of World War. It particularly focuses on the experiences, struggles, and resilience of people, especially mothers, during the Holocaust and the Nazi-German war, highlighting the profound social and human consequences of conflict. To be even more precise, considering social realism and motherhood. The research intends to explain the dystopian relationship between social realism and motherhood and also intends to draw a discourse over the factors of how these two theories can never be considered together when the scenario is of a war. The main areas of investigation in this chapter include the theoretical understanding of Social Realism and Motherhood, their definitions, dimensions, and relevant perspectives, along with the influence of war on motherhood, particularly focusing on the changing roles, experiences, challenges, and dimensions of motherhood during times of conflict.

The paper intends to explain that how no genders can be individually considered during the times of war because both male and female genders suffer their own losses during the times of war and if one really intends to explore the aftermath of a war, then favouring one specific gender can never be the option because considering social realism, realities are horrible for both the genders during the times of war so it is not wise and fair to consider feminism during war. However, one cannot neglect the fact that feminism and womanhood are two separate things. Womanhood is a type of feminist mystique and has an inevitable essence of womanhood. But in the times of war, the most beautiful aspect of womanhood i.e., motherhood gets compromised and out of both male and female genders, motherhood suffers.

Keyword- Social-realism, motherhood, war, mother courage, shawl, womanhood, feminism

Reasons for Writing

The study examines the distinction between feminism and womanhood in the context of war and highlights women's experiences, struggles, identity, and resistance through social realism.

Scope of Research

The research explores the representation of women, gender roles, feminist consciousness, and social realities in war narratives, focusing on how war shapes women's identities, agency, and experiences

Introduction

War literature often exposes the complex experiences of women within societies shaped by violence, patriarchy, displacement, and social inequality. This research examines how female identity is characterised beyond conventional feminist interpretations. While feminism focuses on resistance to gender-based oppression and the pursuit of equality, womanhood encompasses broader experiences of identity, relationships, sacrifice, resilience, and social responsibility. Through the social realism, war narratives portray women negotiating personal aspirations with cultural expectations and harsh historical circumstances. This study explores these distinctions by analysing how women lived realities during war challenge stereotypes and redefine agency, dignity, and resilience. The War literature depicts the harsh realities of human suffering, displacement, and social disruption, particularly affecting mothers and families. This study evaluates the relationship between social realism and motherhood in Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* and Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl*, both set against the background of war and Holocaust trauma. Social realism disclosed the brutal circumstances that transform motherhood from a symbol of care and protection into an experience of sacrifice, fear, and loss. The study also separates feminism from womanhood, arguing that wartime suffering transcends gender while motherhood remains a uniquely vulnerable aspect of women's experience during conflict.

The representation of motherhood in these works exposes how women's identities are shaped by circumstances beyond their individual choices. In *Mother Courage and Her Children*, motherhood is entangled with survival, economic necessity, and the destructive consequences of war, whereas *The Shawl* presents motherhood through extreme deprivation, psychological trauma, and the loss of security. These texts determine the women's experiences cannot be understood exclusively through the framework of feminist resistance, as their identities also emerge through emotional bonds, responsibilities, endurance, and moral dilemmas. By using social realism, the study highlights the everyday consequences of war and examines how maternal love, vulnerability, and resilience operate within oppressive historical conditions. Thus, womanhood becomes a broader conceptual category through which the complexities of wartime female experience can be understood.

Literature Review

Existing scholarship on war literature, social realism, feminism, and motherhood specifies an important foundation for understanding women's experiences during conflict. Studies of Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* frequently examine war, capitalism, survival, and the psychological consequences of violence, while scholarship on Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl* emphasizes Holocaust trauma, motherhood, memory, and loss. Social realism allows writers to signify historical suffering through the experiences of ordinary individuals rather than idealized characters. Feminist literary criticism, meanwhile, has emphasised women's oppression, agency, and resistance within patriarchal social structures. Moreover, motherhood cannot be completely understood through feminism alone, as it involves emotional, cultural, social, and ethical dimensions of womanhood. Existing studies often examine motherhood and war separately or primarily through feminist perspectives. This study states this gap by comparatively examining how Brecht and Ozick portray motherhood through social realism, demonstrating how wartime conditions transform maternal identity, responsibility, sacrifice, and survival while revealing the broader human consequences of war.

Scope of the Study

This study emphasis on the representation of social realism, motherhood, womanhood, and feminism in Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* and Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl*. It questions how war, violence, displacement, and social oppression convert the meaning and experience of motherhood. Particular attention is given to the struggles, sacrifices, emotional conflicts, and survival of mothers during wartime and the Holocaust. This research also explores the distinction between feminism and womanhood, emphasizing that war affects all genders while creating particular vulnerabilities for mothers. Through a comparative literary approach, the research investigates how both writers portray motherhood as a complex human and social experience.

The analysis further reflects how social and historical circumstances shape women's identities and influence their responses to suffering. In both texts, motherhood is not obtainable merely as a biological or emotional role but as an experience shaped by economic insecurity, violence, displacement, fear, and moral responsibility. The study observes how maternal relationships become sources of both strength and vulnerability in situations where conventional social structures collapse. It also investigates the ways in which women negotiate dignity, agency, resilience, and survival within patriarchal and war-affected societies. By distinguishing womanhood from feminism, the research seeks to demonstrate that female experiences cannot always be interpreted exclusively through resistance to patriarchy. Instead, they require attention to emotional, cultural, familial, and historical dimensions that contribute to a broader understanding of women's lives.

A Discursive Insight on Feminism and Womanhood

The concept of womanhood is inherently intertwined with social realism, particularly when examining the complexities of motherhood. Before we start emphasizing over the fact how social realism and feminism are contrary to each other, we feel the need to understand the difference in the connotations of feminism and womanhood. When one says that he/she is a ‘feminist’, it means that the person is supporting the women liberation in the society in terms of political and social reforms for the betterment and emancipation of women which boosts their participation in the society and not just their domestic sphere. But when defining womanhood, the definition changes a little as the person describes those qualities of a female organism, which make her a “woman”. Those qualities include soft intangible mystiques of womanhood like emotional intelligence, motherhood, soft and nurturing attitude of women, higher tolerance for pain and all such things which make her physically and emotionally comparable to men and which make her capable of withstanding emotional traumas and give her the ability to run a family and a household successfully.

The main differentiation between feminism and womanhood lies in the fact that unlike womanhood, feminism demands social and political rights through various movements and a series of rebellions. Womanhood, on the other hand, focuses on the natural aspects of a female i.e., motherhood, nurturing qualities etc. Another difference is that feminist rights can be achieved by political uprisings and movements, but womanhood can neither be given nor it can be taken back, but it does get affected enormously during the times of conflicts, especially during the times of war, and no political uprising or movement can prevent that from happening. The society may see both these terms under the same aspects, but it must be noticed that they are different and while considering a socially realist aspect, we must consider that it is the motherhood, an aspect of womanhood that gets affected during the war and not feminism. Feminism has no relation with the war scenario, but womanhood does have one as it is extremely non-political and strictly personal - depending on the personal makeup of each woman. So, unlike the case where all feminists have same opinions, all women may not have same opinion considering their personal and psychological build especially during war.

Social Realism

Social Realism refers to a movement that encompasses the works of artists from various fields, including painters, printmakers, photographers, and writers. It seeks to highlight the actual socio-political conditions affecting working- and middle-class people, whose experiences often remain overshadowed by the dominant and powerful structures within society. The writers keeping a socially realistic approach is their way of criticizing the underlying impetus behind the problem which is the existing power structures of the society. The writers which fall under the researcher’s area of study are presenting the viewpoints of both the writers who wrote from a realistic point of view. The researcher focuses on how these writers portrayed the realities of World War without concealing the emotions, experiences, or underlying motives of the people involved, presenting the circumstances of war as they actually occurred. Henry C. Hatfield’s definition of realism,

similarity, highlights the fluidity of meaning associated with the term. Hatfield proceeds to list a series of questions that may aid the realist in his enterprise. These inquiries according to Hatfield condition social realism.

What is the attitude of given writer towards the factor of wealth and poverty; and of relations between social classes; towards love and sex; towards the fear and impact of death? How convincingly does he deal with the motivation of human action, in terms of general psychological beliefs of his time and of the attention accorded to psychological matters by the literary conventions of the novel of his age? (Hatfield 1951, 234)

The researcher explores various examples and tries to explain how motherhood and social realism have a sensitive relationship in the times of war taking in consideration the German-Nazi wars and World War II. The paper takes into consideration two writers – Cynthia Ozick and Bertolt Brecht and how their writings are not centred on the idea of feminism or promoting women’s rights or highlighting the issues that women face, rather they deal with the idea that in the times of war, the socially realist point of view states it doesn’t matter which gender, but motherhood as a factor suffers the most which is faced and experienced only by women. Regrettably, people misconceive the suffering as women-centred giving it a feminist connotation, whereas, it is actually women-centred and explores an aspect different from normal feminist issues which are slightly political inclined towards the liberation of women politically and socially.

Motherhood Redefined

Anna Fierling is the female protagonist from the German dramatist Bertolt Brecht’s play *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1939) set against the background of The Thirty Years’ War in 17th century Europe. The story centres around a woman named Anna Fierling who is more famously known as Mother Courage in the entire plot of the story and her three children Swiss Cheese, Eilif and Katrin. Mother Courage loses all her children to war but at the end still continues to go with the flow of the war as she feels war is inevitable and she can only survive off the war. The story is centred around the central character named Mother Courage who displays numerous instances where she had to compromise her motherhood in a way to save her other children’s lives along with her own. However, when Anna Fierling’s circumstances are examined through a feminist view point, she may appear to accept or even benefit from the conditions of war. Yet, when her character is understood through the aspects of womanhood and motherhood, it becomes evident that the mother within her is gradually dying, emotionally collapsing like a row of falling dominoes.

Mother Courage in one of the scenes of the play says, “What would he be needing men of courage for?” (Mother Courage, Scene 2) when the General praises her first son Eilif and offers him a position in the military. Mother Courage remarks the general must be bad at his job. He, and war in general, wouldn't need courageous soldiers if these men weren't forced to put their lives at risk because the leaders either don't care or are incompetent—or both. (Course Hero, 2018) Here, she makes a very strong, sarcastic statement about the bitter reality of society: when powerful militia personnel take advantage of the poor, middle-class,

and typically working-class people to further their own agendas during wars and conflicts, they lose nothing because they are at the top of the chain, but their families suffer greatly. This situation becomes even worse when the young boys taken to the warfront after they are successfully brainwashed lose their lives and, in the process, overall, the family also loses the only source of financial, emotional and physical support they have. With reference to this novel, one can easily figure out that in those families, where a son might be the only support of his mother, the mother and the sister(s) left behind become financially and emotionally stranded and as a result, they may have to put their womanhood aside and take impossibly difficult decisions. Just as happened in this novel, when the army brings in Eilif's corpse after he is killed in front of his mother, Mother Courage puts aside her motherhood for the sake of the safety of her other two children and refuses to identify her son's dead body. Basically, womanhood, or specifically, motherhood suffers heavily and loses in front of the harsh social realism of the war. It is for this very reason it becomes wise to say that it is not about feminism being the anti-thesis of social realism, but it is about how womanhood loses and it is this aspect which is embedded amidst the multiple aspects of social realism. Social Realism displays the harsh consequences that the middle working classes face because of the actions of the power structures pervasive within the society.

Feminist theatre scholars often criticize Brecht's plays for not paying enough attention to gender issues and merely focusing on a class-based agenda. The main issues that these scholars highlight regarding Brecht's plays and theory include the manipulation of female figures through functionalizing them in order to achieve certain political goals. (Coskun,Bilge, 2015).

Another situation from the same novel which carries the theme of womanhood imbibed within the theme of social realism is when Mother Courage's daughter Katrin, who was a victim of rape and mental abuse by the soldiers dies towards the end of the novel because she decides to warn the villagers against the onset of the soldiers who are willing to ransack the village by beating a drum and is consequently shot dead by the soldiers soon afterwards. Mother Courage reacts to the scene by saying,

"I hope I can pull the wagon by myself. Yes, I'll manage, there's not much in it now. I must get back into business."(Mother Courage, Scene 12)

This heart melting scene where Mother Courage is seen accepting her reality even after the death of her last child, her daughter Katrin shows the dark side of the war and how this social evil crushed the most beautiful aspect of womanhood - motherhood. After this situation, Mother Courage lifts her wagon and continues to walk away. However, some critics view the character of Mother Courage as seriously flawed, but the researcher feels that hers was the strongest character displaying womanhood as compared to many novels written around the same age. As a matter of fact, it would be fair to say that if this novel would have been written from a feminist point of view, many literary critics and the female audience would have had sympathies with Mother Courage and her Children and would have been able to feel her gut-wrenching pain as well, but since this novel carries the theme of

social realism and does not talk about women rights and oppression, the perpetual theme as womanhood is somewhat overseen by many. The research tries to explain the bifold idea of this scene - Firstly, this scene explains the harsh social reality that no matter what a person is going through, he/she has to cope up with the existing situation and deal with the realities and hardships that they ought to bear as they are the working class people who act as pawns for the powerful structures of the society who cause war-like situations because of their own benefit and make women, men and children suffer in them.

The theme of social realism comes to full force when we look at the this side of the coin wherein this novel is not considered a feminist text, rather it is considered an anti-war novel despite the fact that the hardships of a woman placed in the society is displayed at many points in this novel through the characters of Mother Courage, Katrin, Yvette Poitier etc. The researcher seeks to establish that the compromise of motherhood and daughterhood is not necessarily a political issue and, therefore, cannot always be placed within the framework of feminist rights. The study explores the hypothetical question of why, despite portraying the “power of a woman” and the “atrocities against women,” the novel is not generally categorized as a feminist text. Instead, it is primarily situated within the traditions of social realism and modernist literature, particularly for its anti-war sentiments and its representation of the broader human consequences of war rather than focusing exclusively on women’s experiences.

“In sum, victory and defeat both come at a price for ordinary people. The best thing for us is if there’s not too much politicking.” (Brescht) and going by this statement alone, the whole argument seems right as to why and how the two ideas coincide with each other and how womanhood and feminism are intertwined within the theme of social realism.

Rosa and Stella: A Mother and A Female

Rosa and Stella are the names of the characters of the story *The Shawl* written by Cynthia Ozick in 1980 set against the background of Nazi concentration camps. The story entails a baby named Magda, who is shot dead by the Nazi soldiers. In the story, Rosa, who is the mother, wraps her baby in a shawl which keeps the baby calm all the time due to which the baby is unnoticeable to the soldiers. But one day, Rosa’s sister Stella unwraps the baby and instead wraps herself in the shawl because she was feeling cold. When this happens, Magda starts crying and is consequently shot by the soldiers immediately thereafter. Rosa, who witnesses all this from the other end is left stunned and stuffs the shawl in her mouth to stop herself from screaming otherwise she and her sister would also suffer the same fate as her baby girl Magda. However, Rosa is so focused on Magda, that Stella is neglected. While this would “*amplify the natural jealousy that an adolescent girl might feel towards a baby sister monopolizing her mother's attention,*”(Brauner, 27). While “she was jealous of Magda,” she was also a girl that was stuck in a concentration camp just like her mother and baby sister (Ozick 516). She needs help, they all do. (Carter, 2018) Through this story, the researcher intends to suggest the distinction between a woman (Rosa) and a female (Stella). It is often observed that feminism and womanhood are viewed under the same lens as it has

become a general notion of the people worldwide that women want only political and social rights for which they are perpetually fighting and rebelling against the male hegemony in the society. Feminism and all the related movements are often viewed as Matriarchal Dividends and because of this, even if a woman shows her true womanly emotions or what we call as the 'feminine mystique', it is often misconceived as matriarchal dividend and is seen from a matrifocal point of view rather than understanding that this is the basic natural difference between male and female genders. The movements and overdoing of the rebellions related to feminism and gender equality have increased to such an extent that now nothing a woman does is ever considered wrong.

Another drawback of matriarchal benefits is that, even in cases where a woman truly needs assistance and a voice, it is frequently dismissed as a "woman-card." The goal of the study is to reveal the root cause of the entire issue. The feminist movement had to be started and is still being pursued because of the radical feminist belief that males are to blame for the unfair problems that women encounter in society. But, if we closely observe from a socially realistic point of view, it is the underlying misuse of the societal power structures that lead to issues like these. There have been many cases in history which show how powerful people have used innocent women belonging from normal working class family backgrounds as weapons to resolve their own agendas against those men who also belong from normal working class family backgrounds by taking advantage of the 'feminine' characteristics of those women to eliminate the political rivals sometimes. Here, feminism is typically taken into consideration when a decision needs to be made and the entire emphasis is switched to how men exploit women. The same thing occurred in the book *Mother Courage and her Children*, where it is demonstrated that all of the female characters have been physically abused by soldiers in one way or another. However, the war and its politics are never emphasised as the primary problem. Critics have also attacked *Mother Courage*, the only female survivor, for her refusal to submit to society's dominant institutions. If *Mother Courage's* fate in the novel is changed, and if she is shown dying towards the end, the novel might have a feminism connotation as to how women were exploited and killed at the hands of men, not at the hands of soldiers. This distinction of words between 'men' and 'soldiers' changes the genre of the novel altogether. The character of Katrin, *Mother Courage's* youngest child and her only daughter was physically abused by a 'soldier' and not some man. The researcher emphasizes on this one point as the 'men' are born as a product of God's creation, but soldiers are purely a creation of 'politics' which in the light of social realism can also be considered as 'the powerful structure of the society'. This is the reason why this term 'social realism' is more narrowly used in the arts created during the two world wars as it was at its peak during that time. In some cases, it has also been observed that not just men or the powerful societal structures, but women are also against women. As in the case of the story *The Shawl*. In the story, Stella could have shown her womanly mystiques and saved her niece Magda by not taking off the shawl off her, but she chooses to do otherwise not showing any concern for the baby and for her own sister Rosa, who was the mother. Rosa,

on the other hand chooses to stay silent even when she witnesses her own baby being killed in front of her eyes to save her sister Stella and herself from getting recognized or killed by the soldiers.

In this story, two aspects of social realism can be seen. First, when the bitterness of one woman leads to damage to another woman, and the silence of one woman leads to the benefit of another woman and second, how the Nazi soldiers were trained to mercilessly eliminate not just women but also innocent babies and children. Once more, this book is not written from a feminist viewpoint; instead, it depicts the dark social realism in which the characters are mistreated by soldiers trained by the powerful social structures to subjugate and carelessly murder innocent middle-class working people in order to further the insane goals of a power-hungry politician and leader who wants to exterminate all Jews.

Conclusion

In the end, the researcher hopes to draw the conclusion that, despite their close relationship, feminism and womanhood are not the same. There is a fine line of distinction between the two which must be maintained to uphold both feminine and womanly aspects of the female gender. The researcher agrees that political and social rights are necessary for a female and that male and female genders should be considered equally, but one must also not forget that a female can be politically emancipated, but a woman can never gain anything from mere gender-oriented power politics as her values and her characteristics are not political, but natural. Where a feminist would politically want a right to work to uphold her equal status with men, a woman would want a right to work to feed her family. A woman considers the protection of her daughter, husband, father, and son in addition to the safety of girls, whereas a feminist just considers the safety of girls.

The depiction of external behaviour takes precedence over psychological probing. It is not the individual but the collectively that is important, as attention centres on a loop of minors, construction workers, or employees and even women who spend their sunday on the banks of Jarama River. Spatial and temporal reduction permits a closely textured portrayal of the sector of society chosen for study. (Glenn and Brown)

The dramatic expansion of women's political participation during the last decades has pushed scholars to consider how women's presence (or absence) alters the form, nature, and content of politics (Baldez, 2010; Beckwith, 2010; Franceschet et al., 2012). Yet many topics within political science still lack a gender perspective, particularly the relationship between political participation and violence. Political violence violates human rights, impedes democracy from developing, consolidates and undermines the relationships of fairness, equality, and trust upon which good governments are built. Studies of political violence traditionally took a narrow view, privileging physical assault and focusing on feminism movements and gender equality for political reasons. Yet if political violence circumscribes women's participation in ways not previously understood—because studies of political violence traditionally measure men's experiences or because the barriers women

face do not always register as violence—then conclusions about democratic quality and integrity may be biased. (Bardall, Gabrielle, 2020)

Around the world, autocrats and their allies are increasingly deploying gendered disinformation to eliminate their critics and consolidate power. By placing gendered disinformation and the fight against authoritarianism at the center of the policy agenda to reduce online harms, the Biden-Harris administration has a chance to not only score a major victory for women's rights but also to advance key national security and foreign policy objectives around preventing further democratic backsliding. (Lucina Di Meco and Kristina Wilfore)

At the end, what the researcher wants to prove is that many a times politicians and other powerful societal structures misuse the feminist movements and misuse 'females' to eliminate their rivals and frame them by accusing them of women exploitation so that under the light of 'feminism', they can be tried and judged. When such an issue happens in society, it is a political agenda and feminism is just a facade. So, rather than focusing on feminism all the time, if we shift on 'womanhood', most of the problems can be resolved and that is how true gender equality can be ensured within the society. Feminism can be a part of social realism because that can also be in some cases used by powerful people in the society to frame and exploit the poor, indisposed and debilitated middle class people.

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