



## Adaptation vs Authenticity: Exploring the Consequences of Changing and Unchanging Human Nature on Individuals and Family Ties in Mother Courage and Her Children

Mohammad Muazzam Sharif<sup>1</sup>, Aleena<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University, Mardan, Pakistan.

Email: sharifmuazzam@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> M.Phil. Scholar, Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, Pakistan.

Email: aleenamalik379@gmail.com

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article History:

Received: May 19, 2025

Revised: June 28, 2025

Accepted: June 29, 2025

Available Online: June 30, 2025

#### Keywords:

Adaptation

Authenticity

Reciprocal Determinism

Self-Efficacy

Self-Disengagement

Self-Directness

#### Funding:

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

### ABSTRACT

Bertolt Brecht's play *Mother Courage and Her Children* portrays the multiple-faceted dimensions of human nature through the characters of Mother Courage, Chaplain Eilif, Swiss Cheese, and Katherine. Through textual analysis of the play and by applying the lens of Albert Bandura's Social Cognition Theory, the paper examines the alteration and steadfastness of human nature and their consequences. This play uses the setting of war as a destructive power that influences human nature as it is shaped by society, culture, and environment. Mother Courage and Chaplin are the characters who transform their nature according to the dynamic sociopolitical landscape. In contrast, Mother Courage's children Eilif, Swiss Cheese, and Katherine are the authentic characters who died but did not bend to the situation. Standing firm on the values, beliefs, and one's true self costs the highest prize, whereas compromising on the values and oneself saves life but shatters family ties and corrupts the individual's existence. The paper asserts that adaptation secures survival but has the possibility to contaminate moral values, while authenticity sustains integrity with an immense personal toll.

Corresponding Author's Email: aleenamalik379@gmail.com

## 1. Introduction

Human nature has served as a central theme of Literature throughout history. Literature is a powerful tool and a mirror that reflects the good and evil of society in a thought-provoking and relatable manner. Literary dramas, as a genre of literature, delve into themes that reflect the universal experiences, relationships, emotions, conflicts, desires, and struggles of people through various characters and narratives. Human nature has inherent duality with virtue, selflessness, empathy, and goodwill on one side and evil, selfishness, and destructiveness on the other side. The role of society, culture, and environment in shaping individuals is undeniable. It is culture and society that influence the self in countless ways, prompting the multiple versions of identity to emerge and evolve. Human experiences are another thing that shapes their tendencies, influencing their perception and reaction to the world around them. Bertolt Brecht, known as a theatrical reformer, challenged the traditional notions of theater and encouraged the audience to use a critical lens to question societal norms. He illustrated the destruction of war and the enigma of human behavior in his plays. He revealed the complexities and contradictions of human nature through his characters' struggles and interactions in his seminal play *Mother Courage and Her Children*. This play presents a profound picture of the resilient and vulnerable human nature, highlighting the human capability of challenging societal norms and expectations while pursuing individual desires. Human nature is a product of the situations and environments in which individuals live and is significantly shaped by societal, political, and economic conditions. This Play, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, criticizes the social structures and the flawed human nature caused by the modern fragmentation and destruction of war.

This study is significant because it examines the character's nature and highlights the conflict between the survival tactics and moral values, highlighting how human values are tested in harsh circumstances. The findings of this study highlight Bertolt Brecht's critique of war and ethical dilemma, connecting the playwright to contemporary issues like exploitation and destruction of war. This study provides an insight into connecting literature to real-life human dilemmas. This also encourages readers to find a balance between ethical choices and self-interest in difficult times. This paper also highlights the importance of empathy in sustaining healthy human relationships. This paper explores the authenticity and adaptive nature of humans in the drama *Mother Courage and Her Children* by Bertolt, and the consequences of the adaptation and authentic human nature of characters that influence their lives and their relationships with family members and people around them. The study is based on the textual analysis of the play *Mother Courage and Her Children*, and the theoretical framework employed in this paper is Bandura's Social Cognition Theory.

## **2. Literature Review**

Bertolt Brecht, the pioneer of Epic theater, aimed to stimulate critical thinking in the audience through his plays and the alienation of the audience's emotional attachment. He introduced certain techniques, including the Alienation effect, to encourage the audience to contemplate the social evils and bring social change, rather than sympathize with the characters. Bertolt Brecht states in his book *Brecht on theatre: the development of an aesthetic*, "The essential point of epic theatre is perhaps that it appeals less to the feelings than to the spectator's reasons. Instead of sharing experience, the spectator must come to grips with things." (Brecht, 1964). Joodaki and Rashidifar (2025), argues that Anna Fierling embodies the concept "Being for itself" (p.125) and constantly shapes her identity and exercises freedom. Joodaki highlights that Mother Courage conscientiously follows material gains, which leads to distancing from others and being numb as a human. This paper also examines the character of Mother Courage and her immoral changing nature for survival, which leads to the loss of her dear children. Adaptation refers to the choices humans make primarily for economic gains, survival tactics, and convenience to live in society. On the other hand, authenticity means refusal of the acts of sacrifice of human nature and betraying moral convictions and value system for any sort of gains. Mother Courage, in this play, illustrates adaptation and its benefits, and Katrin exemplifies authenticity and its tragic results. Furthermore, Goswami (2020), examines the character Anna Fierling as a contrast to the affectionate and ideal mother figure, not self-sacrificing and eternally affectionate, but negligent of her responsibilities. Goswami states that "when the rest were scared of war and prayed for it to end, Anna had made the best out of it and took advantage of the war to use it as her source of income." (p.79) . Existing studies have extensively engaged with Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre and dramaturgical approaches, war critique, historical study of the play, and character analysis through multiple theoretical lenses; however, the characters' adaptation and authenticity, and the detailed analysis of the ethical choices of each character, have not been examined. This paper presents the interplay of the changing and unchanging human nature of the characters Mother Courage, Katrin, Swiss cheese, Eilif, and the Clergyman.

## **3. Theoretical Framework: Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory**

This paper employs Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1986) as a theoretical framework. This theory posits that human behaviors are shaped by the dynamic interaction of personal factors, behaviors, and environmental influences, which he calls *Reciprocal determinism*. "Human functioning is explained in terms of a model of triadic reciprocal causation in which behavior, cognitive and other personal factors, and environmental events all operate as interacting determinants of each other." (Bandura, 1986). This theory explains *Observational learning or modeling* as the idea that individuals learn not only from direct experiences but also by observing others in their surroundings. *Self-efficacy* is another concept that emphasizes the individual's belief in their capacity to perform the necessary behaviors to achieve the desired outcomes. Bandura believes that higher self-efficacy results in higher motivation and perseverance. *Self-disengagement*, by Bandura, is a cognitive process through which individuals justify their unethical behaviors, permitting them to engage in behavior that violates one's moral standards without remorse. *Self-directness* refers to an individual's ability to navigate, regulate, guide, and motivate their behavior based on personal goals and self-standards. *Pragmatic Orientation* in Bandura is the practical, context-based decision-making driven by social expectations rather than self-determined principles. By applying Bandura's social cognition theory, this paper seeks to

explore how adaptation and authenticity function as psychological strategies within the play's Sociopolitical context.

### **3.1. Adaptation and Its Consequences in *Mother Courage and Her Children***

Humans exhibit the ability to transform according to the changing circumstances and environments for their survival and to adjust to the environment. The malleability of human disposition has both weaknesses and strengths. Changing nature is an existential strategy, a greed and avarice for achieving success, and a compromise with the circumstances. Bandura (1991) argues that individuals have a high level of self-directness if their sense of identity is firm and they are strongly inclined towards achieving their personal standards. Furthermore, he argues that "Those who are not much committed to personal standards adopt a pragmatic orientation, tailoring their behavior to fit whatever the situation seems to call for. They become adept at reading social cues, remembering those that have predictive value, varying self-presentation accordingly." (Bandura, 2001). Bertolt Brecht's characters in the play are the embodiment of adapting human nature and the advantages and disadvantages that result. Anna Fierling as Mother Courage is a complete representation of changing human nature. Throughout the play, she changes according to the changing status quo. It is human desire to find a better life partner to share the ups and downs of life. Humans continue their search until they find their best partner. Mother Courage, in her marriage relationships, was non-committal and free-spirited. She had all three children from three different men of different nationalities. Her non-committed nature and current unclear relationship with the cook reflect her fluid and adaptable disposition. At the start of the play, a Sergeant questions Mother Courage about the father of her child, Swiss Cheese. Mother Courage complicates the conversation by presenting confusing and unnecessary explanations to dismiss his questions. However, she herself clarifies Swiss Cheese identity: "Don't confuse the issue, Sergeant, or we'll be here all day... I call him Swiss Cheese. And that is my daughter, Katrin Haupt, she's half German." (Brecht, 1964).

Moving on from one relationship to another to fight loneliness and find a life partner is a human necessity and a survival tactic. Her adaptable disposition questions her morality; if she stuck with her moral values, she could be solitary, and if she operated independently, her ethical integrity would be questioned. She gave birth to 3 children and had her support system as a result of her flexible nature. Anna Fierling changed her search for a partner and rejected the cook when she was offered a good future for the sake of her daughter. She changed her nature of uncommitment and stuck with the mother role. Her sacrifice saved her image as a mother and reflects the positive facet of a mother's love, which is steadfast and unwavering in any circumstance. Her love for her daughter is a genuine depiction of the enduring and unchanging sacrificial nature of a mother. Her maternal love is illustrated in the conversation with Cook when Cook offers her to go with him to his inn in another village and secure a safe future, she utterly refuses the offer. "Mother Courage: You want me to leave Katrin behind?... I was thinking she might find a husband in Utrecht." (Brecht, 1964). Her decision to prioritize her daughter over the cook reinforces the notion that maternal affection remains intact irrespective of the context, be it wartime or peacetime. And her unwavering loving nature is the intrinsic nature of her motherhood. If a mother's compassionate temperament alters, the family system disintegrates, and the children's ideologies about love and sacrifices shatter, resulting in birthing a disoriented and emotionally destabilized generation. This rupture profoundly influences a child's positive identity. It is the mother's love that holds a family and shapes a positive child's personality.

She travels across European landscapes in her wagon; accompanied by her three children. She is a resilient woman with a strong determination to earn for herself and her children amidst the adversities of war. She transformed her nature from a woman confined within the private sphere to an enterprising breadwinner of the family, illustrating her capacity to adapt. Changing places symbolizes her changing nature. Rather than passively waiting for peacetime and awaiting the cessation of war and external assistance, she takes the initiative and actively engages in the struggle for her survival. This also reflects her avarice for money and is not devoid of her moral vagueness. Despite living in one place and earning, she prefers travelling from one place to another. Mother Courage is earning money by selling goods to the people of war-stricken areas feeding her insatiable desire for profit in times of widespread suffering. She is struggling to earn and putting efforts to secure her children's safety but at the same time, she is merciless for other people's sufferings in war-ravaged areas. Her apathy for others marks her adapting nature as deleterious for the people around her. "People possess self-reactive capabilities that enable them to exercise some control over their own thoughts, feelings, motivation, and actions. Through

self-regulation, they can influence their own behavior and the circumstances under which they live." (Bandura, 1986). This is her flexible disposition, which lacks empathy and benevolence for the distressed humans around her. In an episode, an injured person came to take a shirt, but she refused to sell him free of cost. "First Soldier: But I'm broke. (Mother Courage tears the fur coat off his back.) Mother Courage: Then leave this. It's stolen goods anyhow." (Brecht, 2015). Anna Fierling's adapting nature accentuates a profound ethical dilemma, as her role as a mother is undermined by prioritizing her survival and economic interest over her children's survival and maternal obligations. She fails to protect her children whenever she prioritizes herself over them. She was unable to fulfill her perceived obligation of protecting her children in the conflicts around her. Throughout the play, Mother Courage's role oscillates between a nurturing mother and a pragmatic profiteer. Her ethical quandary is more truly exemplified when she, as a mother, failed to prioritize the safety of her child, Swiss, over her greed for money. Yvette Portier urges her to sell the wagon to secure freedom for Swiss Cheese from imminent peril. She values material gain over familial preservation by giving an excuse, "hold on to something", for her daughter Katrin, who is "Twenty-five and still has no husband. I know what I'm doing. One hundred twenty or no deal." (Brecht, 1964). She refused to sell it for less than her desired amount, which led to the tragic consequence of the demise of her child.

Mother Courage's maternal failure is revealed when she disowns the dead body of her child, Swiss Cheese, to protect herself from the soldiers. It exemplifies how humans erode their emotional, ethical, and familial duties and responsibilities for their own survival. "Look at him. See if you know him...Throw him on the garbage dump. He has no one that knows him." (Brecht, 1964). This approach reveals the significance of the interaction between an individual's behavior and the demands of the external environment, emphasizing that this interplay is crucial to individuals' development and influences their actions. "Degradation of maternal instincts in the time of war is not the major message Brecht wants his audience to get. The implications of this idea seal with setting life priorities by people...Maternal values take over some human or ethical values in life." (Yahya, 2023). Yahya argues that Anna Fierling's maternal courage and affection are dominated by her unwavering determination to prioritize her business instead of the welfare of her children. This showcases her decline as a mother. Mother Courage transitions from a protective mother to a pragmatic survivor, engendering selfish traits in her personality. She exhibits reduced emotional investment in her son Eilif and remains unaware of his demise until the end. Eventually, her family disintegrated, and she faltered in protecting her children by adapting her nature to a dynamic socio-political landscape and diverging from her role. She survived, though all her children died, which shows that adaptation of human nature to the changing status quo is the only way to endure.

Similarly, Chaplin's adaptive self-preservation enabled him to endure and survive in the end. Though he was a clergyman and his obligations required him to strongly adhere to his religious obligations, he abandoned his religious principles to avoid the soldiers. He altered his attire from a protestant to a catholic to survive. Chaplin's transformation was not a spontaneous reaction but a calculated response based on his societal observations. "Moral standards do not function as fixed internal regulators of conduct. Each individual who regards themselves as highly moral can behave inhumanely without self-condemnation by disengaging moral self-sanctions from their actions." (Bandura, 1986). He strategically adapted a persona to navigate through a discriminatory society. "Those who seek to alter social systems and their practices encounter opposition from power holders and influential vested interests...The numerous obstacles and coercive threats deter attempts to alter social conditions that adversely affect human lives." (Bandura, 1982). In an episode, Chaplain foresees an impending threat and fears that he could be killed by the soldiers because of his religion. Mother Courage offers him a cloak, but he refuses and insists on not running, "I better stay put. If I run, I might attract attention." (Brecht, 1964). This suggests that he compromised his identity for survival by carefully calculating the forthcoming risk, highlighting the importance of self-preservation over moral values.

His survival tactics compromised his values and ultimately gave a detrimental lesson where life is valued more than values, beliefs, and ethics. Such examples and lessons corrupt society and encourage individuals to deviate from the right path if their life is endangered. Ayala (2010), in her work, *The difference of being human: Morality*, states that an altruist serves the community in a broader perspective, but the selfish individual also benefits from their selfless behaviors, where the altruists pay the costs, while the selfish people pay no cost, and instead

enjoy the rewards. "Thus, selfish behavior will be favored within the population. Natural selection will thus eliminate genetically determined altruistic behaviors." (p. 9017). The characters of soldiers depicted in the play brutally slaughter peasants and commoners during wartime, forcefully seizing their possessions, and ultimately causing their demise. Their moral compass and conscience underwent a significant shift to peace in peacetime and reversed again in wartime. Soldiers transformed into perpetrators in wartime and sang of glory and peace in peacetime. This adaptive behavior helped them survive but raises profound questions about the malleability of human nature, which accepts the cyclical return of wartime. Self-preservation is precedent to the value of another human's life. Mother Courage's capacity to adapt her nature safeguarded her family and ensured her life for her children. She struggled to strategically navigate the adversity and challenges of life, but ultimately found a safe path by adapting according to the circumstances. Adaptability and a flexible nature for adjusting to the environment resulted in minimal cost, instead yielding rewards

### **3.2. Authenticity And Its Consequences in The Play**

Authenticity is a human trait that stands on self-awareness, honesty, and unwavering adherence to one's values. The preservation of one's nature and firm adherence to one's convictions embody the true essence of authenticity. Bertolt Brecht masterfully portrayed authentic human nature through various characters in the play, including Swiss Cheese, Katherine, and Eilif. "Through the exercise of forethought and self-reflection, people can set goals and construct courses of action to realize them. They are not simply onlookers of their behavior. They are contributors to their life circumstances, not just products of them." (Bandura, 1986). This explains the reason for the characters behind their self-sacrifice. Brecht's profound understanding of life and human nature, and presenting both the steadfast and transforming human nature, are equally prominent in this play. Anna Fierling, as the mother of three children, demonstrated authentic behavior to her true self only once when she refused the cook's proposal for the sake of Katherine. Eilif possesses the qualities of bravery and strength in the play. Brecht pictured Eilif as both positive and negative. He showed bravery as a soldier, but could not change himself in peacetime and remained committed to himself. Eilif's steadfast nature led to his demise in the end. In a scene where Eilif was brought to meet his mother, the soldiers tell the Chaplain that he broke into the peasant's farm in peacetime and killed a woman, therefore, he has to die. "The OTHER SOLDIER makes the gesture of throat cutting." (Brecht, 1964).

The unbending and steadfast human nature in the play deeply affected the individuals and their relationships. Eilif stayed in the Army despite being stopped by her mother. He joined the Army knowing the fact that he could die anytime. Spending time with his mother and siblings remained second to his desire to showcase his bravery. Eilif did not think much of the family but fought the war, which took his siblings' lives and left his mother alone. "The exercise of personal agency is achieved through reflective and forethoughtful self-guidance, by which people set goals for themselves and regulate their own behavior accordingly." (Bandura, 1986). Swiss Cheese is another example of authentic human nature. He prioritized his honesty over life, unlike his mother. He possessed the quality of honesty. He was honest and defended the cashbox of soldiers. His naïve honesty killed him. People who stand firm on their values pay with their lives but do not bend to the circumstances. "Two men come on with a stretcher. There is a sheet over it, and something underneath." (Brecht, 1964). Though he died of honor, yet death snatched the only hope of the single mother and her mute sister. His commitment to his job and naïve honesty cost him his life. Brecht categorizes him as a silly person because he could save himself and still not compromise his honesty. Katherine, the daughter of Mother Courage, died because of her innocence and selfless compassion. Her kind nature did not allow her to be complicit in violence, which led to her demise. She sacrificed herself but saved the villagers from the impending attack.

Ayala (2010) argues that empathy is a universal human quality, rooted in advanced human cognitive abilities, which enables us to perceive and identify both constructive and destructive human experiences. This further enriches our understanding of human behavior and impacts an individual's choice. "Human empathy occurs because of our advanced intelligence. Humans may then choose to behave altruistically, or not, that is morally, or not, in terms of the anticipated consequences of their actions to others." (p. 9016). Katherine's compassionate nature overshadowed her judgment, leading to her tragic demise when she advocated for the oppressed people. This compassionate nature claimed her life and irrevocably fractured her familial unit leaving her mother all alone. Authenticity and their unwavering values demand significant sacrifices, exemplified by their tragic demise. "Katherine climbs onto the roof and

begins to beat the drum with all her might...Katherine utters a loud, inarticulate cry." (Brecht, 1964). Authenticity and the willingness to strictly adhere to values and a moral compass claimed a huge prize in the form of life.

#### 4. Conclusion

In *Mother Courage and Her Children*, Bertolt Brecht explores the theme of human nature i.e., adaptation and authenticity in wartime. This paper explored the individual's behaviors and actions that are constructed by the interaction of self-determined values, motivations, external environment, and societal pressures that influence their lives and their familial bonds. Anna Fierling's ability to adapt her values guarantees her survival, but fractures her family structure. However, her children's unwavering authenticity cost them their lives but preserved their core moral values. Brecht's thoughtful portrayal of the characters advocates that adaptation and authenticity entail consequences. The play encourages contemplation on how individuals survive in war-stricken zones. Bandura's theoretical framework offered a profound insight into the complex factors and dilemmas that mold human nature and its effect on people and their family ties.

#### References

- Ayala, F. J. (2010). The difference of being human: Morality. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 107(supplement\_2), 9015-9022. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0914616107>
- Bandura, A. (1982). Self-efficacy mechanism in human agency. *American Psychologist*, 37(2), 122-147. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.37.2.122>
- Bandura, A. (1986). Social foundations of thought and action. *Englewood Cliffs, NJ*, 1986(23-28), 2.
- Bandura, A. (2001). Social Cognitive Theory: An Agentic Perspective. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52(1), 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.52.1.1>
- Brecht, B. (1964). *Brecht on theatre: The development of an aesthetic*. Macmillan.
- Brecht, B. (2015). *Mother Courage and her children*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Goswami, G. (2020). TO BE OR NOT TO BE A "MOTHER": A Study of Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* and Indira Goswami's "The Offspring". *New Literaria*, 1(2), 78-84.
- Joodaki, A., & Rashidifar, S. (2025). A Conceptual Analysis of Being in Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* through the Lens of Sartre's Existentialism. *Qualitative Inquiry as Praxis in L2 Studies*, 115-135. <https://doi.org/10.22034/quipls.2025.2060161.1005>
- Yahya, E. F. (2023). Maternal Instincts in Bertolt Brecht's "Mother Courage and Her Children". *Journal of the College of Basic Education*, 29(121).