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Psychological Necessity of Shen Teh/Shui Ta

Anamorphosis

Abstract: *This paper examines the psychological necessity of Shen Teh's adoption of the Shui Ta persona in Bertolt Brecht's The Good Person of Szechwan. Through Lacanian psychoanalysis, it explores that Shen Teh's disguise of Shui Ta, her imaginary cousin, is more than a materialistic necessity to survive in the societal structures, which compel individuals to adopt capitalist morality. Shen Teh, a good-hearted prostitute, creates a male persona, Mr. Shui Ta to know the public opinion about herself, glorify herself making her disguised role a sharp contrast to her female/original representation before other at the same time fulfil her desires to dominate over others which patriarchal society does not permit a female individual, and most importantly, fulfil her desire to be the male counterpart, thus completing the wholeness of her psychological identity.*

Keywords: mask, identity, alter ego, lacking, animus, *manque-à-être*, anamorphism, gaze.

Psychological Necessity of Shen Teh/Shui Ta Anamorphosis

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Introduction

The Good Person of Szechwan by Bertolt Brecht (1898- 1956) is considered to be a chef d'oeuvre in the literary canon of continental drama. The play comes into the Category of Brecht's parable play, where he manifests his intensive desire to educate the audience so that they gain a proper consciousness. On account of the dramatic form of his parable plays, Brecht not only adopts the parable that appears mainly in a narrative form throughout history, but he also combines it with his Epic theatre technique, thus creating a unique form of parable: the epic parable. The parable puts forth several contemporary issues and problems. To cover the wide gamut of growing content ranging from the commercial society's modus operandi to the conflict between good and evil, Brecht experimented with several styles and approaches. Set on the backdrop of a capitalist society, the play sees human beings reduced to mere commodities whose worth is measured by their productivity, profitability, or utility. The system privileges material gain and competition over empathy, compassion, and collective welfare. In *The Good Person of Szechwan*, Shen Teh's kindness becomes a liability in an economy driven by self-interest and exploitation. To survive, she must adopt the ruthless, pragmatic persona of Shui Ta — a figure better suited to a world where survival depends on prioritising personal gain over moral integrity.

The idea relates to Karl Marx's concept of alienation in labour, where individuals become estranged from their essential human nature due to the commodification of both goods and human relationships. Under capitalism, workers — and by extension, individuals — must suppress their innate ethical impulses to fit into exploitative systems. Shen Teh's fragmented identities mirror this alienation: she is forced to sever her authentic, compassionate self to function as Shui Ta within a profit-driven society.

Generally, it is accepted that *The Good Person of Szechwan* shows the impossibility of goodness under capitalism and patriarchy. But Shui Ta is not merely a survival tactic but a psychological imperative that completes Shen Teh's fractured subjectivity. Combining Lacanian and Jungian frameworks, this paper reveals the dual identity as a response to lack (Lacan) and to animus integration (Jung). Thus, this paper argues that the alternative and disguised identity of Shen Teh is not only a materialistic necessity but also a psychological necessity to complement the symbolic order.

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Literature Review

Several studies have been done on the dual identity of Shen Teh. However, the previous studies viewed the shifting identities from social and Marxist perspectives. For example, both Priyanka Arora and Sneha Banerjee analysed the dual identity of Shen Teh/Shui Ta from the Marxist point of view—Shen Teh as the embodiment of socially accepted goodness and Shui Ta as the materialist to save her from the financial disaster. Coşkun’s thesis, “A gender-oriented approach towards Brechtian theatre: functionality, performativity, and affect in mother courage and her children and the good person of Szechwan,” discusses the dual identity of Shen Teh / Shui Ta and the necessity of cross-dressing and disguise from economic, social, and moral perspectives. Coşkun acknowledges that Brecht does not problematise gender itself; the cross-dressing is primarily framed as an instrument within the class / economic conflict, not as a gender critique in its own right. Choudhry and Kayani’s article shows the gendered perspective of Shen Teh/Shui Ta shifting identity but does not recognise it as a psychological necessity. Azad’s article, “Shen Te as an ‘Alter Ego’ of Shui Ta in Brecht’s *The Good Woman of Setzuan*: An Analysis,” establishes Shui Ta as an alter ego of Shen Teh (Te)—though the title is quite ambiguous which preconceives Shen Teh (Te) as an Alter ego of Shui Ta. But for Azad, it is just a survival necessity, not a psychological necessity. So, the previous study of the play does not recognise Shui Ta as a psychological necessity, which this paper aims to do. theological lens, thereby reclaiming the divine feminine. It puts them in the context of theology and analyses how, though they have been seen as figures who uphold power.

Methodology

This paper employs an interdisciplinary approach to the shifting identity of Shen Teh/Shui Ta, combining psychoanalytic criticism and gender studies. Whereas this study tries to establish Shen Teh's disguised identity of Shui Ta as a psychological necessity, the focus has been given to the psychological theories of Carl Gustav Jung and Jacques Lacan.

Jung’s idea of the archetype of animus and Lacan’s idea of the phallus have both been taken into consideration for analysis. Using Lacan’s theories of alienation, lack (manque), and the Symbolic order, this study investigates Shen Teh’s identity as a manifestation of the fragmentation under societal constraints. The persona of Shui Ta is interpreted as the externalised “Other” through which Shen Teh excludes herself from patriarchal authority. The Lacanian reading thus uncovers the internal psychological necessity of masking as a response to symbolic castration and lack of social recognition. Besides the Lacanian psychological theories, this paper also adopts a Jungian theory of archetype to interpret Shui Ta as the projection of Shen Teh’s Animus—the masculine component within the feminine psyche. The creation of Shui Ta dramatises the emergence of this repressed masculine

archetype as a necessary psychic compensatory mechanism. Her survival depends upon incorporating the Animus symbolised by Shui Ta, even though this integration produces moral and emotional conflict. The Jungian framework thus reframes the duality not merely as social disguise but as an archetypal struggle for psychic wholeness—an attempt to balance compassion (the feminine principle) with assertion (the masculine principle). In this way, these approaches situate Shen Teh's masking not as a simple narrative device but as a psychological necessity embedded within Brecht's critique of capitalist and patriarchal orders.

Logical Basis for a Dual Psychoanalytic Framework

While single-theory approaches to *The Good Person of Szechwan* illuminate aspects of Shen Teh's duality, they cannot fully explain the complexity of her psychic split. Lacanian psychoanalysis clarifies the structural pressures acting upon Shen Teh: the experience of *manque-à-être*, symbolic castration, and the quest for the phallus as a signifier of socio-symbolic authority. Lacan allows us to read Shui Ta not merely as a disguise but as a response to symbolic lack, a position Shen Teh must occupy to function within a linguistic and cultural order that denies her recognition.

Jungian archetypal theory, by contrast, illuminates the intra-psychic compensation that occurs beneath this symbolic layer. The emergence of the Animus—the repressed masculine principle within the feminine psyche—explains why Shui Ta is presented not only as a strategic persona but as a necessary psychic counterpart. Whereas Lacan explains the structural production of the subject within a patriarchal symbolic order, Jung explains the archetypal balancing mechanism through which the psyche compensates for its internal fractures.

By employing both Lacan and Jung, this study brings together two dimensions of Shen Teh's fragmentation: the external, discursive, and socio-symbolic constraints that necessitate the mask, and the internal, compensatory psychic processes that make the mask psychologically indispensable. The dual framework is thus required because Shen Teh's transformation cannot be read solely as a social strategy or solely as an intrapsychic conflict; it is the product of an intertwining of symbolic alienation and archetypal compensation, both of which converge in the figure of Shui Ta.

Shui Ta: A Materialistic Necessity

In *The Good Person of Szechwan*, Shui Ta's introduction comes at a crucial point in the play when Shen Teh finds herself unable to maintain her goodness and withstand the exploitation she faces. The character of Shui Ta is symbolic of the compromises individuals must make to survive in a harsh world and the dualities within human nature. As Shen Teh takes on the persona of Shui Ta, she becomes more assertive, practical, and willing to make ruthless decisions for self-preservation. Through the character of Shui Ta, Brecht explores the themes of survival and morality.

While Shen Teh is trustworthy, selfless and naive, Shui Ta, on the other hand, is fierce, manipulative and efficient. Shen Teh feels the necessity to create her alter ego mainly because in a province like Szechwan, women cannot survive without a male partner, because, naturally, Women are expected to be submissive. The split into Shen Teh/ Shui Ta persona reflects a dissociative defence mechanism. Shui Ta, Shen Teh's male alter ego, emerges as a pragmatic response to her struggles. Shui Ta represents a tougher, more Calculating Persona that allows Shen Teh to navigate the harsh realities of her world. Adopting this alter ego allows Shen Teh to make tough decisions, protect herself, and ensure her survival. This masking is not merely a performance; it becomes a necessary psychological partition to function in opposing ethical domains.

One of the central themes explored through Shui Ta's character is the conflict between morality and survival. As Shui Ta, Shen Teh is no longer burdened by the expectations of being excessively good. Instead, she adopts a more pragmatic approach to navigate the capitalist system and protect her interests. Shui Ta is seen as someone who can manage the shop efficiently, negotiate with creditors, and make tough decisions without being swayed by sentimentality or moral qualms. Shen Teh's desire for a male identity may be an exemplification of Jungian theory of animus archetype—the male persona in a woman, because for Jung, man or woman is basically androgynous. Shui Ta constitutes how Jung characterised animus, “The animus is obstinate, harping on principles, laying down the law, dogmatic, world-reforming, theoretic, word-mongering, argumentative, and domineering” (Jung Four Archetypes 67).

Lacanian Alienation and Its Theatrical Resonance

Jacques Lacan's concept of lack complements the idea that human identity is constituted by a perpetual sense of incompleteness or absence, shaped by societal norms within the Symbolic order. Shen Teh experiences this lack when her goodness is exploited by societal expectations, compelling her to assume a mask to navigate the social order. The alter ego of Shui Ta momentarily fills this lack, offering her the symbolic authority denied to her as a woman and as a "good person." Lacan asserted in his seminar, delivered on November 11, 1962,

...the distance which is so essential to construct at the source of everything into which we are now going to advance, a distance which renders at once homologous and so advance, a distance which renders at once homologous and so distinct the relation between desire and narcissistic identification. (4)

Jacques Lacan's theory of alienation posits that the human subject is fundamentally split or divided, resulting from the inherent contradictions between the individual's inner experiences and external realities. This division arises from the process of entering the symbolic order, which is the realm of language, social norms, and cultural expectations. This process, often illustrated through the "mirror

stage", involves the subject's initial identification with an external image (like a mirror image) leading to a sense of an external, othered self. Alienation is seen as a necessary condition for the development of a human identity, but it also marks that identity as fundamentally alien, coming from the other. In *The Good Person of Szechwan*, there is a distance between Shen Teh's desire for the phallus, the male identity to dominate and her self-love for her female identity. Shen Teh forgets that she is in the disguise of a male persona and looks at the mirror to dress up her hair evidences her narcissistic love for her original identity. Her returning with 'a soft laugh' (Brecht 49) upon realising her disguised identity establishes the distance and confusion between the Shui Ta mask—the desired phallus—and the societal expectation from her "Que vent-il à moi?" (Lacan Book X 4). Shen Teh, from the very moment she comes up with the idea of Shui Ta, oscillates between her female identity of "the Angel of the Slum" and her desire for the phallus that she satisfies by disguising herself as Shui Ta. Again, Shen Teh's withdrawal from the scene towards the end of the play is a remarkable development: it constitutes Shen Teh's desire to surrender her own identity in the bipolar anxiety to overcome the barrier that separates the subject and the object, 'je' and 'objet petit a .' However, in Shen Teh's symbolic order, the objet petit a is not real: it is imaginary—an imaginary creation formed and characterised by the taken-in persons: "He's sharp as a knife" (Brecht 16). Interestingly, the imaginary saviour of Shen Teh has been conceived as a male persona because in the patriarchal society, only men can be "sharp as a knife," not women (Brecht 16).

Shen Teh's appearance in the disguise of her imaginary cousin in the very next scene (keeping aside the Interlude), suggests her long-nurtured desire for phallus: the objet petit a. Shui Ta is the best detour to find what Shen Teh is lacking as object of her desire. In him, Shen Teh finds a person to defend and save her from impending financial and social disaster, and her phallus as well, though she is well aware that neither Shen Teh herself nor does her disguised persona possess the male identity. However, as Shui Ta is the "unconsciousness constituted," Shui Ta does not but Shen Teh does know what she is lacking.

Conclusion

The dual identity of Shen Teh and Shui Ta in *The Good Person of Szechwan* encapsulates Brecht's complex exploration of morality, survival, and selfhood within a world structured by capitalist and patriarchal forces. At its surface, Shui Ta appears as a pragmatic response to economic exploitation; yet beneath this performative mask lies a deeper psychological necessity. Shen Teh's transformation is not merely a theatrical device or a material survival strategy but the manifestation of a divided psyche negotiating the demands of the social and symbolic orders.

From the Lacanian perspective, the emergence of Shui Ta reveals Shen Teh's confrontation with lack—the absence of symbolic authority and recognition denied to her as a woman and as a moral

being. Shui Ta, thus, operates as her *objet petit a*, the elusive signifier of what she desires but cannot attain within the patriarchal economy: autonomy, assertiveness, and agency. The mask provides temporary relief from this lack but also exposes the inescapable alienation of the subject within the Symbolic Order. Shen Teh's oscillation between goodness and ruthlessness dramatises Lacan's split subject, perpetually divided between the gaze of the Other and the ideal image of the self.

Simultaneously, within a Jungian framework, Shui Ta embodies the activation of the Animus, the masculine archetype repressed within the feminine psyche. The persona becomes a psychic compensatory mechanism—a necessary projection that allows Shen Teh to act with the authority her society denies her. Yet, this integration remains incomplete; her confession, “Yes, it is me. Shui Ta and Shen Teh, I am both of them,” signifies not resolution but recognition of fragmentation (Brecht 105). The wholeness she seeks through disguise collapses into the very duality it attempts to overcome.

Ultimately, the anamorphosis of Shen Teh into Shui Ta visualises the impossibility of sustaining goodness in an unjust world and the impossibility of achieving psychic unity under social repression. Brecht's parable thereby anticipates psychoanalytic modernity: identity emerges as a mask that both conceals and reveals the subject's desire. The gaze of society reflects Shen Teh's alienation back to her, showing that to live, one must split between the moral and the material, the feminine and the masculine, the self and its Other. Shen Teh, in the end, discovers that in a divided world, wholeness itself is an illusion.

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