

# YASMIN CHAUDHURI

## The Good Woman of Setzuan Themes

### Goodness

The theme of "goodness," which seems so simple in the title, is revealed as multi-faceted right from the beginning of the play. While Wong runs off to find a house that will welcome the gods for the night, the gods confer among themselves about how their mission to find a good person is failing. The second god says, "People just aren't religious anymore, let's face the fact. Our mission has failed!" The third god, reading from the resolution they are trying to follow, defines good people as those "living lives worthy of human beings." This definition is vague, since it is unclear what exactly a human being is worth.

The gods reveal a bit more about their definition of "goodness" in Scene 1a, during their interaction with Wong. They ask him to find Shen Te and "show interest in her goodness - for no one can be good for long if goodness is not in demand." This reveals that they recognize how difficult it is to be good without support from others. However, Shen Te provides her own support, in the form of her invented cousin, Shui Ta. When the carpenter asks him to call Shen Te because "she's good," Shui Ta answers, "Certainly. She's ruined."

The old woman is a candidate for a "good" person, and Shen Te recognizes that when she offers to lend her money to pay her rent. Shen Te says, "I wish the gods could have heard what your wife was just saying, Mr. Ma. They're looking for good people who're happy - and helping me makes you happy because you know it was love that got me into difficulties!"

"Goodness" as a theme is addressed in Scenes 6 and 6a by Yang Sun and by the gods, respectively. The Song of St. Nevercome, sung by Yang Sun, reveals that he believes it is futile to try to be "good." He sings sarcastically, "Oh, hooray, hooray! That day goodness will pay!" and describes the day that will never come as when "all men will be good without batting an eye." To him, this day is unachievable. The gods cite goodness as a strength, telling Wong that they cannot intervene in Shen Te's life because "The good man finds his own way here below! The good woman too."

When Shen Te realizes she is pregnant, her perception of goodness changes as well. She sees the carpenter's child digging in the trash and realizes her son will come into this kind of world. She sings and it is unclear whether anyone else hears the song. She sings, "To be good to you, my son / I shall be a tigress to all others / If I have to. / And I shall have to." With this resolve, she will stand up for her own property as Mr. Shui Ta.

When the gods appear to Wong in Scene 9a, they reveal how little goodness they have found in the world. Shen Te is the only person who has "stayed good," and Wong draws attention to the fact that she has not even done that. The third god concludes that, "Good intentions bring people to the brink of the abyss, and good deeds push them over the

edge." The gods have discovered that it is impossible to be "good" in accordance with their rulebook. When the courtroom is later empty, Shui Ta reveals that he is just Shen Te, disguised. Shen Te then tells the gods, "Your injunction / To be good and yet to live / Was a thunderbolt." It was impossible for her to be good to others and herself at the same time. The first god refuses to hear that Shen Te did bad things disguised as Shui Ta, instead congratulating her for remaining good. They leave without changing anything; Shen Te still has the same problems and still struggles to be good.

## Suspicion of Others

The suspicion of others is a character trait common in *The Good Woman of Setzuan*; it is contrary to the quality of "goodness" for which the gods are searching. Although the unemployed man asks for a free cigarette, after he leaves, the husband says, "I bet he had money on him." When Shui Ta arrives at the beginning of Scene 2, the sister-in-law immediately loses faith in Shen Te, declaring, "So we've been cheated. Where is the little liar?"

## Historical Materialism

*The Good Woman of Setzuan* suggests that a society's morality is determined by its economic systems. This theme is introduced in the prologue. When Shen Te complains to the gods, "But everything is so expensive, I don't feel sure I can do it!" the second god responds, "That's not our sphere. We never meddle with economics." However, the first god immediately contradicts him and they decide to give her some money to make it easier for her to be good. This irony blurs the distinction between the morality of "goodness" that the gods are searching for and economics.

In Scenes 7 and 8, Shui Ta creates a new kind of "goodness" for Shen Te to live by, employing those people who had come to expect free handouts from his "cousin." Being forced to work to earn his keep in Shu Fu's cabin seems to transform Yang Sun from "a dissipated good-for-nothing into a model citizen," as his mother puts it.

It is clear in Scene 9 that Shui Ta has let economic success get the best of him. He is called "The Tobacco King of Setzuan," since he has continually expanded the small tobacco shop into a huge factory system. He has turned Shen Te's "goodness," which was a weakness, into economic success, which is a strength. This value is in accordance with the theme of Historical Materialism. The theme of Historical Materialism is evident in Scene 10, when Mr. Shu Fu testifies on behalf of Mr. Shui Ta. He tells the judges, "Mr. Shui Ta is a businessman, my lord. Need I say more?" The first god answers, "Yes." This is because economics make no sense to the gods; it is not their realm.

## Patriarchal Capitalism

In order to be a true capitalist capable of getting what she wants, Shen Te must "become" Shui Ta, a male alter ego.

The issue of gender comes to the forefront during Scene 4, when Yang Sun interacts with Shui Ta in a completely different manner than that in which he interacts with Shen Te. Shui Ta defends his cousin (himself) by saying, "She is a human being, sir! And not devoid of common sense!" However, Yang Sun answers, "Shen Te is a woman: she is devoid of common sense. I only have to lay my hand on her shoulder, and church bells ring."

Scene 4a, which consists of "The Song of Defenselessness," demonstrates the theme of Patriarchal Capitalism. Shen Te sings first with Shui Ta's mask in her hand, then *as* Shui Ta, with the mask on. The first part of the song is an appeal to the gods, pointing out that "even the gods are defenseless" and asking, "Why don't the gods to the buying and selling"? As Shui Ta, she is more cynical: "You can only help one of your luckless brothers / by trampling down a dozen others."

In Scene 6, when Shen Te is planning to marry Yang Sun, it is revealed that the marriage will not happen without Shui Ta's presence (which is, of course, impossible). This is because Yang Sun believes Shui Ta will sell Shen Te's tobacco shop in order to get Yang Sun the money he needs to fly again. When Shen Te tells him that she has promised the money to the old couple to repay the loan they gave her, Yang Sun retorts, "And since you always do the wrong thing, it's lucky your cousin's coming."

## **Alienation**

Brecht is known for his creation of what he called the "alienation effect," which forced the audience to view a play objectively rather than experiencing its content emotionally. In *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, the epilogue calls upon the audience to decide for itself how goodness can exist in a world that is inherently not good.

The epilogue, which was added after the Viennese premiere of the play, implores the audience to write their own ending. It acknowledges that the current ending of the play is not quite satisfactory, since nothing is fixed. The gods are unable to accept that their rulebook must be changed in order to make it possible to be good in the world, and they leave in denial of Shen Te's situation. This technique of addressing the audience directly is an example of alienation, which forces the audience to see the play for what it is rather than think of it as an analogy for real life.

## **Music**

Throughout the play, the songs comment on the action. The Swiss composer Huldreich Georg Fröh composed the music used in the play's 1943 premiere at the Zürich Schauspielhaus in Switzerland. In recent productions, a score composed by Paul Dessau in 1947-48 is more commonly used. Brecht authorized both scores.

Sometimes the songs are recognized as such by the characters, as in Scene 1 when the grandfather sings "Song of the Smoke." The refrain is, "So what's the use? / See the smoke float free / Into ever colder coldness! / It's the same with me." Scene 1 ends with singing by Shen Te, though it is apparently not noticed by her rude house guests. This song, "The little lifeboat is swiftly sent down. / Too many men too greedily / Hold on to it as they drown," is a commentary on the greediness of the characters around her and how impossible it is to help everyone in need. In Scene 1a, the gods sing to Wong in his dream as a way of chastising him for having no faith in Shen Te.

The problem of the economy is addressed in Wong's song, "The Song of the Water Seller in the Rain." It is ironic to be selling water when it is raining, and it represents the futility of being in a profession that supplies something for which there is no demand.

The lyrics, *What are lawns and hedges thinking? / What are fields and forests saying? / "At the cloud's breast we are drinking! / And we've no idea who's paying!"* draw attention to the tension between nature, which appreciates what it receives in plenty, and humankind, which does not want that of which there is a surplus.

After telling Yang Sun that he only wanted to kill himself because it is a rainy day, Shen Te sings to the audience, breaking the imaginary fourth wall that exists between characters in a play and the audience watching them. She sings "In our country..." and Yang Sun does not acknowledge it, as if the song is not heard by him but exists only in Shen Te's mind and as a commentary for the audience. It happens again as she describes to him why she will not be a prostitute anymore ("I'm rich now, I said..."), but this time Yang Sun recognizes it and responds to the words.

Scene 4a, which consists of "The Song of Defenselessness," demonstrates the theme of Patriarchal Capitalism. Shen Te sings first with Shui Ta's mask in her hand, then as Shui Ta, with the mask on. The first part of the song is an appeal to the gods, pointing out that "even the gods are defenseless" and asking, "Why don't the gods to the buying and selling"? As Shui Ta, she is more cynical: "You can only help one of your luckless brothers / by trampling down a dozen others."

At the end of Scene 6, Yang Sun sings "The Song of St. Nevercome's Day," about the day people wait for when their lives will change. Of course, it never comes. His dream is to be a pilot, but because he does not have the money to buy the job in Peking, the day when he flies again will never come. The song occurs within the context of the play; he tells Shen Te, "While we're waiting, the bridegroom will sing a little song." However, the scene ends with him, Shen Te, and Mrs. Yang looking at the door, waiting for Shui Ta. Shui Ta will never come.

In Scene 8, music is used as encouragement to work. After he is promoted to foreman, Yang Sun directs the workers to sing to make them work faster. They sing The Song of the Eighth Elephant, which is about how the world values power over hard work. The eighth elephant is lazy but is rewarded even though his seven brothers do all the work; he is the one with tusks, so they are at a disadvantage. The song concludes, "Seven are no match for one, if the one has a gun!"

In Scene 10, music is used to drown out reason. The gods sing "The Valedictory Hymn" ironically, since there is no victory to be celebrated. They have not fixed anything about Shen Te's life. While they make their final exit, they sing "The Trio of the Vanishing Gods on the Cloud" in which they admit that "If we watch our find too long / It will disappear." They do not want to stay in case Shen Te proves to not be good after all; they would rather be ignorant of that change if it does happen, so they will not have to change their rulebook.

## **Love as a Weakness**

In *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, love is not equated with goodness. In fact, it is "love," or what is described as such, that most hinders Shen Te. The theme of love as a weakness is introduced in Scene 2 as the policeman describes the problem with Shen Te's lifestyle. "Miss Shen Te lived by selling herself... it is not respectable. Why not? A very deep question. But, in the first place, love - love isn't bought and sold like cigars, Mr. Shui Ta." This is also a reference to the play's original title, "Die Ware Liebe," which translates to "Love as a Commodity."

The theme of love as a weakness is emphasized with regard to Shen Te and Shu Fu in the beginning of Scene 4. Shen Te is walking home from Yang Sun's house and everything seems pleasant to her because she is, as she says, in love: "They say you walk on air when you're in love but it's even better walking on the rough earth, the hard cement." In Scene 4, Yang Sun will reveal to Shui Ta that he plans to abandon Shen

Te and take her money. After he leaves, Shui Ta says, "One weakness is enough, and love is the deadliest." Meanwhile, Shu Fu speaks of his love for Shen Te for the first time: "I begin to suspect I am in love with her. She is overpoweringly attractive!"

The issue of gender comes to the forefront during Scene 4, when Yang Sun interacts with Shui Ta in a completely different manner than that in which he interacts with Shen Te. Shui Ta defends his cousin (himself) by saying, "She is a human being, sir! And not devoid of common sense!" However, Yang Sun answers, "Shen Te is a woman: she is devoid of common sense. I only have to lay my hand on her shoulder, and church bells ring." Moreover, when Shen Te returns and Yang Sun reminds her of how he loves her, she says, "Forgive me, Mr. Shu Fu, I want to go with Mr. Yang Sun." She proves Yang Sun's rude characterization of her correct by ignoring the horrible things he said about her to Shui Ta. They exit as she sings to the audience, "I don't want to know if he loves me / I want to go with the man I love."

Love is represented as a weakness in Scene 6. After the would-be wedding guests depart, Yang Sun makes a fake announcement, explaining that the ceremony is postponed because Shui Ta has not arrived, but "also because the bride doesn't know what love is." He is making the point to Shen Te that if she loved him, she would sell her shop to support him in his dream of becoming a pilot in Peking. Nevertheless, it is clear to the audience that it is Yang Sun himself who does not know what love is, since he has betrayed Shen Te.

Wong is aware that love is a weakness and he reveals this to the gods in Scene 7a. They ask him how he wants them to help Shen Te, and he suggests, "Well, um, good-will, for instance, might do instead of love?" This is because Shen Te's love for Yang Sun has created so many problems for her. This belief is reaffirmed by Shui Ta as he offers Yang Sun a job "in consideration of my cousin's incomprehensible weakness" for him. It is ironic that Shui Ta is able to recognize this weakness, yet as Shen Te he still acts on it.