

Marxist Theory in Modern Drama: A Textual Analysis of Karen Zacarias' *Destiny of Desire*

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1. Introduction

In rebellion towards the common negative critique of Latin@ works, Karen Zacarias “decided to write the best stage telenovela [she] could... to show what a telenovela really is” (Clare). This idea birthed the Brecht influenced play of *Destiny of Desire*, utilizing Epic Theatre techniques of song, titles, and quotes. Despite outlining only three techniques, the play lends itself to Marxist (materialist) analysis with its material, style, and performance. While Zacarias’ *Destiny of Desire* utilizes overt characteristics of Epic Theatre, the play’s use of covert content unveils a Marxist approach towards social change within the United States and its treatment of Latin@ Americans.

First produced in Arena Stage, Washington D.C, *Destiny of Desire* follows a story presented by the troupe of actors, consisting of babies switched at birth, chance encounters, secrets, and lies. Displaying the opposite lives of those babies, the play becomes a commentary and invitation for thought over class relations, racial issues, gender roles, and controversial social debates. The Brechtian technique of alienation defamiliarizes the audience in order to engage in discussion and internal debate over the plot provided. This technique also allows for engagement with the Marxist lens in order to analyze the overt and covert characteristics of the play in a manner that uncovers an intention to teach, along with please.

By first deciphering a Marxist framework, this essay will analyze the text of Zacarias’ *Destiny of Desire* in order to understand the active social change the play is attempting to engage with. Utilizing both Marx’s economic theory and beliefs for the arts, the Epic theatre techniques will be evaluated in consideration to its Marxist beginnings. Then, the overt characteristics

within dialogue and action will be scrutinized under the framework previously laid out, followed by the covert characteristics of the spectacle as a whole, as it is laid out by the playwright.

2. Marxist Framework

To begin creating a framework for the analysis, the essay “Marxist Keywords for Performance” was first used to draw out characteristics to look for within the content of the play and the supplement information given by the playwright. Published by the University of Kansas, a group of theatre academics assembled five keywords from Karl Marx’s works that could be utilized when analyzing performance as the economic unit. While the essay does not correspond directly to a textual analysis, its findings identify words and connotations that are useful in beginning the analysis. Blackwell-Pal and company distinguished the Marxist method as “the ‘ruthless criticism’ of both the capitalist social conditions that make a performance possible and the capitalist society such a performance helps to reproduce,” establishing their analytical roots in performance (Blackwell-Pal, et al. 26). This essay’s criticism lies within the social condition that performance exhibits and the capitalist society it represents. However, like this group, and like Marx before them, analysis begins with the premise that “exploitation constitutes all aspects of social life under capital” (Blackwell-Pal, et al. 30-31).

The five terms laid out in “Marxist Keywords for Performance” are:

- *Capital*: can be interpreted as “investment towards accumulation,” but better stated as the “value in motion” (Blackwell-Pal, et al. 34). It is otherwise simplified as the exchange for labor for the exchange for wages in which a product is delivered and sold at a higher price, the profit made is capital. Capital in this discussion refers to the capital within the

world of the play and the world that presents the play, allowing discussion of how capital has a negative or positive effect on the members of society.

- *Class*: the level of society in which a person lies within. Class discussions within theatre notoriously end with further debate (Blackwell-Pal, et al. 36). However, within this analysis, class finds itself at the forefront of the play and the subconscious of reality. In both, the reader can draw conclusions on how the classes interact and oppose each other, while supporting or denying mobility. The term proletarianization joins discussions of class, in which a “activity is turned into a proletariat job” (Blackwell-Pal, et al. 38).
- *Commodity*: “a useful thing produced to be exchanged,” or, in this sense, the products within the play that hold value and the play itself holding value (Blackwell-Pal, et al. 41). The term commodity could be given to a tangible product or an intangible concept, but must be agreed upon by at least two parties.
- *The State*: the “institutional ensemble activities, including regulation, law enforcement, militarism, taxation, and public services,” distinct from the terms “government” and “nation,” as it enables social stratification in some manner (Blackwell-Pal, et al. 43). The state in the play is similar to the state in the real world, as the play shows a reflection of reality, despite its fictional location.
- *Value*: while having a distinct definition in politics, in this essay, it can be derived as abstract wealth, either in money, a tangible symbol with an agreed upon value, or in an intangible concept, such as love or thoughts. Both are important as value will play a major part in discussion within the play and externally.

Two other sources were used in creating a framework for *Destiny of Desire* to be analyzed under. Starting with *Marxist Literary Criticism Today* by Barbara Foley, specific

literary tools and characteristics are given importance to Marxist Criticism, in a semi-strict order. The author first lays out “rhetoric,” defining it as the “means of persuasion in the text” (Foley 124). The critic is looking for the ways the text creates assent in the audience. This embodies the literary tools familiar to us already, such as repetition, syntax, image, etc. This in itself alienates the researcher from viewing the play as a play but as a “linguistic artifact” (Foley 124). The next few tasks of the critic are not laid out as an order but as paths to take. Ideological critique focuses on “implicit about individual and social being,” utilizing what Foley deems as “maneuvers” such as dehistoricization (portrayal of a timeless and changeless human condition or nature), and naturalization (the portrayal of specific social formations that are beyond the human creation or intervention) (Foley 126-7). Observing Humanism, assuming that literary works are driven by ideologies that one needs to evade or repress, allowing the critic to analyze “the ways in which the text ends up legitimizing existing social relations” (Foley 137). Alternatively within this method is the “literary text, like other artworks, as a use value, a product of concrete labor that refuses commodification in the capitalist marketplace,” meaning that the writer of the text occupies a position opposing the reigning state, as they do not follow the means normal means of capital or value (Foley 137). Foley goes as far as to directly quote Marx in this explanation, “The writer in no wise considers his work a means. It is an end in itself, so little is it a means for him and for others that he sacrifices his existence to its existence, when necessary,” the writer is inherently alienated from the marketplace, describing literature’s, or in our case, a play’s, relationship to society (*Rheinische Zeitung* ch.6). This directly correlates with the derived definition of value and capital previously laid out. The last task pulled from Foley’s work is analyzing the Alternative Hegemony, reviewing the outlook from the proletariat point of view

and assessing the “extent to which the notion of the political unconscious is a useful tool” (Foley 150, 154).

The last resource used to lay out our framework is an article published in *Marxism, Modernity, and Postcolonialism*. By Neil Larson, “Marxism, Postcolonialism, and *The Eighteenth Brumaire*” lays out two viewpoints, from the subaltern (in reference to “Can the Subaltern Speak?” by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak) and from the Western view (Larson 207). Through Larson’s article, he argues that “representation would now no longer stand between class subject and class agency, screening the first front the second; it would disclose itself as simply the objective *self-mediation* of a class in whose formal make-up consciousness and agency, desire and interest... can now coincide,” meaning there is no longer a need for the subaltern to be represented by another group (Larson 210). The issues of the said class can be presented by them in a way to combat these problems themselves, not having others face it for them.

The framework can be abridged to the following:

- Keeping in line with the terms outlined (Capital, Class, Commodity, The State, and Value), analysis begins with the rhetorical analysis of the text.
- Through analysis of the text, ideological critique will evolve, alongside discussion of humanism and alternative hegemony. This is all done with the idea of self mediation underlining the evidence.

With this framework, the analysis has been divided into three sections: Epic Theatre Characteristics, Overt Content, and Covert Content. Within each section, evidence has been derived and placed in the most manageable and most open to analysis position. For example, the

use of alienation with actors presenting themselves as actors is not in the Epic Theatre Characteristics section, but instead the Covert Content, due to its implications of real world implications and being an afterthought within the audience's mind.

3. The Epic Theatre Characteristics

Zacarias is quick to note three specific characteristics from Epic Theatre that she employs into *Destiny of Desire*: Quotes, Titles, and Songs. She is also quick to quote Brecht, directly from his work "A Short Organum For The Theatre," a specific passage that explains theatre is meant to entertain, that it needs no other justification to exist within our society (Brecht 2). In that same essay, Brecht goes on to advocate for a critical and analytical engagement from the audience instead of passive and emotional. Brecht's form of theatre is a "practical theatre," as it is a means to see possible change and improvements in society (Shukla and Purohit 48). The utilization of Epic Theatre, as Epic Theatre itself was a "wilful assault on the theatrical canon," and derived from a belief in Marxism, lends *Destiny of Desire* directly into a space for analysis under the Materialist lens (Desmond 157). Focusing on the three characteristics Zacarias has listed, this portion of the analysis ties the rhetoric of Quotes, Titles, and Songs into the larger discussion of the plays content.

The quotes within *Destiny of Desire* are described as "current national facts that (progressively) contextualize the issue of the scene," grounding the play into its location of performance and the hegemonic society of the audience (Zacarias 101). The preface regarding the quotes exhibits the allowance of changing the facts to reflect the time the play is being presented and the society. It also implies that the sources should be credited in some manner, with the quotes in the play having a bibliography at the end of the script. The usage of quotes are

described by Zacarias herself as “funny or sobering facts that ground the plot and connect it to life in the U.S” (Clare). Each quote carries a different weight in the context of the United States hegemonic society, some feeling less important or controversial than others. For example, when Victoria, the daughter swapped to poor parents Hortencia and Ernesto, accidentally shoots Dr. Mendoza, the corrupt senior doctor who is in love with Hortencia, due to a misfire and misbelief Mendoza was a bandit, an actor steps out to say “Last year 285 children under the age of eighteen picked up a firearm and accidentally shot themselves or someone else” (Zacarias 130). This asserts the real life implications of gun access and accidental gun violence of children in the United States. It has the larger debate of gun control and defense of the Second Amendment looming over the fact. That fact forces the audience to think of how The State allows a statistic of this kind when it is presented in front of them. The use of the fact raises the implication of a need to evade this kind of statistic, as any number above zero is a sobering thought.

On the other hand, when Fabiola, the vain mother of Pilar (the other swapped baby) and wife of wealthy casino owner, Armando, begs Sebastian (the estranged son of Armando) to not betray their secret affair to Armando, (her husband, his father, for clarification) an actor steps out with another fact. Coupled with the written direction that the actor also plays Armando, the actor states “68% of married women, in the United States say they would have an affair if they knew they would never get caught. [Play location] is in the United States,” eliciting a comedic moment within the dramatic scene (Zacarias 148). While the stakes of this fact do not reach all the way to congressional debate, it does reach into the family unit. In the hegemonic society of the United States, there is a perceived lesser value of guilt if there are no consequences. Adultery is statistically more acceptable in women than rejected in the United States. It is humorous, but it

also implies the need of suspicion to your female-identifying partner. That in itself is a lesser implication than the need to ridicule firearm access.

The titles used within the play are not as in depth as the ones of Brecht's works. In fact, Zacarias has employed a strategy of a telenovela in combination with the title cards, utilizing an incredibly brief allusion to what the next scene is to exhibit. For instance, scene five is opened with an actor displaying a placard stating "Secrets and Lies," as well with the actor saying the phrase (Zacarias 140). This, of course, leads to the expectation of secrets and lies being told to the audience but hidden from characters of the story. Unlike, per say, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, *Destiny of Desire*'s titles do not clue the audience into who is in the scene or what the action of the scene can be summarized as. The titles resemble more the titles of episodes of a telenovela. This can be seen in all of the other scene titles, such as "Scene 9: A Surprising Turn of Events," "Scene 2: A Chance Encounter," or "Act II, Scene 5: Servants, Poets, And Daughters," all laid out like chapters the preface (Zacarias 102). While the titles do not have a direct correlation to materialism, it is a pause in the action, reminding the audience that they are in fact watching a show.

Regarding the songs, it relates to Brecht's notion of the "circus arena," in which without any illusion, the audience witnesses the actors exhibit their skills (Shukla and Purohit 49). Theatre is a social phenomenon that entertains, but, within the song presented, metaphors and correlation to one's position in the hegemonic society can be found. Taking the song that interludes scene four, "The Saddest Song: A Rose in the Desert" is a duet of Pilar and Victoria (the two swapped at birth) that reveals their shared despair for their opposite situations (Zacarias 133). The characters sing of a rose blooming in a desert, despite the elements against it, a metaphor of the young women in their respective plights. The song states that the rose seed only

needs a drop of rain, a chance, to bloom, in which the rose will exhibit hope in its petals and fight in its thorns. This metaphor leads to the representation of women in a situation that holds them back, alluding to an alternative state. It can be more specific as Latina women are held back in the United States, needing a chance to break out of their social class. They are respectively searching for mobility, Pilar: down, in order to become a writer and Victoria: up to become a doctor, both with similar means, holding education in high value.

The other aspect of the songs to note is the use of which language, Spanish or English, is used in the song. In the first song of the play, “A Song of Destiny and Desire,” all the actors sing in Spanish (Zacarias 119). It is described as an “opening credits song... a theatrical musical collage,” in which the characters allude to a time jump of 18 years and suggest some of the upcoming points of conflict within the story (Zacarias 119). The use of Spanish in the songs separates the songs from the narrative, making them more of a spectacle, alluding to the charm of the music used in telenovelas. With these songs, the audience is forced to remember that the story does not take place in the United States like the performance does, instead remembering that the play is in a fictional city of Mexico, an alternative hegemonic society than our own. While being placed in a different country, the facts still correlate to America and the State still resembles one Americans are familiar with.

4. The Overt Content

In deciphering the overt from the covert, and separating from the Epic Theatre Characteristics, the analysis leads to specific sets of actions and dialogue the playwright presents in *Destiny of Desire*. Within the play, there are a number of ideas explored such as education, gender roles, class mobility, corruption from capitalism, and socialized medicine. While

discussing each example will be brief, each subject is laced throughout the entirety of the story. This analysis will be observing each in the text that they are directly mentioned or alluded to. All of these examples lead to conflict of some kind, “modeling characters and situations on patterns of human behavior,” and pushes for the audience to think critically of the matter set before them (Shukla and Purohit 50).

Education, as pivotal to upward class mobility, is characterized as pivotal in a downward class movement, earning a positive and negative value to the social position of characters. In the case of negative value, it is also tied with gender roles. While Pilar first mentions going to University in scene one, the conflict of education is derived in scene four, in which Pilar exclaims her defiance to the future Armando has laid out for her. Armando demands that “Now is the time to find you a husband from an elite family and secure your future,” only to be answered by “Papi, I am going to the University,” Pilar exhibiting her own hopes for her future (Zacarias 131). Armando goes on to explain that going to University is “for the sniveling middle classes” and a “waste of time for a pretty girl like you,” dismissing the dream quickly by belittling the need for education and enforcing the position of trophy wife onto Pilar (Zacarias 131). Armando goes on to claim that the Public University is filled with “infectious radicals and revolutionaries,” giving a negative connotation to those of educated thought (Zacarias 132). Education is seen as beneath the Castillo family’s class, that they should not lower themselves to the ideal of common people. This notion enforces the separation of classes, while also settling wealthy women, especially pretty ones at that, to a life without higher education. In this higher status, the value of education is diminished, seeing it as a “hot” commodity that anyone could access.

In the case of Victoria, education is seen as means of upward class mobility and lives with the tie to gender roles. However, in the need to live, education takes a backseat, and gender roles are once again enforced upon a young woman. After Hortencia's arrest, the audience learns of Victoria's dream to become a doctor, something she has worked towards and her parents supported with their long hours and manual labor. Later in that same scene, Victoria pleads to take her mother's place as the Castillos' maid, Armando demanding she be placed into a "maid's uniform as soon as possible," immediately diminishing her character to a lower class job (Zacarias 138). Victoria is reduced in the eyes of Armando to someone lower in the physical sense. Furthermore in the physical sense, Armando sexually harrasses Victoria (remember that is his biological daughter) by "[tapping her bottom]," reminding her that he is the boss, and to remember her place (Zacarias 139). Education in this instance is of positive value in class mobility, also allowing Victoria to rise above the gender roles that have been forced upon her in her current position.

As both conflicts of education are shown through the modeling of behavior, the maneuver of humanism allows the assumption that the writer is demonstrating these scenes as a society to evade. It is an example of what society should actively work against. The audience is faced with two sides of the same coin in regards to education and gender roles in the face of class mobility. They are faced with a view in order to consider "collective action" to prevent these scenarios and allow some measure of control (Chemers 3). These situations also examine how the issues of class mobility, education, and gender roles all coincide with each other, Zacarias explores the contradictory ideas and nature within the State (Shukla and Purohit 52).

To further the conversation of contradictions, the corruption of capitalism and socialized medicine are displayed in the behaviors and characteristics of Dr. Mendoza and his son, Dr.

Diego. Upon being introduced to Dr. Diego, the audience learns Dr. Mendoza is disappointed in his son because he did not “bolster his practice or elite clientele,” instead choosing to provide medicine to the poor of the community (Zacarias 141). Dr. Diego goes on to state that his dream is to build “a clinic that provides free medical help to the people who most need it,” not directly, but implying some sort of socialized medicine (Zacarias 141). This is in complete juxtaposition to his father, who is described as “selfish and evil” because he has taken bribes and donations from Fabiola in order to build out the hospital, but charge exorbitant prices (Zacarias 184). To backtrack, in the very first scene of the play, what could be considered the prologue, Fabiola convinces Dr. Mendoza to switch the babies, as her biological child is unhealthy and likely to die soon after birth, the “prestige and money seduced him” (Zacarias 208). Over the next eighteen years, Dr. Mendoza extorts and blackmails Fabiola for donations and contributions to the hospital, making it a medical hub in Bellarico. The hospital services become an expensive commodity, with the doctor increasing its monetary value to his liking. Dr. Diego is the complete opposite of his father.

In showing the two sides of healthcare, Zacarias also engages with an alternative hegemonic society, in which the greedy face a gruesome end and the generous prosper. Dr. Mendoza is suffocated by Ernesto in an act of protection for his family, but, in poetic justice, Dr. Mendoza is a match to donate his heart to Victoria, the original sick baby he doomed to a life of poverty. In the final scene of the play, Dr. Diego accepts his father committed bad decisions, but he gets to live and marry Victoria. The audience witnesses the chain of actions, presented to them at first as a choice. In the first scene, it is clear “that the characters were choosing one action over another,” and then the story plays out the consequences of that first decision to switch the babies (Shukla and Purohit 50). As Dr. Mendoza is faced with a choice, the audience is also invited to

think about what decision they would make, as the money, the social classes, and potential access to healthcare all weigh into the situation. It is clear here that in Zacarias' play, capital has corrupted a once good man, who in turn decreases commodity and increases the monetary value of healthcare in order to ride to the upper class. It is corrected by his son doing the opposite.

5. The Covert Content

As stated previously when discussing the framework, alienation of the audience was chosen as a covert characteristic of *Destiny of Desire*. The presence of the actors over the characters forces the audience to constantly remember they are watching a performance. The setting is “an abandoned theater in (hometown),” and the actors are described to discover it (Zacarias 102, 105). They are written to be seen dusting off set pieces, warming up, getting dressed, all at the top of the first act. Throughout the play, the actors are described to create sound effects, dress into different costumes, and constantly watch the action of the story. The actors are an ever-looming presence, serving as fellow audience and player. This usage, while causing alienation, also lends to the analysis of the spectacle itself.

In the given framework, the bourgeoisie can be characterized as the wealthy, controlling the means of capital and value in the given State. The proletariat are the “subservient class... surviving by selling labor” (Chemers 4). In the case of the play, not the story, the designation of the two classes is convoluted, as the actors are presented to seemingly be in control of the means of capital and value, but they are also the one selling their labor, constituting that acting and delivering a story is a service. One can give value to a play as one gives value to a novel, it lies intrinsically outside the hegemonic State as its capital goes back to the working force. Furthermore, specifically in bigger cities, the “[Latino] population is under-represented in our

audiences” (“New Kind of Audience”). The audience for smaller shows with less of a following than major Broadway productions are mostly Caucasian. The white racial class is more likely to be considered of the bourgeois class, especially those that are willing to spend time and money on casually seeing live theatre. In some cases, the Bourgeoisie also fund the theatre that they are seeing. In that case, the audience is in control of the value, giving a monetary value to create the play and set wages. In *Destiny of Desire*’s case, the actors happen upon an abandoned theatre, so there’s no wealthy benefactor to be attributed. With the actors controlling all aspects of the production, value, capital, and commodity (setting dates and times), they are inherently not imposed on by the State, they “controlled their own agency” (Huerta and Morton 248).

Supporting the alienation of the audience, the style of a telenovela also leads to a discussion of materialism, as it is the most popular form of television in the world with a “reported 2 billion people regularly [watching] these stories of life, death, love, and betrayal” (“Sweaty Popularity”). Despite the popularity, as stated previously, the term “telenovela” is given a negative connotation of inferiority when used as a critique of Latin@ artists and writers. However, by merging the styles of Epic Theatre and Telenovelas, Zacarias “embraces relativity,” drawing from traditions of a culture in which her characters live (Desmond 161). The playwright utilizes cultural elements and integrates them for her time and society. The usage of the telenovela style opens Zacarias’ usual predominately white audience to include more Latin@ spectators. While coded as a melodrama, the usage of Epic Theatre characteristics opens *Destiny of Desire* to reject singular genres, instead living in multiple. Televised telenovelas are a common commodity, familiar to any Latin American household. The commodity is now more rare as it is presented on a live stage and coupled with traditional theatre traits. The value of this play rises as its rarity of genre is also aided with the subaltern representing themselves, bolstering the idea of

self mediation. Zacarias “navigates cultural... and artistic borders” and “provides multifaceted ways” of engaging with Latin culture, engaging with an alternative hegemonic society all along (Garcia-Romero 106).

6. Conclusion

Destiny of Desire, while complex in story and method, simplifies to its tagline “An Unapologetic Telenovela in Two Acts,” living in two worlds of traditional theatre and modern television form (Zacarias 98). By engaging with an alternative hegemonic society, Zacarias has shown the reader the pitfalls of corruption, gender roles, and class distinctions while elevating the issues of class mobility and accessible education and healthcare. Zacarias presents an audience with actions that present active social change and rebellion to the State.

The usage of Epic Theatre characteristics charges the audience to be active and unattached to the story presented, inviting the audience to think critically about the actions and decisions, constantly reminding them that they are spectators of a performance. They are forced to consider their own reality with the quotes directly correlating with their hegemonic state. The overt content of *Destiny of Desire* directly targets multiple issues in society, reflecting the State and those in its grasp to the audience. The issues are presented by believable characters, similar to those one may encounter in reality, depicting multiple sides of the same subjects, leading the audience to consider their own behaviors in the same or similar position as the characters. The overt content of the performance as a whole engages with the humanistic approach towards art as being outside the State, that art is controlled and valued by the creator. This content also entails the idea of self mediation and embracing relativity in order to invite a change in audience makeup, changing the overarching hegemonic society of theatre goers.

Destiny of Desire bolsters audiences to create social change in the material world, opposing the hegemonic State and welcoming a greater society of self mediation and diversity. While Zacarias concludes the play with the resolution of an alternative hegemonic society, where the just and poor prevail over the rich and corrupt, Zacarias true push for change can be interpreted as a new culture within American theatre, one in which Latin American stories are celebrated for their usage of the cultural form, and audience diversifies to include more people of color and economic levels. Creating an accessible form of theatre, Zacarias pioneers a form that subverts genre, inspiring “discussion of where Latino theatre is going- back to its populist root,” and championing the development of self mediated stories (Huerta and Morton 250). Just like her predecessors before her, with Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu the King* and Bertolt Brecht’s *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, Zacarias masterly employs familiar cultural elements in order to engage an audience in something comfortable. *Destiny of Desire* embodies the spirit of theatrical works that came before it, giving room and inspiration to those that will come after.

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