



Gender Performativity and Economic Identity in *Good Person of Szechwan*

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Abstract: This article examines the intersection of gender performativity and economic identity in *The Good Person of Szechwan*, arguing that the dual persona of Shen Teh/Shui Ta is not merely a psychological or economic necessity but a structurally gendered response to capitalist conditions. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of performativity and Bertolt Brecht's concept of the alienation effect, the study demonstrates that gender in the play operates as a contingent and strategic performance shaped by material exigencies. Shen Teh's socially coded femininity—marked by compassion, self-sacrifice, and ethical obligation—proves economically unsustainable, necessitating the adoption of the masculine persona of Shui Ta, who embodies rationality, authority, and capitalist pragmatism. The paper further proposes that this identity-switching functions through a proto-algorithmic logic, wherein subjectivity is determined by situational demands rather than psychological continuity. In this framework, femininity aligns with moral expenditure, while masculinity facilitates economic survival and accumulation. By foregrounding the performative and functional nature of identity, the article repositions gender as an economic technology within Brecht's dramaturgy. Ultimately, the study argues that the play exposes the structural incompatibility between ethical goodness and capitalist survival, while simultaneously revealing the failure of divine justice to reconcile this contradiction.

Keywords: Gender Performativity; economic identity; social functions, survival strategy; socially coded Femininity.

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Introduction

Bertolt Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan* occupies a critical position within modern political theatre as a dramaturgical experiment that interrogates the ethical viability of goodness within a capitalist order. Written within the framework of Epic Theatre, the play resists psychological realism and foregrounds the socio-economic structures that determine human behaviour. At the centre of this inquiry lies the paradox embodied by Shen Teh, whose moral integrity becomes increasingly untenable within a system governed by profit, exploitation, and survival.

The dual identity of Shen Teh/Shui Ta has traditionally been interpreted through psychological, Marxist, or ethical lenses. However, such readings often treat identity either as an expression of internal division or as a direct response to material conditions, without sufficiently accounting for the mediating role of gender as a performative and functional category. This study proposes that gender in the play is neither essential nor merely symbolic, but operational—a strategic mode through which economic survival is negotiated.

Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, this paper reconceptualises identity not as a stable ontology but as a reiterative performance shaped by regulatory norms and material pressures. Simultaneously, Brecht's alienation effect destabilises audience identification, compelling a critical engagement with the socio-economic logic that necessitates Shen Teh's transformation into Shui Ta. Within this framework, femininity becomes aligned with moral expenditure and vulnerability, while masculinity emerges as a performative apparatus of economic control and rationality.

Thus, the play stages identity as a situational mechanism, governed less by psychological continuity than by functional adaptability. Shen Teh's transformation is not simply a disguise, but a systematic recalibration of subjectivity, dictated by the structural incompatibility between ethical goodness and capitalist survival.

Literature Review

Existing scholarship on *The Good Person of Szechwan* has approached the play through diverse critical frameworks, including performance studies, Marxist critique, and psychoanalytic interpretation, each illuminating distinct aspects of Shen Teh/Shui Ta's dual identity.

Palit analyses *The Good Person of Szechwan* through body movements, arguing that bodily gestures—especially of the hands—function as critical signifiers of social and economic contradictions. Within Brecht's Epic Theatre and alienation effect, gesture disrupts empathy and foregrounds analysis. Shen Teh's compassionate gestures contrast with Shui Ta's controlled pragmatism, materialising a performative split identity shaped by economic survival. Thus, gendered behaviour emerges as contingent and strategic rather than essential. Palit further shows how bodily movement encodes class dynamics and systemic violence,



exposing the instability of “goodness” under capitalism and reinforcing the need to read identity—ethical and gendered—as economically conditioned performance.

According to Muhammad Minhas et al., both *Death of a Salesman* and *The Good Woman of Szechwan* offer a powerful critique of capitalist society through a Marxist lens. The authors argue that these plays expose how capitalism leads to alienation, class struggle, and the commodification of human relationships. In *The Good Woman of Szechwan*, Shen Teh’s transformation into Shui Ta reflects the moral conflict between maintaining goodness and surviving within a profit-driven system. Minhas et al. highlight that both playwrights reveal the dehumanising effects of capitalism, where individuals are forced to compromise their values and personal relationships in order to survive.

Sneha Banerjee writes that *The Good Person of Szechwan* criticises Marxism and shows how capitalism creates inequality and exploitation. She explains that in such a society, it is difficult to remain good, as people struggle to survive. Through Shen Teh and her alter ego Shui Ta, Brecht shows that one must become practical and sometimes harsh to live in a capitalist world. The play also highlights poverty, greed, and gender inequality, showing that true goodness is not possible without changing the system.

Parveen and Biswas argue that the dual identity of Shen Teh in *The Good Person of Szechwan* cannot be explained by a single theory. They analysed the identity switching from the psychological theories of Lacan and Jung. From a Jungian view, Shui Ta represents her inner “animus,” or masculine side of Shen Teh. From a Lacanian perspective, Shen Teh’s creation of Shui Ta is driven by the lack of social power and recognition in a patriarchal society. Thus, they conclude that Shen Teh’s dual identity is both a response to social pressure and a result of inner psychological conflict.

Taken together, these studies establish that Shen Teh/Shui Ta’s duality has been read either as a psychological necessity or as a response to material-economic conditions. However, the specific role of gender as a performative and economically functional category within this identity transformation remains insufficiently theorised.

Research Gap

While existing scholarship has productively examined the dual identity of Shen Teh/Shui Ta through psychological, Marxist, and performative frameworks, it has largely treated gender as either a secondary attribute or an implicit background condition. Consequently, the structural and functional role of gender in mediating the relationship between morality and economic survival remains underexplored.

In particular, previous studies have not adequately addressed how gender operates as a performative mechanism that is materially conditioned and strategically mobilised within the play’s capitalist framework. The transformation into Shui Ta is often interpreted either as an expression of psychological division or as a pragmatic response to economic pressure; however, such readings fail to account for the extent to which this



shift is specifically gendered, aligning femininity with moral expenditure and masculinity with economic rationality and control.

This study seeks to bridge this gap by analysing gender not merely as an identity marker, but as an operational category that structures subjectivity in response to material exigencies, thereby reconfiguring the Shen Teh/Shui Ta duality as a function of performative adaptation within capitalism.

This study argues that in *The Good Person of Szechwan*, gender operates as a performative and economically conditioned construct, wherein Shen Teh's adoption of the masculine identity of Shui Ta emerges as a strategic response to the structural incompatibility between socially coded femininity and capitalist survival. Rather than reflecting an internal psychological division, this transformation reveals identity as functional and situational, governed by material exigencies and sustained through performative adaptation.

Theoretical Framework

Gender performativity is a concept that explains that gender is not something we are born with, but something we show through our actions. This idea was given by philosopher Judith Butler. According to her, gender is not fixed. Instead, we “perform” our gender in our daily life through behaviour, dressing, speaking, and interacting with others.

In the play *The Good Person of Szechwan*, this idea can be clearly seen through the character of Shen Teh. Shen Teh is a kind and soft-hearted woman, but she struggles to survive in a harsh society. To protect herself and manage her business, she creates another identity called Shui Ta, who appears as a strict and practical man. Through this dual identity, we can understand gender performativity. Shen Teh behaves according to the expectations of a “good woman” — she is caring, emotional, and selfless: she is called “The Angel of the Slums” (39, 55, 72). On the other hand, when she becomes Shui Ta, she acts in a more authoritative, practical, and sometimes harsh way, which society usually associates with men. This shows that gender is not natural or permanent. Instead, it depends on how a person acts in different situations. Shen Teh is the same person, but her behaviour changes according to the role she is playing. Society forces her to “perform” different genders to survive. Therefore, *The Good Person of Szechwan* reflects the idea that gender is not something fixed, but something that is created through repeated actions and social expectations.

Judith Butler believes that identity is not fixed but is influenced by external pressures like society and conditions. In *The Good Person of Szechwan*, economic identity is clearly shown through the character of Shen Teh. Shen Teh is a poor but kind woman who wants to help others. However, because of her weak financial condition, people take advantage of her kindness. She is unable to survive properly just by being good.

To deal with this situation, she creates another identity called Shui Ta, who is practical, strict, and business-minded. This change shows how her economic condition forces her to behave differently. As Shen Teh, she represents kindness and morality, but as Shui Ta, she represents survival and economic control.



This shows that a person's identity is not always stable. Shen Teh's economic struggles push her to change her behaviour and even her identity. She cannot survive in society with only goodness, so she adapts herself according to economic needs. Therefore, in the play, economic identity plays an important role. It shows that financial condition can shape a person's actions, decisions, and even their sense of self.

Again, Shen Teh's entrance with the mask and dress of Shui Ta exposes the real identity of Shui Ta to the audience and makes them realise that Shen Teh is very potent to handle tough situations and her own business, even to run a factory. This technique creates an alienation effect on the audience. This leads to a further question: Why cannot Shen Teh handle her own material problems being in her own self?

Shen Teh: Performing Feminine Ethics

In *The Good Person of Szechwan*, the idea of "goodness" is not something natural, but something that is socially constructed. The character of Shen Teh shows how society defines goodness, especially for women. Her kindness and generosity are not just personal qualities, but they are also connected to what society expects from a "good woman."

She is shown as caring, helpful, and selfless. She gives shelter to the poor, helps people even when she has very little, and always tries to be kind. These qualities make her appear as a "good" person in the eyes of society. However, these traits are also examples of socially coded femininity. Society expects women to be gentle, emotional, and giving, and Shen Teh fulfils these expectations.

But this construction of goodness creates problems for her. Because she is too kind and generous, people start taking advantage of her. She is unable to protect herself or maintain her livelihood. This shows that the idea of being a "good woman" is not always practical in a harsh, economic world.

To survive, Shen Teh creates the identity of Shui Ta, who is strict, practical, and less emotional. This contrast clearly shows that the "goodness" associated with femininity is not enough for survival. It is something imposed by society rather than something natural.

Therefore, the play suggests that goodness, especially in women, is socially constructed. Shen Teh's kindness and generosity reflect how femininity is defined by society, but at the same time, it also shows the limitations of such expectations in real life.

Due to this economic pressure, Shen Teh is forced to create her alter ego, Shui Ta, who is practical, strict, and business-minded. As Shui Ta, she becomes more successful economically, but she has to act harshly and even exploit others. This shows that in a capitalist system, survival often requires selfishness and cruelty.

Therefore, the economic consequences for Shen Teh are very serious. Her poverty, financial instability, and social pressure force her to change her identity. Through her character, Bertolt Brecht shows that it is very difficult to remain good in a society driven by money and profit. Moreover, in *The Person of Szechwan*, Shen Teh's feminine identity is shown as economically unsustainable in a capitalist society. As a woman, she is kind, caring, and emotional, and she tries to help everyone around her. However, these qualities



make her weak in the world of business and survival. The Interlude after Scene 4 reveals her inability protect herself against the harsh world and remain good:

The good

Cannot remain good for long in our country

Where cupboards are bare, housewives start to squabble.

.....

.....

In order to win one's mid-day meal

One needs the toughness which elsewhere builds empires. (48)

Interestingly, immediately after this interlude, Shen Teh tries to resist and reject Sun but probably conforming to the gender-expectation, she walks off with her beloved one: "I would not reckon what it costs me. / I would not consider what is wiser" (59).

Shui Ta: Performing Masculine Capitalism

In this play, Bertolt Brecht shows how difficult it is to remain good in a selfish society. Shen Teh is kind and helpful, but people take advantage of her goodness. Because she cannot handle everything alone, she creates another identity called Shui Ta. Shui Ta helps her protect her shop and deal with selfish people. In so doing, he draws various opinions from different people. Initially, people consider him wicked, but they realise only a person like Shui Ta can save Shen Teh. So, rightly, the unemployed man and the sister-in-law of the taken-in family opine about Shui Ta:

THE UNEMPLOYED MAN, *excited*. She must send for her cousin! All of you, advise her to send for her cousin! He's the only one can do anything.

THE SISTER-IN-LAW. That's right! He's mean enough, but at least he'll save her business, and then she'll be generous. (Brecht 78)

Later, in the same scene, Wang says: "He's not a wicked man..." (Brecht 81). Though Shui Ta is often considered to be materialist and mean, the policeman thinks that he "is a man of principle" (Brecht 100). He is practical, strict, and business-minded. He focuses on profit, discipline and does not trust people easily. Because of these qualities, he becomes successful. Shui Ta can, what Shen Teh fails, tame Sun and appoint him as a worker in the tobacco factory. Here, the dramatist shows how proficient Shui Ta is in managing his workers. This is further reflected in the Song of the Eighth Elephant. Earlier, we have already observed how efficiently he tackled the carpenter and kept good terms with the policeman. These traits are called economic masculinity. Brecht shows that in a capitalist society, masculine traits like control, logic, and financial strength are necessary for survival. Bertolt Brecht shows these qualities through the character of Shui Ta. Shui Ta is the practical side of Shen Teh, created to survive in a harsh society. At the same time, he also criticises this system because it forces people to hide their kindness and become harsh. So, the idea of economic masculinity



in the play shows how gender-like qualities are connected with money and power, and how society pushes individuals to adopt these traits to survive. Thus, the emergence of Shui Ta shows that being only good is not enough to survive. Society forces Shen Teh to become strong and sometimes harsh.

Analysing the character of Shui Ta, we find some noticeable traits. First, Shui Ta's rationality is seen in the way he makes logical decisions. He does not act emotionally like Shen Teh. Instead, he thinks about profit and future security. He manages the shop carefully and avoids unnecessary loss. Secondly, Shui Ta is ruthless. He does not hesitate to be strict or harsh with others. He refuses to help people blindly and sometimes exploits workers to increase profit. This shows that he values success more than kindness. Lastly, Shui Ta controls labour very strictly. He makes workers work harder and keeps discipline in the workplace. He treats labour as a means to earn profit, not with sympathy. Because of this, his business grows, but it also shows the lack of humanity. Through these traits, Brecht shows that in a capitalist society, a person must become rational, ruthless, and controlling to survive, even if it means losing kindness. These traits help Shen Teh manage business, control labour, and earn profit. Because of these characteristics, people cannot exploit him. It is clearly comprehensible that women are subject to exploitation, but men are not. So, masculinity becomes a survival strategy for Shen Teh: Shen Teh is forced to perform masculinity to survive.

Dual Identity as the Economic Mechanism

The switching of identity shows the inner conflict of Shen Teh. She wants to be good, polite, and generous but society forces her to become harsh. So, she keeps changing between these two identities according to the situation. Through identity switching, Brecht shows that in a capitalist society, a person cannot survive only with goodness. People are forced to be harsh in order to live.

Shen Teh's behaviour follows the proto-algorithmic logic. She does not act randomly; instead, she responds to situations through a simple internal rule or pattern and switches her identity:

- If her survival is threatened, she becomes Shui Ta. In this role, she acts strictly, uses logic, and makes practical decisions to protect her business and life.
- If her morality is threatened, she becomes Shen Teh. In this role, she shows kindness, sympathy, and helps others, even if it harms her.

This shows that Shen Teh is solving her life problems through a step-by-step mental process in the following way: *identify the situation (survival or morality in danger) → choose the suitable identity → act accordingly*. This is why it is called proto-algorithmic logic—it is not a modern computer algorithm, but an early, human form of decision-making based on fixed conditions.

Hence, Shen Teh's identity switching is a logical and patterned response to a difficult society. It proves that in a capitalist world, a person may need to follow such basic "rules" to balance survival and goodness. So, identity is not fixed and purely psychological. It is shown as functional and situational, meaning it changes



according to need and circumstances. It echoes the idea of Judith Butler, who said that identity is something we perform in different situations.

Conclusion

This study has argued that *The Good Person of Szechwan* reconceptualises identity as a performative and economically conditioned construct, wherein gender functions not as an inherent essence but as a strategic mode of adaptation. Through the dual figure of Shen Teh/Shui Ta, Bertolt Brecht exposes the structural incompatibility between ethical goodness and capitalist survival, demonstrating that the performance of socially coded femininity—marked by compassion, self-sacrifice, and moral obligation—becomes materially unsustainable within a profit-driven system.

By engaging Judith Butler's theory of performativity, the paper has shown that gender in the play operates as a reiterative and situational practice, shaped by regulatory norms and economic pressures. Shen Teh's transformation into Shui Ta does not signify an internal psychological rupture; rather, it reveals identity as functional, contingent, and responsive to shifting material conditions. Masculinity, in this context, emerges as an instrumental performance that enables economic control, rational decision-making, and social authority, while femininity is aligned with ethical expenditure and vulnerability.

Furthermore, the concept of proto-algorithmic logic foregrounds the patterned and conditional nature of Shen Teh's identity-switching, suggesting that subjectivity itself becomes governed by a quasi-systematic response to situational demands. This reframing challenges humanist notions of stable identity, instead presenting the self as a site of continuous negotiation between morality and survival.

Finally, the play's critique extends beyond socio-economic structures to interrogate the failure of divine justice. The gods' inability to reconcile ethical imperatives with material realities underscores the inadequacy of transcendental solutions within a fundamentally unequal system. As such, Brecht's dramatic vision ultimately compels the audience to confront the systemic conditions that render goodness untenable, positioning theatre as a space not for resolution, but for critical recognition and socio-political reflection.



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