

SHAW'S MAJOR BARBARA AS A DISCUSSION PLAY

Nivedita Lahkar M.A. Ph.D.
Bezera Anchalik College,
Bezera Assam
nivedita.rm@gmail.com

Abstract

Bernard Shaw emerges in the 20th century in English drama as a new leader of ideas and thoughts, who takes up the task of exploring social issues and educating public conscience in such a way as to highlight them through discussion. In his hands, the dramatic form becomes an effective instrument of discussion. His characters are looked at not in action but in conversation and discussion relating to various issues and interests. The play is a drama of ideas, focusing on conflicts between conceptions and ideas rather than characters or heroes. The three main characters, Undershaft, Barbara, and Cusins, represent different powers and conceptions. They engage in sustained debates about problem-solving, society, and civilization, with Major Barbara focusing on humanity and destiny, rather than men and women. As we turn to study any play of Shaw we come to realize that we are under a climate of ideas sharing a series of intellectual meetings. Barbara, the main character in Shaw's play, represents the capitalist era, emphasizing the importance of economic prosperity for achieving success. The characters represent the socio-political landscape, with the father and daughter's actions centered on material possessions and acts of generosity. The clash between the salvation army and the father's selfishness creates division, with the father successfully persuading the daughter to support his scheme throughout their meeting and discussion. This study is an attempt to justify my topic with reference to the text.

Keywords: Discussion, iconoclast, salvation army, ammunition etc.

1.0. Introduction

George Bernard Shaw (Born in: 26th of July 1856. Died in: 2nd November 1950) was a critic, political campaigner, and playwright. He was an Irish dramatist and keen spectator of social and human nature. He has written more than 50 plays and some of his plays are 'Man and Superman (1902)', 'Pygmalion (1913)', 'Arms and the Man (1894)', 'Saint Joan (1923)'. His works are mostly based on social satire and allegory. He became the most important dramatist of his time and was awarded the Nobel Prize in the year 1925 for his outstanding contribution in the field of Literature. Shabbir (2002) stated that "Shaw shatters the romantic notion of life which according to him, are root cause of many social evils and injustices in the society Shaw, therefore, deemed it necessary to reconstruct the edifice of society on a new set

of moral values to abolish all kinds of ills from the society” (p. 1). Life is not a brief candle for Bernard Shaw, it is a sort of splendid torch which he wants to see burning as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations. As a dramatist of ideas he emerges in the British theatre as a staunch rationalist and ruthless realist in broadcasting his ideas and views for the betterment of humanity. Ganaie (2018) mentioned that “In the history of the English drama, Shaw occupies a position second only to that of Shakespeare. He dominated the English theatre for over sixty years and his influence, name and fame were all pervasive. He built up his own theatre, “the theatre of ideas”. (p2). Throughout his dramatic career he makes his focuses of interests and aims to attach his ideas and ideals which are prevailing in society. Shaw aimed to bring social change through his plays, challenging accepted morals and conventions. He described himself as “A specialist in immoral and heretical plays,” and believed that old customs must change for society to progress and reform. He does not rest content by merely challenging current thoughts and directions in every direction or by exposing the sham and stupid values enshrined in the mind of people around him. He goes to the length breaking the idols of ideas and values which are held in respect. It is this positivity for demolishing false icons in our minds that makes Bernard Shaw an iconoclast in the dramatic realm. It can also be said that Shaw was a revolutionary who wanted to replace old traditions with new ideas. He is described as an iconoclast, which means he aimed to break down false beliefs and accepted norms. Shaw called himself a rebel and a destructive critic, aligning with his view of a revolutionary. He defined a revolutionary as someone who wants to discard the current social order and try something new, reflecting his mission of iconoclasm.

In his book, "Major Barbara" George Bernard Shaw, delves into the clash between materialistic influences and spiritual principles, emphasizing the importance of community welfare. Materialism emphasizes the importance of physical and financial health, whereas spirituality emphasizes the significance of communal welfare. Consumer culture promotes unethical work practices, ultimately resulting in a resolution between Andrew Undershaft and Barbara Major. The research investigates the spread of knowledge in societies that are structured by institutions, emphasizing the influence of materialistic factors rather than spiritual beliefs and the necessity for personal transformation. Achieving harmony in society requires recognizing the inherent goodness in humanity and cultivating spiritual feelings in every aspect of life.

1.2. Review of Literature

On the basis of a survey of literature no work is noticed on the present topic. However some related notable works are noticed by the researcher which is in the following:

Baroud and Elmeaza (2020) have mentioned in their paper “Shaw’s Major Barbara as a Thesis Play” that “The current trend of opinion seems inclined to take Major Barbara as Shaw's finest masterpiece or as one of his two or three masterpieces.” (p 13).

Patel (2014) in his paper “George Bernard Shaw- As an Iconoclast” has mentioned that “Shaw was essentially a revolutionary. He wanted to destroy the old order and the traditions and replace them by the new ones. In this regard, he is called an iconoclast.” (p 451)

Pokharel (2024) had written in his paper “Redeeming Humanity: Materiality and Spirituality in Bernard Shaw’s Major Barbara” that “George Bernard Shaw’s Major Barbara deals with the conflict between materialistic forces and spiritual values and the victory of the former over the latter to infuse the materialistic power of the contemporary society.” (p 92).

Harding (2019) had described in his research work “Utopia and endless war: Bernard Shaw’s Major Barbara” that “Bernard Shaw’s Major Barbara (1905) revives the pre-modern notion of utopia and in doing so bears a more complex relation to modernism and capitalist culture than previously acknowledged” (p.158)

Critics have examined the drama from different angles, such as social, contemporary, realistic, and atheistic viewpoints. The play centers around the battle against greed and corruption in society, with the main characters symbolizing the ongoing ideological conflict within the community. The financial stability of Undershaft serves as a motivating factor for Barbara and Cusins, while their obsession with power and money stifles their spiritual growth. The play emphasizes how capitalist forces exert control over the lower class, utilizing financial resources to generate influence and establish power holders within society. Spiritualism is considered the perfect sanctuary for individuals to establish a joyful and harmonious world.

1.3. Methodology

The present work is based on the data collected through oral discussion among my colleagues from the department of English of Bezera Anchalik College, Gauhati Assam. Secondary data were collected from books, research papers etc for closer study. This research employs a qualitative method to assert that materialistic society prevails over spiritual society, resulting in the breakdown of social harmony due to the influence of consumer culture. It employs marxism, materialism, and spiritualism theories to examine major Barbara, with critical reviews and secondary sources such as marxist theory and Foley's materialism and Aurobindo's spiritualism.

2.0. Major Barbara as a discussion play

Discussion constitutes the Hell-Scene of Shaw’s Man and Superman (1903), In Getting Married (1908) Shaw offers nothing but talk, characteristics, and his disquisition. In Arms and the Man (1894) we have the title action but discussion between Raina and Bluntschil between Nicola and Louka which predominates in it. In Major Barbara too the same penchant

for discussion is evident. We feel that Shaw has signed a contract with himself with the spirit of Henrik Ibsen that each play by him is patterned to present problems and discussion. The current interpretation of Shaw's *Major Barbara* emphasizes his tendency to view the world in terms of contraries, a refusal of absolutes and aversion for definiteness. The play's characters' qualities and values are respected, along with their complementary flaws. The Preface, titled *First Aid to Critics*, offers an explanation for the play's meanings, which is ironic. J. L. Wisenthal argues that Shaw's Preface does not necessarily represent his entire view of the play. *Major Barbara* is a play that denounces poverty and its vices, revealing Shaw's materialistic pessimism. It portrays poverty as the mother of all crimes, brutality, corruption, and fear. The play highlights the failure of a girl's noble ambition to become a Salvation Army officer under her father's capitalist power.

Major Barbara opens with a conversation between Mrs Undersheft and her son Stephen. Gradually the daughters Barbara and Sarah with their fiancés joined it, but the central point of discussion is set in motion with the arrival and participation of Mr Undersheft. The earlier topic of conversation yields to the predominant subject of religion. It is the Salvation Army of Barbara, its target ways of functioning that draw and drag him into animated discussion with his daughter. Gradually the theme of discussion assumes gravity when the two become involved in intellectual conflict, friction of wills while Barbara wedded to the cause of Salvation Army asserts to the value and power of her spiritual organization. Mr Undersheft is emphatic in dealing with the mighty influence of money and material possession thus, the conflict of ideas and values prompts them to enter into a challenge for establishing their own point of truth.

The second act of the play takes us to the West Ham Shelter of the Salvation Army. But soon the action of the act drifts into the discussion of the issue raised in the first act. Undersheft continues to convince the sovereignty of money to eliminate poverty. All the religious organizations, he affirms, exist on the financial assistance of the rich of any category. Act II of the play showcases Shaw's boldness and realism. In this scene, Bill Walker violently attacks Jenny Hill and an old woman, Rummy, which led to criticism of Shaw for brutality. However, such violence is common in the lives of the poor and drunk. Shaw uses this to illustrate how Barbara helps Bill see his mistakes. J.T. Grein noted that Shaw presents the true workings of the Salvation Army in a way that is both honest and impactful. Barbara, as the major of the Salvation Army refuses to submit to her father theory and message of money and gunpowder as the modern source of salvation but soon the economic impasse confronted by the Salvation Army shatters the illusion of Barbara. The acceptance of devotions by her superior officer of Salvation Army from the whisky merchant Mr Bodger and the ammunition maker, Mr Undersheft her own father exposed the hollowness of her values and convictions. Defeated by her father's point of view, Barbara discards the banner of her religious army.

The third act of the play shows the final perception, self discovery of Barbara. In her visit to the industrial township of Mr Undersheft she keenly realizes how her father justified is, how true and substantial, his ideas are in the practical world. When the central subject of discussion is over Mr Undersheft takes the opportunity of focusing on other aspects of the society. Now he concentrates on his son Stephen to expose his so-called middle class morality hypocrisy and vanity as an English youth. He turns to Professor Adolphus Cusins of Salvation Army to mock their sense of ought in everything. The prevailing politics and politicians , the inconsistencies and contradictions in English society come under the fire of Undersheft discussion and criticism. But the emphasis of discussion is mainly on his exposition of poverty as the worst of crime as well as on the never failing on the panacea of money. Thus it is Mr Undersheft who has the mouthpiece of Bernard Shaw, presides over the present play of discussion, applying the Socratic method of dragging others into discussion and driving home truth by truth while proving political and religious advancement is impossible without the help of money in real life.

In this theatrical production, the daughter and father engage in a passionate discussion about their religious convictions, with the daughter striving to persuade her father of the existence of a higher power. Undershaft, a wealthy individual, asserts that his sole worth lies in maintaining the status of a millionaire, emphasizing the community's power-centered mindset and the increasing prevalence of greed. Underneath the surface, the two scholars delve into the notion of salvation, asserting that it is rooted in the acquisition of wealth and the possession of firearms. Cusins, however, is a strong advocate for the Salvation Army, as he believes in the power of joy, love, and courage that it brings. Undershaft contends that the absence of money renders the fundamental aspects of human existence inconceivable. Andrew, a product of a capitalist society, holds the belief that money is the driving force behind control and power.

3.0.Conclusion

In the drama Major Barbara, the central debate revolves around whether society's redemption can be achieved through financial influence or moral principles. Distiller Saxmundham donates five thousand pounds to the Salvation Army, with the remaining five thousand to be handled by other gentlemen. Barbara, a distiller, refuses to acknowledge this, as it represents the world's hopelessness. Morina contends that financial power governs moral values in contemporary society, and poverty and hunger are considered offenses that stifle social interactions. Barbara strongly believes in the power of spirituality to improve humanity, but her argument falls short because materialism is hindering the common good. Capitalist culture undermines compassion and reduces the value of human and non-human entities to mere commodities. The purpose of charity should be to benefit the community as a whole, rather than serving as a means to enhance personal status.

One thing that strikes in the novel predominance of discussion in Shavian play like ‘Major Barbara’ is the contribution of discussion to the dramatic effects. True discussion happens in Shaw’s presentation of characters and what we have in them is the enactment of ideas and views. No critics of such play could say that discussions are out and out useless and meaningless with respect to their dramatic values and structures. Rather Shaw is the first English dramatist who has widened the scope of the dramatic medium through his employment of discussion and made them integral parts of his dramatic art. The play is a discussion play that highlights the importance of intellectual, religious, and materialistic powers in achieving political, religious, and economic progress. The alliance between these powers is crucial for human existence, as it combines the opposing forces of heaven and hell, love and hate, and life and death.

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