

REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN G.B. SHAW'S PLAYS

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Abstract

A legendary Irish playwright and founder of London School of Economics George Bernard Shaw (July 26, 1856 – November 2, 1950) reigns over the hearts and minds of the scholars of English drama, his readers as well as the audience of his plays for the vast spectrum of society with multidimensional roles of women therein which these plays take into their ambit. Women have always played a pivotal role in imparting some particular direction to the culture and civilization of the time they belong to and literature materializes their status at different levels with some additional details emerging from the writer's intellectual as well as emotional response to it. Nobel Laureate Bernard Shaw was an eminent critic and journalist of his time. As a genius playwright he transcended the limits and limitations of the time period he came from and very artistically delineated historical events and women's role therein. His plays introduce the readers or the audience, as the case may be, to the women of his time as well as those of the past brimming with their imperative roles. As a fighter for women's cause he offers his constructively positive vision regarding their future position through the women characters of his plays.

Present paper is an attempt to display how Shaw's plays represent the crude reality of women's life in the society he lived in and their subservient status in the past as well as his vision about their bright future.

Key words: suppression, treachery, servitude, positive vision.

Literature has always remained the most favoured haven for the representation of various peculiarities of women's multidimensional world. Almost all of the literary artists - dramatists, novelists, poets, prose writers in all genres - deal with one or the other facet of women's personality and their status in the society of the time they deal with. These creative artists enter the world of women from the corner of their choice and explore it thoroughly to represent all the crisscross features of their life. No doubt, much is added to this

representation from the vast horizons of their imagination. In fact, fact and fiction walk hand in hand to provide impressive literary beauty and appealing touch to the literary works.

Women have been indispensable members of the group of characters in all genres of literature since ancient times. Classical literature of Rome brings to the forefront their position, sometimes as administrative queens, sometimes as revolutionary beings sounding trumpet against the restrictions unduly imposed by the male dominated society which compelled them to survive playing second fiddle in all matters of progress and advancement in various fields of social as well as national interest. The myths of Ariadne and Medea and Jason portray female characters as representatives of innocent as well as villainous traits of personality. The myth of Ariadne reveals the story relating how a credulous woman suffers for this weakness. Ariadne, victim to her lust for Theseus' love fell into the mess of his treachery and underwent heart rending consequences. Her father, king of Crete got a labyrinth with her half-brother Minotaur in the centre in the centre of the maze created. Every year many children would enter the maze Minotaur but fruitlessly endeavour to escape the savage Minotaur. But, Theseus with the help of the ball of string given by Ariadne kills the beast and finds a way out. He leaves the spot with Ariadne as his wife but leaves her sleeping on an island. On waking up she finds herself broken and emaciated. This happens only due to lack of exposure to the deceitful and harsh reality of the world beyond the restricted world of home which makes them trust anybody and suffer later on.

But, Ovid, Catullus and Seneca the Younger focus upon the assertiveness of the suppressed and exploited Ariadne. On finding herself deserted and deceived by Theseus, she feels broken but assertive enough to write to him, "The words you now are reading, Theseus, I send to you from that shore from which the sails bore off your ship without me, the shore on which my slumber, and you, so wretchedly betrayed me – you who wickedly plotted against me ask slept." (Atsma, lines 2-4) Resignation to the suppression was the hallmark of women's modesty but Ovid's Ariadne aggressively asserts, "Me, too, you should have slain, O false one, with the same bludgeon that slew my brother; then would the oath you gave me have been absolved by my death." (Atsma, lines 76-77) Again, she spits her anger and hatred for Theseus thus: "... tell to me, abandoned on a solitary shore – for I must not be stolen from the record of your honour!" (Atsma, lines 130 – 131) Medea in the myth of Medea and Jason is cruelty incarnate who in the guise of of an enchantress kills Jason, her husband and cuts her children into pieces, poisons Glauce and her father, for whom Jason left her. Medea's words in Seneca the Younger's play *Medea* put a confirmatory stamp on the extremity of her cruelty, "Go away womanly fears, cloth thy heart with unfeeling Caucasus. [...]. Wilddeeds, unheard of horrible calamities at which heaven and earth alike shall tremble, my heart within is planning ... wounds, slaughter, death, creeping from limb to limb..." (Seneca the Younger, lines 39-46) Clytemnestra's character in Aeschylus' *Orestia* serves yet another example of

how the evils of revenge and lust lead a family to utter destruction. But, Egyptian literature deals with women like Cleopatra (69 BCE to 30 BCE) who enjoyed high status as powerful woman. The story of her relation with Caesar and Marc Antony occupies considerable space and attention of the writers and readers as well.

The preceding discussion focusing upon the representation of women in literature brushes aside the subsidiary status under male dominance where they were allowed no dignified position, nor could they move hand in hand with men to shoulder the responsibilities of the world beyond the four walls of their homes. Their world was confined to their home and the matters attached to it. Jane Austen's novels throw light upon this facet of this reality. But, the contributors to the world of English literature have also dealt with the optimistic side of their status in family. Beowulf, the earliest and the greatest epic, or heroic poem in English literature narrates how Beowulf was received by King Hrothgar and Queen Wealhtheow with great hospitality. William J. Long has rightly penned about the respectable status of women through the description of this scene. He writes, "The picture of Wealhtheow passing the mead cup to the warriors with her own hand is a noble one, and plainly indicates the reverence paid by these strong men to their wives and mothers." (Long 10-11) Shakespeare's heroines cover vast strata of the society and are so large in number that Ruskin's words deserve to be quoted. He says, "Shakespeare has no heroes, but only heroines..." His plays serve as a favourable ground for the presentation of their prestigious status in society.

Nobel laureate George Bernard Shaw was a prolific Irish playwright and the only person to have received both a Nobel Prize in literature and an Oscar. He was a great scholar and his wide and voracious reading opened gates to the gallery of traditional as well as historical female figures. His plays are infused with a climate suitable for the flourishing of women from different worlds. Women characters in every single play add to the Shavian gallery of female characters focusing on some peculiarities of their personality. Some of these are the materialization of the women of his self formed image of women based upon his own life experiences, while others represent their counterparts in the society of the time or in the history. In fact, Shaw's literary journey comprises the whole world of the past, present as well as visionary spectrum regarding their expected position and status in future.

The art of characterization in Shaw's plays opens new venues of thought for the audience and readers as well. Being a dramatist of ideas he infuses the female characters with the peculiar characteristic features which are sometimes not observed in the general run of life. Shaw flouts Aristotelian principle of appropriateness in characters and presents female characters of his plays as bold and brave as men. In *Arms and the Man* Raina Petkoff belongs to the family of a high ranking military officer. Her act of protecting a Swiss mercenary

soldier, Captain Bluntschli in her bed room reserves her position in the Shavian gallery of unworldly women. Louka, though a maid-servant in the Petkoff family talks to Sergius in authoritative tone when he stealthily tries to make a love to her. Sergius holds her hand and prevents her from leaving him and exhorts her for love making. Now she says to him, "Let me go, sir, I shall be disgraced ... Oh will you let go... Then stand back where we cant be seen. Have you no common sense." (*Complete Plays*106) Besides, Saint Joan, the female protagonist of the play *Saint Joan* is an illiterate girl from a farmer's family, but her dress pattern, boldness of behaviour and indomitable courage place her in the list of women with unwomanly traits. Archbishop tells Charles, "She does not wear women's clothes. She is dressed like a soldier, and rides round the country with soldiers." (*Complete Plays*970-971) Joan herself says to Dunois:

I am a soldier: I do not want to be thought of as a woman. I will not dress as a woman. I do not care for the things womencare for. They dream of lovers, and of money. I dream of leading a charge, and of placing the big guns. You soldiers do not know to use big guns: you think you can win battle with a great noise and smoke. (*Complete Plays*977)

Moreover, Orinthia in the interlude of *The Apple Cart* is miles away from the royal status of King Magnus. She is just his mistress and is expected to be submissive but so assertively she gives him a moral lecture regarding how healthy balance can be maintained in relations:

Do not let us fall into the common mistake of expecting to become one flesh and one spirit. Every star has its own orbit; and between it and its nearest neighbour there is not only a powerful attraction but an infinite distance. When the attraction becomes stronger than the distance the two do not embrace: they crash together in ruin. (*Complete Plays* 1033)

Cleopatra, Candida and many other women characters appear with frank, bold and dominating personality. We find no modesty in Grace and Julia, no feeling of shyness in Blanche as Aristotle's principle of goodness advocates. Thus Shaw discards the cold strategy laid down by the ancient dramatic critics and creates females with their individual traits. He supports the originality of a dramatist in the execution of such innovative ideas through his plays thus:

No writer of the first order needs the formula anymore than a sound man needs a crutch, [...]. He finds no difficulty in setting people on the stage to talk and act in an amusing, exciting, or touching way. (*Prefaces*205)

Whatever be the traits of the women characters, they keep the audience and readers rapt in the action till the final scene of the play because of the feature of continuity. Shaw holds that a play should not be dull and boring. For this effect continuity of character is required for “the continuity of character is all – important to the author if he is to communicate with us.” (Styan 174)

Bernard Shaw was a man of keen vision, strong social passion and critically concerned about the improvement in women's position in society. They have always been allotted subservient status at all levels. They could not take any decision even about their own future. Even the law of religion has been prohibiting them to speak in the church. Shaw is of the view that they will break all shackles of convention and forced inferiority and expand their sphere to enjoy the strength which nature has meant for them. His plays voice the belief that there are wonderful possibilities of their development in all fields barring all the unwanted restrictions unduly laid down by the orthodox supremos of society. Vivie in *Mrs. Warren's Profession* talks to her mother in a rational tone. Candida's final decision of living with her husband Mr. Morrell as she considers him helpless without her support is just a glimpse of the depth of Shaw's realisation of the strength of a woman's support for a man. He himself received the desired support of his wife and kissed dizzying heights in the arena of literature. Ann Whitefield in *Man and Superman* is yet another woman who loves John Tanner and finally marries him in spite of Roebuck Ramsden's dislike for their union. In *Pygmalion* an ordinary flower girl Eliza Doolittle behaves in a refined and bold manner and speaks quite effectively only after a little training by Prof. Higgins and good dealings by Colonel Pickering. In Act IV of the play the dialogue between Higgins and Eliza justifies the great change that may occur in a woman's personality only if she gets an opportunity to brandish her skills. She confidently declares about her decision to marry Freddy Eynsford-Hill and says to Higgins,

Oh, you are a cruel tyrant. I can talk to you: you turn everything against me: I'm always in the wrong. But you know very well all the time that you're nothing but a bully.[...] I can't go to the gutter as you call it.[...]. But don't you be too sure that you have me under your feet to be trampled on and talked down. I'll marry Freddy, I will... (Pygmalion)

Again,

Liza: ... I'll let you see whether I'm dependent on you. If you can preach, I can teach. I'll go and be a teacher.

Higgins: What'll you teach, in heaven's name?

Liza: What you taught me. I'll teach phonetics. (Pygmalion)

Bernard Shaw was a staunch supporter of women's cause. His avid reading and practical experience in the society of the time exposed him to the dire consequences of financial dependence of women. It is this evil which supplied fertilizer to the growth and blooming of the plants of evils like exploitation, torture and sexual as well as emotional harassment. Due to this financial handicap many women have to lead a slavish life under suppressed conditions. This slavish status kills the innovative spirit of women who can scale heights in the fields of their choice. The poignancy of financial dependence shook Shaw's inner self and he wrote through the section entitled *The Economic Slavery of Women*:

The truth is that family life will never be decent, much less ennobling, until this central horror of the dependence of women is done away with. (George Bernard Shaw on Marriage)

Getting Married is a sharp revelation of the mite of gender discrimination which is a stumbling block in their progress in the fields of their choice. This play is an attack on the hypocrisies of monogamy and supports the evolution of desperately needed divorce laws. Moreover, Shaw had witnessed naked reality of the evil of subordination of women which prevented them from their active role even in suffragette movement. Only a handful of them would come forward to fight for their rights. Anne Besant, an active member of the Fabian Society was one of these lucky ones.

Comparative study of women in Shaw's plays and those in the works of other contemporary literary artists manifests the uniqueness of his delineation. John Galsworthy's problem play *Justice* deals with a woman who represents those women who due to domestic violence with them leave their homes in search of some safe haven. Falder commits forgery on the cheque of the bank only to help Jane. Like Shaw's women she is not bold enough to stand on her feet by joining some profession to earn money. *The Black Hermit* by Thiong'o, an award-winning, world-renowned Kenyan writer serves yet another evidence of the emotional dependence of women upon men. Thoni after her husband's death is married with Remi, brother of her deceased husband. She stays deeply depressed and unduly forlorn for months together when Remi does not return from the city and finally commits suicide when he does not show any sign of acceptance and happy married life. In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* Eugene beats his wife Beatrice for no cause so frequently and so severely that she finally poisons him to death. In Nuruddin Farah's *From a Crooked Rib* a nomad girl runs away from her home because her marriage has been arranged with a much older man. Such examples of women's servitude and subordinate condition can be multiplied from the literary works of Shaw's contemporary

But, Bernard Shaw, a committed socialist and philanthropist was the champion of women's cause and strong supporter of the status of equality for women. In *Man and Superman* Annis fully authorized to select her care taker out of Roebuck Ramsden and John Tanner. *The Man of Destiny* introduces the readers and the audience, as the case may be, to an ordinary woman who reaches Napoleon Bonaparte with some dispatches and holds arguments with him quite boldly. When Napoleon reveals that he fights for the sake of others not to serve his own selfish ends, she swats all fears and says that it is womanish on his part:

Lady: Ah, yes there is. There is a difference between what you call my bravery and yours. You wanted to win the battle of Lodi for yourself and not for anyone else, didn't you?

Napoleon: Of course... I am only the servant of French public following humbly in the footsteps of the heroes of classical antiquity. I win battles for humanity – for my country, not for myself.

Lady: (disappointed). Oh, then you are a womanish hero, after all...

Napoleon: (greatly astonished) Womanish!

Lady: (listlessly) Yes, like me. (*The Man of Destiny*)

Thus, through such characters Bernard Shaw joins the world vibrated with enthusiastic advocacy of feminism which emboldens even ordinary women like this lady to indulge in free and frank discussion with authoritative personalities like Napoleon.

Preceding discussion is a window revealing the significant contribution of female characters in making Shaw's plays universally admirable and acceptable. Women characters in his plays, far from being mere representative portraits of different features of the territory of females in family, society and other spheres of various professions possess artistic significance. Bernard Shaw has used them for projecting human possibilities, as ideological mouthpieces, in parallelism, for revealing and developing other characters and as various forms of Shaw's idealism, as victims of the evil of gender discrimination and portraits of his vision of their future.

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