



THE UNCONVENTIONAL WOMEN IN THE PLAYS OF GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

S.Jeyalakshmi

Assistant Professor of English, PG Department of English (UA), Kongunadu Arts & Science College, Coimbatore .

George Bernard Shaw was a committed socialist, a successful, controversial dramatist, an inspired theatre director of his own work and an influential commentator on contemporary music, drama and fine art. In all his endeavors he demonstrated an indefatigable zeal to reform existing social conditions, sterile theatrical conventions and outworn artistic orthodoxies. Shaw's opinions on art and artists are scattered throughout his works, in his critical and journalistic writing, in letters and notebooks, as well as in his plays and the prefaces to them.

He wrote essays of very high quality which are still read and praised. More than half a century after they were first printed. Shaw had moved to London because he felt that London was the literary centre of the English language. He occupied a central position from the opening of the modern period to his last play in 1950. Shaw dominates the theatre from 1890 right through to the Second World War. In play after play, in preface after preface, he has presented his analysis of the evils and errors of the time and has indicated his own solutions. He has constantly infused into his ideas. The stage-platform has given him the opportunity of shattering numerous false idols and also of awakening minds to thoughts beyond the superficial conventions.

Feminist ideas spread among the educated female middle classes and the women's suffrage movements gained momentum of the Victorian Era. Women's rights were extremely limited in this time. Rights and privileges of these women were limited, and both single and married women had hardships and disadvantages they had to live with. They had disadvantages both financially and sexually, enduring inequalities within their marriages and social ranks. It was an age where the impact of the industrial revolution caused a sharp differentiation between the gender roles, especially of the upper and middle classes. Men and women were thought to have completely different natures, owing largely to Darwin's work in biological determinism, and people saw those differences as dictating separate and different functions in society. Men were thought to have natures suited to the public world, women to the private. Women were not freely offered the opportunity to study subjects of an extended, classical, and commercial nature. This made it difficult for a woman to break free from the societal constraints to achieve independent economical status. Great change in the situation of women took place in the 19th century, especially concerning marriage laws and the legal rights of women to divorce and gain custody of children.

Women have inspired numerous creative writers for a long time especially to Shaw. Change is the only thing in nature' is true to literature and literary theories as well. Nigel Alexander points out in his book, *A Critical Commentary on Bernard Shaw* says that "Shaw wrote his sequel because he regarded the creation of the woman as rather more important than the creation of the duchess and was alarmed that his audience should have missed the point"(55). Shaw's unorthodox mindset, distrust of conventions and the status of women, both in the society as well as at home revealed in many of his works.

The world of Bernard Shaw has a large place for women. He honored women, showing in his plays that they were not only to be loved, but to be respected. Life with women was as large a subject to him as religion. Though his love scenes burst with emotion he tended always to intellectualize sexual relations, and approached emotion as though it needed to be intellectually experienced. By that it's not meant that he rationalized sex. On the contrary, he emphasized its irrationality. Shaw put the women in his plays on a pedestal with full consciousness.

Shaw created memorable and conspicuous female figures in his play which resulted in the creation of the 'New Woman'. Unlike conventional Victorian woman, the new woman is not accustomed to self sacrifice. She chooses her career for a living and pursued self fulfillment and independence. She strives for equality in her relationships with men, discarding the double standard of sexual background of the time and she is much more frank about physical relationships. She is physically well-built and energetic, preferring comfortable clothes than voluminous dresses of the Victorian woman. This hybrid combination of new woman mushroomed in the late nineties literature; but she meets fatal ends reflecting that the society was yet not ready to accommodate her. Many of these characteristics formed the features of Shaw's creation of women.

Emancipation of these women led to a kind of improvisation of manners, faced by women in the twentieth century. Sangeetha Jain in her work, *Women in the Plays of George Bernard Shaw* states, "Women in Shaw, possess two unwomanly virtues –wit and will; these have been admired and appreciated by Shaw just against the prudent literary tradition of deprecating such type of women"(20). They have been endowed with a verbal grace and arrogance which is the sign or symbol. Shaw openly asserted his viewpoint about woman that she was an individual and not a lifeless object nor a sexual



impetus. He gave his women characters their own individualities and choices. In proclaiming their own rights to existence his women characters are sometimes accused of being eccentric and egotist. His unconventional perception gives them an everlasting charm, will power and triumph that mark a genuine importance as protagonists.

Shaw named this 'will' as 'life force'. It means that a supreme power beyond the principle of sufficient reason with a profound purpose of evolution. This supreme power manifests itself in all individuals and is utilized by them for fulfilling different purposes in which each of them is involved. For example, in *Saint Joan*, Life force takes the form of celibacy and sainthood.

The titles of Shaw's major plays indicate the essential and great importance of women in his work: *Candida*, *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, *Major Barbara*, *St. Joan*, *The Millionaires*—these titles suggest the women protagonist in respect to social ambience around them. One very important fact about the male characters in Shavian drama is that, generally all of them are supportive of the Shavian women. It seems that women have a superior goal and that men are their assistants in the accomplishments of their objectives. This observation has been highlighted by Watson, "the only men who are a match for the Shavian women are those who have given up the old illusions about the relations between the sexes"(55 Watson). It means a new men community which can accept the equality of women, has been evolved in Shaw's plays.

Shaw's concept of equal status for men and women never demanded masculinisation of women through dresses. He never wanted women to be dressed in masculine costumes as it caused them to lose their femininity, womanly charms and thus look ridiculous. It does not mean that he recommended Victorian voluminous gowns either, which covered a woman from head-to-toe. He criticized Victorian costumes as these concealed the fact that women were human beings.

Shaw revolted against the sentimental heroine- an ideal which made her a paragon and priestess and ultimately a prisoner. He prohibited women from taking the advice of others as it could develop into a lifelong habit of transforming them. The persona that characterizes Shavian heroine is of unconventional, intelligent woman with a will of her own. He insisted that women were not angels but ordinary fallible creatures, subject to temper tantrums, sexual infatuation and other lapses from decorum. In this way Shaw prepared men to visualize women as human beings who had to be granted equal importance. They have been defined by critics as 'men in petticoats', 'unsentimental', 'unromantic' 'rebellion', 'cruel' etc. Carl Henry Mills explains the concept as,

Shaw's theory of creative evolution represents femininity as being more primitive and fundamental than masculinity and calls civilization an attempt on man's part to make himself something more than the mere instrument of woman's purpose. Since woman has more direct inheritance from the life force, she usually succeeds in turning man back to his specific biological function of reproduction and nourishment. Man may have his dreams and his ideals, but woman will very often divert him from them (130).

Shaw's relationship with women in his life is reflected in the creation of strong women characters. Most of the female characters inherited prominent traits of those women who had a liaison with Shaw. As a proponent of the ideology of equality of men and women, he has given this sense of equality not only in work and politics but in social relationship also. Shaw has turned the table by giving his women characters an open platform to put forward their own choice of their mates. Unlike other Victorian female characters, they never meet bad ends; Shavian society and Shavian characters never criticize the individualities of Shavian women.

Shaw's mother was the model of Shavian woman in many respects both emotionally and economically. Shaw wrote in *Cashel Byron's Profession*, 'I have a mother; I have not seen her for years; and I don't much care if I never see her. It was through her that I came to be what I am'(93 Shaw). Shaw had relationships not with the ordinary women but with unconventional women. Alice Locket, Jenny Patterson, Florence Farr, Annie Besant, May Morris, Eleanor Marx Aveling, Edith Nesbit, Janet Achurch, Ellen Terry, Mrs. Patrick Campbell, Molly Tompkins were few astounding and remarkable women who had ardent associations with Shaw. All these remarkable women had their different influences on Shaw's conception of women. Somewhere Shaw's women characters have the same habits and tendencies as all these women had. Shaw was completely susceptible of feminine beauty and charm, especially when they were conveyed to him through the medium of art.

The variety of Shaw's women characters is astonishing, all impelled by passion. Like Blanche in *Widower's Houses*, and Julia in *The Philanderer*, to Orinthia in *The Apple Cart*—there are abundant examples of the passion of love, but as different from each other as women could be. Vivie in *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, Barbara in *Major Barbara*, Lina in *Misalliance*,



Lavinia in *Androcles and the Lion* and Joan Saint Joan, represent another kind of passion, the passion for conscience, for work, for a cause, for god. There are, however, other women such as Mrs. Warren, lady Cecily, Mrs. Clanton, lady Britomart, Mrs Tarleton, lady Utterword, and Queen Catherine of Bragnza who belong to the world, and Candida who belongs to herself.

In *Pygmalion* Eliza devotes herself completely to her creator in order to be a perfect creation. She gets the desired result and proves successful in her pursuit of being a duchess. She goes through a transformation of inner soul in the process of learning to become a duchess. She has deep-rooted feminine instincts and always she proves them. Cleopatra is one of a long line of Shavian female characters who stand out in sharp contrast to the virtuous or acceptably flawed women of nineteenth-century drama. This young Egyptian queen embodies all the vices of a tyrant, despite the admonitions of Caesar, a sovereign of great experience and wisdom, as depicted by Shaw. The play *Major Barbara* highlights a woman's spiritual voyage and tells how it completes with her turning back to life with a new religion of saving everybody's soul whether poor or rich, full-fed or ill-fed. This proves Shaw's faith in the ultimate goodness of women with which they can save the world. Barbara accepts the evils of society yet maintains her purity of conscience.

In Mrs. Warren's Profession, Vivie's discovery of her mother's secret would have been quite acceptable to a nineteenth-century audience if it precipitated a scathing denunciation of the mother by her daughter followed by a suitable expression of repentance and reformation by the fallen woman. Vivie is very different and she breaks out of the doll's house-like world kitty creates in her childhood. Vivie is ensconced in her figures, hunched over and secluded from the world, giving off the impression that she is content to have lost whatever little love, family, and acquaintance she had. In her business-like, self-reliant and unfeminine way, she is completely opposite of her mother who uses her feminine style to earn money. In *Saint Joan*, Joan's extraordinary virtues bring about her destruction. But so do her ignorance of the realities of power, her failure to take account of the often sensible views of others, her willfulness and obstinacy, not to mention the small but significant vanity that takes her into battle thus causing her capture. Lynda Mugglestone argues the fact and comments as,

The biological fact is a beginning, by no means the end of the matter. History, if not creative evolution itself, quickens in their wombs. They aspire to and often realize communion with the life force. They are very often daughters of divine grace- that is to say, Shaw's concept of divine grace. It seems that Shaw saw the woman as holding out most hope for mankind (321).

Shaw's women are no longer martyrs and they are not only equal to their male counterparts, whereas they often surpass them in their intelligence, will-power, and spiritual strength. Shaw brought about something in his plays that had yet to happen in reality-the emancipation of woman.

Women are depicted by Shaw as personalities in their own right, invested with intelligence, feelings, beauty, a better understanding of life, deeper perception of truth and justice than men. They are not only the bearers of certain views and opinions. They are living people, although often most unusual people. Shaw's women display a beautiful amalgam of fact with fiction to create dramatic illusion. These creations were not only valid in his age but proved to be forceful and cogent in the future also. "Shaw could not create a woman in any of his plays without making that woman a female Bernard Shaw"(189Toni block). These successful women have strong will which strengthens their soul to get what they want. They are represented as bosses fit to rule, rather than as subordinates to be ruled.

Works Cited

1. Alexander Nigel A Critical Commentary on Bernard Shaw's Arms and the Man' and 'Pygmalion', London Macmillan 1968. Print.
2. Jain, Sangeetha Women in the Plays of George Bernard Shaw, Discovery Publishing House, New Delhi 2006. Print.
3. Lynda Mugglestone, Shaw Subjective Inequality, and The Social Meanings of Language in *Pygmalion*, Review of English Studies 44, Sidgwick and Jackson, 1978, 321-375. Print.
4. Mills, Carl Henry. Shaw's Theory of Creative Evolution Shaw Review, XVI No.3: September 1973. (45-67). Print.
5. Shaw, Woman-Man in Petticoats (1927). *Platform and Pulpit*. Ed. Dan H. Laurence. New York: Hill & Wang, 1961: 172-78. 22.6.2010 web 1.4.2015.
6. Toni Block Shaw's Women Modern Drama, Volume 2 Number 2, summer 1959pp, Journal U of Toronto P. Doi 10.1353/Mdr.1959.0020). Print.
7. Watson, Alfred. George Bernard Shaw, Articles, Lectures, Essays and Letters. Literary Collections: E-Artnow, 12-4.2015 Web. 16.12.2015.