



BERNARD SHAW AS AN ADEPT IN DEPICTING WOMEN CHARACTERS AS EMBODIMENT OF SOFTNESS, ENDURANCE, DOMESTICITY, HUMAN PASSION, INDEPENDENT WILL AND HUMAN SYMPATHY IN HIS PLAYS : AN APPRAISAL

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ABSTRACT



This paper aims at delineating the women characters as paradigm of softness, endurance, domesticity, human passion, independent will and human sympathy in the dramatic world of Bernard Shaw. It neatly brings out the literary and artistic skill and insights of Bernard Shaw by scrutinizing his women characters whose passions, aspirations and the fruitful goal of liberation is mirrored in his dramatic realm. It sketches that the role of woman characters of Shaw's play actively take part in life, where they evolved to be the new independent woman. This paper sums up with the fact that Bernard Shaw wholeheartedly incarnates his woman characters as a self-sufficient and glorified women with self-dignity and individuality who in turn would awake and change the world surrounded with optimistic fragrance.

Keywords: *Woman, Softness, Endurance, Domesticity, Passion, Independence, Liberation, Self-Sufficient, Glorified, Individuality, Self-Dignity.*



Drama is a source of public recreation and it grew in England out of religion and the church is said to have contributed to drama to a very great extent. The main aim of church was to bring about moral and spiritual upliftment of its uneducated followers and so it adopted the device of drama. This device succeeded greatly in inculcating spiritual and religious values in the minds of the ordinary folk. From church, it went to the market place and from religious sphere, it became a thing of the secular world. By and by, it slipped out of the hands of the leaders of religion and became the property of common men.

Since drama became popular, several guilds came into existence. The actors tried pretty hard to make the performance a success. Guild's by name of **Chester, York, Coventry, Townley** and **Wakefield** were the known names in the field of performance of mysteries and miracle plays. **Abraham and Isaac, Noah and the Flood, The First Shepherd Play** and **The Second Shepherd Play** were the four notable and famous mysteries and miracle plays of the day which served a useful purpose and in fact, they planted in the English people a taste for drama and it was this taste that blossomed forth in its fullest form in the Elizabeth era. Then, moralities marked a step, definitely ahead in the progress of the English drama. These plays replaced religious and spiritual values with human and moral values.

The age of Queen Elizabeth is a period of the blossom of English drama. During this period, great dramatists came to the field and put forward several tragedies, comedies and historical plays. In fact, Elizabethan age was the renaissance of English literature and culture. It was also renaissance of the English theatre. It was during this Elizabethan period that the group of the dramatists known as university wits came to the forefront. This group included dramatists like John Lyly, Robert Greene, Thomas Lodge, Thomas Nash and George Peele who all gave a new life to the English theatre. Then Shakespeare, usually called the king of the English Drama, Thomas Kyd, Christopher Marlowe. It was Shakespeare who brought the English drama to apex. His contribution is immortal and his name too. Even George Bernard Shaw, the author of **The Arms and the Man** did recognized William Shakespeare as a prolific writer

who has 'produced comedies, tragedies, and history plays in galore'. Ben Johnson was an important contemporary of William Shakespeare other contemporaries and successors of Shakespeare were George Chapman, Thomas Dekker, Thomas Heywood, John Fletcher, James Shirley, Francis Beaumont, etc. who significantly contributed to the field of English drama. Following suit, Goldsmith, Sheridan, Ibsen, Oscar Wilde imparted a place of pride and honour to English drama.

It was towards the close of the 19th century that George Bernard Shaw entered the dramatic field. Since Shakespeare, it is George Bernard Shaw who has carved a niche as the greatest name in the field of English drama. In fact, George Bernard Shaw wrote dramas thereby advocating the cause of the new drama. He wrote about Ibsen and his New Drama. This led to his debut in the field of English dramatist of the new variety. In his personality as a critic of the dramas, he brought about the progress of English drama as well as theatres. In fact, Shaw made his contribution to the modern drama originally in the field of comedy. He is responsible for creating a new school of **Shavian Comedy**. The following extract from Nicoll's 'British Drama' aptly delineates the contribution of George Bernard Shaw to the field of Comedy in new drama:

"No account of modern drama can be complete without a reference to Shavian Comedy. George Bernard Shaw is a peculiar admixture of Ibsen and Wycherley. His aim is as serious, his analysis as deep as those of any of the more solemn dramatist, yet he cloaks the seriousness of purpose with a gaiety and wit which has rarely been equaled in any time. We may call Shaw's plays comedies of purpose. They aim at being as laughable as Congreve's, as stinging as Johnson's as profound as Ibsen's. There is no early comedy in English akin to those of Shaw; he has brought to the English stage a type of drama entirely new – a type, however, which few could follow. Unquestionably, critics of a 100 years hence will regard his plays as one of the most notable contribution to the theatre in our time, but it is probable that they will find



only one or two with whom to compare. The comedy of purpose, if it is not to drift into mere sentimentalism, demands a genius not only of a high, but of a peculiar order" (P 17).

Bernard Shaw is said to have had his own technique of drama writing by adopting the technique of the Greek dramatists and choosing the modern problems for his theme. This made his dramas a blending of a classical technique and modern outlook. In many respects, Shaw met with the similar circumstances as those of Shakespeare. He has to his credit publication of such notable plays as 1. *Devil's Disciple* (1897), 2. *Cesar and Cleopatra* (1898-98), 3. *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* (1899-1900). 4. *Man and Superman* (1903-5), 5. *Candida* (1895), 6. *Man of Destiny* (1895-1897), 7. *Major Barbara* (1905), *The Doctor's Dilemma* (1908), 9. *Pygmalion* (1912-13). 10. *Back to Methuseiah* (1920) 11. *John* (1923-24) and 12. *The Apple Cart* (1929) and a few other plays like *On the Rocks*, *Geneva* etc. Shaw is said to have succeeded in making drama a real literature and not a mere three-hour traffic of the stage. In the words of a modern critic, Shaw's contribution is sum-made up thus:

"He (Shaw) laughed out of the theatre its romantic falsities and its prudery. He immediately enlarged the dramatist's horizon. He threw open the doors to the new theatre of ideas; he made the author bigger than the actor, and lastly he created a new public, the intellectual middle class" (P 45).

Shaw is to the English stage what Ibsen was to the Norwegian. He has been rightly called the Father of the Theatre of Ideas in England or in other words, another great exponent of the problem play which is associated with Galsworthy. Shaw's stress on ideas is the basis of his drama. In every play, the central motive is some significant idea or problem which the dramatist has to expound or discuss. Thus, in a sense, Shaw's plays may be termed as 'discussion plays' or 'problem plays'. Shaw's method to out match the progressive is to take the wind out of his sails by finding original and ingenious arguments for him. For instance, the progressive believes in the emancipation of woman and Shaw too is a feminist. But his stand is refreshingly original. The old reformer will argue that women have equal rights but Shaw

goes up a step further and says that their rights should be identical with men.

There is no denying the fact that George Bernard Shaw occupied the English theatre as an outstanding dramatist for ever sixty years. Though his interest was primarily in morals, politics, philosophy and social reforms, he used the drama as an instrument for the spread of his ideologies. No doubt, the honoured women and his women characters are loved, respected and even feared. He used women characters as spokeswomen for propagating his ideologies and imparting his ideas. So as to awaken the human society to the idea of self dignity and individuality. From time immemorial, women have been playing a vital role in the society. They are found to be the life-giving source and without them, humanity will automatically become sterile. As no race or nation can survive in the absence of women, they are treated as equal and necessary as men in the growth and prosperity of a country. The popular saying "Behind every successful man, there is a woman" reveals the fact that women plays a decisive role in man's life. Walter Dias endorses this idea here rather aptly:

"Man is decorous because she is there;
Man is eventual, because she reveres God;
Fine arts are there because she is there;
and redeeming romantic love is there
because love was first seen in ladies' eyes" (P 248).

Woman is considered to be the embodiment of softness, kindness, beauty, endurance patience and above all Godliness. The compassionate feeling of women is such that even the rivers and ships are named after them. Women have been the focus of many literary works of all ages. The role of women in literature is as significant as literature itself. Without women, the poetry of life and the chemistry of relationships get lost. Women are portrayed with all their aspects in works of literature. Dramatists, novelists and historians of all languages and of all countries have created their women characters as pious mothers, sisters, social reformers and patriots, nationalists and even religious leaders. She is viewed as wife, mistress, sex-object-according to her relationship to man. The mother image of woman in literature has always been ambivalent. Eve, according



to the Bible, is the mother of all humanity. She is the temptress, who brought sin and death into the world. But the Virgin Mary, passively acted upon by the Holy Ghost, Pondering in her heart the experience of her son, is the Queen of Heaven, to Mother of God, and through Him, of all humanity. Eve could be tolerated as a necessary evil but Mary is worshipped as a model for all mankind. Every human being in his early life sees his mother as the bringer of life, nurturer, and the source of pleasure and comfort. Shakespeare has brought to light the powerlessness of man in the presence of women. George Bernard Shaw comments:

“In Shakespeare’s plays, the woman always takes the initiative. In his problem plays alike, the love interest is the interest of seeing the woman hunt man down. She may do it by charming him like Rosalind or by stratagem like Mariano, but in every case, the relation between the woman and man is the same; she is the pursuer and the contriver, he the pursued and disposed of.”

Whatever may be the character, talents and education of the women, all over the world, the male sex only dominates. But Indian tradition has generally respected womanhood. Dr.S.Radhakrishnan comments:

“... Where women are honoured, there the Gods are pleased, where they are not honoured, all works will become fruitless” (P 15).

He further says,

“Women are human beings and have as much rights to full development as men have. In regard to opportunities for intellectual and spiritual development, we should not emphasize the sex of women as we do not emphasize the sex of men” (P 167).

Mahatma Gandhiji preached against the wrongs done to women in the name of law, tradition and even religion. Gandhiji says:

“Man and woman are equal in Status ... I am uncompromising in the matter of women’s rights. In my opinion, she should labour under no legal disability not suffered by man. I should treat daughters and sons on a footing a perfect equality” (Sharma, 2).

Gandhiji had full confidence on the sincerity and hard work of woman. Nowadays, women are, in a sense, better placed. Their merits, skills and talents are being gradually given due recognition. This is due to the untiring efforts of many writers, philosophers, social reformers and religious leaders. In this category, the name of George Bernard Shaw can also be included.

Bernard Shaw, the great dramatic and literary giant, who dominated the English scene for over a half a century was an enlightened and broad-minded writer giving much importance to women in society at a time when women were given secondary place in Britain. Shaw’s peculiar attitude to his women characters was induced in him by his mother, who has a great deal of self-sufficiency about her. Having known her well, it was impossible for Shaw to think of women as the weaker sex. According to him, the female is not the weaker sex but the strong sex, in the sense that women’s instincts are more compelling and determined, their sense of reality more vivid, the fury of creation is more violent in them than in man. Shaw says that sexual intimacy can confer no real intimacy and as far as the Life force is concerned, husband and wife are as great as strangers to each other as to other people in the world. Shaw objects to marriage because by being associated with private property, respectability and sentimentality, it has become an obstacle in the way of the Life force. But Shaw had a great reverence for woman.

All his woman characters are strictly self – sufficient with not the slightest vestige of the clinging wife about them. Shaw’s own temperament contributed not a little to his evaluation of women. He was one of the rarest men who could have a life-long platonic relationship with some of the most beautiful women of the world. That Shaw believed whole heartedly in woman and her intellect is clear from the way he has named his work *The Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Socialism*. One cannot ignore the fact that the supreme figures of the Shavian stage are women. Candida, Joan of Arc, Mrs. Warren, Major Barbara are the realistic portraits of women drawn by Shaw. Shaw’s women are already emancipated and have not always remained charming. Candida, Ann,



Barbara are advanced women because there is a peculiar type of development in their characters.

Candida is considered to be Shaw's masterpiece which deals with a domestic problem and shows that it is not sentimentalism but intelligence that governs life. This play, is unique in the sense that the protagonist plays more than one role. As a daughter, wife, mother, friend and lover, the protagonist Candida reveals realistically the human passion in these roles. The play **Candida** is the story of Candida and her life with her husband and children. Her husband James Mavor Morell, a Christian socialist clergyman of the Church of England one day finds Eugene an eighteen year old young man on the Thames embankment. He takes the young man home, and discovers that he is a poet. After that, the poet becomes a regular visitor to the house. Morell makes him stay in their house itself. Eugene is very fond of Candida.

One day, Eugene March banks tells Morell that he is in love with Candida that he, the poet understands her; and that Morell, the husband does not. Eugene also claims that he should give up his wife to him. Morell takes the matter lightly. But when he comes to know that Eugene is serious in this matter, he gets angry and is moved to shake the silly boy. When Candida comes in, she finds her husband in a dejected mood. She scolds Eugene and tells him how he is responsible for her husband's miseries. Morell admits before Eugene that Candida is his greatest treasure. Then Morell asks Candida to choose between himself and Eugene. She asks Morell and Eugene to make their birds. Morell expects his complete protection in everything. But Eugene is in need of her protection only in time of weakness and unhappiness. Candida argues that Morell has led a happy life while Eugene has had an unhappy life. If she leaves Morell, his happiness will be ruined. But Eugene is accustomed to the art of leading an unhappy life. Thus, Candida gives herself to Morell.

Candida is a thirty three year old woman who is well-built, well-nourished with the double charm of youth and motherhood. She is the mother of two children. Her presence in the house is essential. One day when Candida enters the house after a long absence, Burgess, her father tells her:

"The house ain't worth living in since

you left it candy. I wish you come round and give the gurl a talking to"

(Candida, Act-I, 533)

Everyone in the locality respects Candida. Eugene March banks also has a high opinion about Candida. He tells Morell that she is "a woman, with a great soul, craving for reality, truth and freedom" (543). Candida is a mother to her children, wife to her husband, daughter to her father, and friend to all. In nursing her husband, she not only takes the part of a wife but also the part of a mother to him. One day when Morell seemed to be very tired, Candida said:

"My body is not looking well. Has he been overworking? He looks very pale and grey and wrinkled and old. You've done enough writing for today. Leave Prossy to finish it"

(Candida Act II, 561)

From the very beginning, Candida plays the role of virgin mother. In her, one can observe an 'amused material indulgence' which is her characteristic expression, especially when Burges, her father and Morell, her husband quarrel. Candida looks after her husband she cares for her baby. Morell says to Candida:

"What I am you have made me with the labour of your hands and the love of your heart. You are my wife, my mother, my sister; you are the sum of all loving care to me" (**Candida**, Act-III, 593).

It is quite sufficient to show how Candida overpowers her husband because of her motherly love. Shaw beautifully portrays Candida as a beloved wife. One day Eugene and Morell are conversing with each other. While talking, Morell tells Eugene as:

".... In a happy marriage like ours, there is something very sacred in the return of the wife to her home I should like you to see for yourself what a happy thing it is to be married as I am" (Candida, Act-I 539).

Though Candida is fond of Eugene, she does not like him talking ill of her husband in her presence and warns Eugene as a loving wife often does not like her husband to be ridiculed by others. Candida is a fond wife and she loves her husband, to be with her. She



asks Morell to take rest at home. Moreover, she wants his company and says:

“Why must you go out every night lecturing and talking?

I hardly have one evening a week with you”

(Candida Act – II, 562).

In the same manner, Morell also trusts her. He has developed a high opinion about his wife. He says:

“You know that I have perfect confidence

in you, Candida I thought of you

goodness, of your purity. That is what

I confide in” (Candida Act II, 564).

Throughout the play, Candida has behaved as a loyal and believed wife to her husband. She is depicted as kind, considerate and sympathetic and this has endeared her to all those. She comes in contact with, making her husband think that the kingdom of Heaven can be established on earth only through marriage with a good woman like Candida.

Mrs. Warren's Profession is an unpleasant play in which Mrs. Warren and her daughter are portrayed as the two important women characters. The play is concerned with a coarse mother and a cold daughter. The mother drives the ordinary and dirty trade of prostitution. Later she becomes the manageress of a chain of brothel houses. The daughter Vivie Warren does not know the origin of her respected life and all her comforts and refinement till the end. When she discovers the truth, she is very much shocked with contempt. The mother defends her trade by explaining the circumstances which forced her to become a prostitute. The daughter says that the trade is loathsome; the mother answers that she loaths it herself; that every healthy person does loathe the trade by which she lives. It is no doubt that the general effect of the play is that the trade is loathsome. What Shaw tries to convey to the public is that brothel is a miserable business, and a brothel-keeper, a miserable woman. Vivie revolts and frees herself both from her mother and her lover. She is a modern and independent woman. She is entirely unromantic, a woman almost certain to live in perpetual virginity. Thus in this play, **Mrs. Warren's Profession**, one comes across two women characters who are just opposite in their view points. The play was written, as Shaw himself says:

“... to draw the attention to the truth that prostitution is caused not by female depravity and male licentiousness, but simply by underpaying, undervaluing, and maltreating and maltreating women so shamefully that the poorer of them are forced to resort to prostitution to keep body and soul together. Society and not any individual is the villain of the piece” (Gibbs 18).

Mrs. Warren's Profession is perhaps the best of Shaw's early plays. The major scene of the play is inevitably a clash of wills between the mother and the daughter. Mrs. Warren prefers comforts rather than poverty. Though Mrs. Warren knows that it is an immoral act to be a brothel woman, she does not like to come out of it because she is accustomed to the comforts and riches the profession provides. So, **Mrs. Warren's Profession** is a play which deals with a woman who runs after man for the sake of comfortable living. But in **Man and Superman**, the woman runs after a man in order to get a good husband to bear healthy children.

Bernard Shaw has described his play **Man and Superman** as a comedy and philosophy for it is the full statement of his theory of salvation for the human race, through obedience to the Life Force. His Life Force is a power continually working upon the heart of men, endeavouring to take them up towards better and fuller life. In this play, Ann White Field illustrates Shaw's thesis that in the duel of sex, woman is always the victor and that woman is the pursuer and the man the pursued. The story is that Ann, the heroine pursues Tanner and finally marries. In the actual process of husband hunting, Ann appears in very poor colours. With cynicism, Shaw has drawn her portrait look like a vile and objectionable woman. Tanner does not want to marry Ann. He regards her as “a frightful, in famous, abandoned woman” (Man and Superman, Act I 727). He crosses half – Europe and goes to Spain to escape her. But it is all of no use. Ann chooses him and ultimately corners him in Granada, ensnares him into a marriage proposal. Poor Tanner is helpless in her hands, ‘a mere baby’ as she herself puts it.

For Bernard Shaw, the female is the stronger sex and she unscrupulously exploits the sexual attractiveness with which life has endowed her in



order to catch the male and then take the originality and adventurousness out of him, so as to reduce him to the status of a bread winner, for herself and her children. In this play, Ann represents the creative urge the urge of motherhood. She prefers biologically superior males like Tanner and she is the female driven by the urge to secure the best possible father for her children. This is the secret of her vitality which makes her a pursuer. Tanner understands this and hence describes her as a human 'boa-constrictor' a spider and himself as the bee and the marked down victim. She is the typical female who illustrates Shaw's thesis that "Man is not the victor in the duel of sex" (England 2). In the play **Man and Superman**, Ann Whitefield seeks the best father, biologically, suitable for her children. On the one hand, in **Mrs. Warren's Profession** Mrs. Warren, the mother involves herself in the trade of prostitution. Moreover, she tries to defend the immoral trade of prostitution on the excuse of providing herself as well as her daughter all the basic needs and all sorts of facilities. It is very clear that Ann and Mrs. Warren are just opposites in their view points and mentality.

Like a new woman, Vivie preferred a business or career to a life of domesticity. She is intelligent and serious minded. She is the senior wrangler in Cambridge and gets fascinated by the study of mathematics and law. Vivie's nature, view points and mentality make one come to a conclusion that Vivie and Ann of **Man and Superman** have the same qualities. Both of them can even be considered the embodiment of domesticity and chastity. In **Major Barbara**, Lady Britomart prefers to live apart from her husband because she does not want him to put his wicked ideas into the head of her children. Lady Britomart has two daughters. Sarah and Barbara. Lady is in need of more money for her children and she sends for under shaft. The play **Pygmalion** is an exploration of the inter-relations of language, class and money. The central theme is the education and transformation of Eliza Doolittle, the flower girl, brought up in gutters. Henry Higgins, Professor of phonetics, takes efforts to transform her into a lady of rank and status by teaching her to speak and pronounce correctly. She is made acceptable as a Duchess. The play falls into two parts or two Acts. In the first, a duchess is made out of a

flower girl and in the second, a woman is made out of a Duchess. In **Pygmalion**, Eliza an innocent and honest girl who never runs after material riches. In this connection, Eliza can be compared with Barbara Eliza realizes that the differences between a flower girl and a Duchess is not how she behaves but how she is treated Eliza becomes a Duchess in the eyes of others except those of Higgins.

Among Shaw's women characters, St. John is considered as one of the first protestant martyr's as she chooses to put her conscience against the judgement of the church. She is a born leader of men not using any untruth or lies to achieve her ends. She presents the truth so simply so sweetly and yet so majestically that her audience cannot help being inspired by her words. On the whole, St. John was a pious and selfless lady, who delivered her country from confusion, but claimed nothing for herself. Through the play, Shaw has proved how the chief instruments of human society, the state and church combine in natural hatred to crush goodness, purity and the voice of truth. St. John is considered to be an extra-ordinary creature because of her heavenly visions and her obedience to them.

To conclude, it may be said that in all Shaw's plays, women characters are shown to be moving towards the goal of liberation and they evolve to be the new women. In Shaw's plays, the theme of ascendancy of woman is more persistently seen than in the plays of any other English writer. Shaw has pictured his women characters rising against male Shavianism and by doing so, they become glorified women. Who all awake men and women to the idea of self-dignity, and individuality. Certainly, they in turn would awake the human society in all respects.

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