

Shaw's Women Characters: A Study of Three of his Plays



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Abstract:

George Bernard Shaw was an Irish dramatist who became one of the leading English dramatists that the world has ever witnessed. He was the first dramatist to give a preeminent voice to his women characters. This trend was new as the Victorian writers presented women as meek and submissive in their works. Shaw's plays created some memorable women characters in English literature. These independent, free-minded and unconventional women characters represented the rise of the modern woman who wants to live life on her own terms. This paper focuses on three of Shaw's prominent plays- *Pygmalion* (1914), *Man and Superman* (1903) and *Arms and the Man* (1894). Shaw has created each of the women characters of the aforesaid plays with some specific purpose that this paper intends to highlight.

Keywords: Unconventional, independent, Life Force, realistic, intelligent.

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G.B. Shaw's plays reflect issues affecting women's rights and tried to make women conscious of their position in society. Most of Shaw's plays deal with social problems. He was a modern dramatist who wrote in both nineteenth and twentieth century. In his plays, Shaw provides detailed description of the characters to create reality effect. His plays are full of ideas like the purpose of life and man-woman relationship.

Bernard Shaw has created several memorable women characters. Shaw's women are not usually the charming and romantic heroines. Shaw was one of the first writers to see woman as a human being with a will of her own. He has drawn his women in unsentimental and unromantic terms. He in a way invented the modern woman, strong willed and free minded, ready to move forward on her own terms.

This paper is however confined to Shaw's portrayal of women in three of his most popular plays- *Arms and the Man* (1894), *Man and Superman* (1903) and *Pygmalion* (1914). In these plays, women emerge as strong, bold and assertive, leaving behind their traditional roles of dutiful daughters and submissive lovers.

Shaw's play *Pygmalion* is an insightful comedy of social manners and social morality. In *Pygmalion*, Elizabeth Doolittle transforms from an ordinary flower girl to a lady in the Ambassador's party. Shaw rejected the traditional romantic ending in his play and made Eliza a strong, independent woman able to survive on her own skills and talents. She wants to rise up the social ladder through her refined language and manners. From the beginning of the play, Eliza is not just an ordinary flower girl. She is ambitious and self confident and wants to get the knowledge and power to become a lady in a fashionable flower shop. She is ready to pay Higgins for her phonetic lessons out of her meager resources. The six months training that she receives develops this self confidence fully and at the end of her training we see her as a strong-willed woman who throws the slippers at Higgins' face and walks out of his house.

The character of Eliza Doolittle is best seen in her progression from a "gutter-snipe" at the beginning of the play to an exquisite lady who surpassed her creator Professor Henry Higgins. Shaw recreates Pygmalion-Galatea theme to show how Eliza, not better than a piece of marble, shaped into a lady by Higgins, like Pygmalion did. Eliza possesses naive intelligence and has a perfect ear for all sorts of sounds, a superb memory and a passionate desire to improve her language.

Shaw shows Eliza at the beginning of the play as a low, vulgar girl, devoid of manners. Shaw allows us to listen to the violations taking place to the English language through the mouth of Eliza. But Higgins himself rebukes Eliza rudely and swears a lot. He could not teach her good manners that Colonel Pickering could teach her with his gentlemanly behavior. With her perfect hold over language and superior manners, Eliza outdid her 'creator' Higgins.

In course of her training, Eliza completely submits to the wishes of her masters. But after Higgins rejects her love and tells her to go back to her old life, Eliza decides to leave Higgins. Throwing the slippers at Higgins face she walks out of his house as a transformed woman. The choice that she makes at the end of the play was between a lifetime of her fetching Higgins' slippers and a lifetime of Freddy fetching hers. So she marries Freddy who may be a fool but who loves her truly and is likely to be a good husband. In the last two acts we see Eliza as a completely transformed person. She is dignified, asserting her independence and rejecting all the common vulgarity of her past life.

Mrs. Higgins is another significant woman character in *Pygmalion*. She is the ideal woman for her son, Henry Higgins, who judges every woman by her standards. She is the first person to foresee the trouble that Eliza's training will create. She realizes that once out of her own class boundaries, Eliza will not be able to fit anywhere. This doubt in fact proves to be true. Mrs. Pearce, Higgins' housekeeper is the voice of reason. She is witty and bold to reply to her master. She too considers Higgins' scheme for Eliza to be ridiculous. She cares for Eliza and points out his faults to Higgins.

Man and Superman is a play about Life Force. Ann is ambitious and Octavius fears that she might reject him as he is not ambitious. Octavius and Ramsden believe Ann to be a very obedient girl ready to fulfill the wish of her parents. Ramsden thinks that Ann rarely does things according to her own wishes. It is always "Father wishes me to" or "Mother wouldn't like it". But this is Ann's strategy to do things according to her own whims. From the beginning, we see Ann giving nicknames to people. She calls Octavius Ricky-Tick-Tavy and this makes him think that she loves him. But her real intention is to persuade John Tanner to marry her. Tanner is however the only person who is not deceived by Ann. But he too starts believing that it is Octavius who is Ann's target to marry. She flirts with Tanner at every possible opportunity and finally succeeds in persuading him to marry her. That too she says is her father's dying wish which she cannot disobey at any rate.

In Shaw's depiction of Ann's character, he says that whether Ann is good looking or not depends upon the taste, sex and age of the observer. She is a "well-formed creature", "perfectly ladylike, graceful, and comely, with ensnaring eyes and hair". Tanner views woman as the agent of Life-Force, pursuing man of her choice to mate and produce a superior human species. In Ann's case his view is true when he says "a man is nothing to them but an instrument of that purpose". Tanner resolves that he will never be enslaved by any woman, but in the end Ann succeeds to break his resolve and he agrees to, marry her.

Ann's mother, Mrs. Whitefield understands Ann's intentions well when Ann says that her mother wishes her to marry Tanner. Mrs. Whitefield says, "It is only her way of saying

she wants to marry Jack. Little she cares what I say or what I want.” She is the conventional Victorian mother, but is shrewd enough to see Ann’s true nature.

Another significant woman character portrayed by Shaw in *Man and Superman* is Violet, the sister of Octavius. In her first appearance she is pregnant and is bold enough to declare that she is married but would not tell the name of her husband. She is practical and knows that apart from love, money is the most important thing for survival. It is she who advises Hector Malone to keep silent on the matter of their marriage as his father might disinherit him. Unlike Ann who wants a father of her children and is concerned about the future of the human race, Violet is interested in having a rich husband who will provide her all comforts of life. She married Hector, the son of an American millionaire with full confidence to win over his father.

Shaw’s play *Arms and the Man* has two basic themes- one is war and the other is marriage. In the opening scene, Raina Petkoff intends to marry Major Sergius Saranoff. Raina is presented as a romantically idealistic person in love with the noble ideals of love and war. Raina is presented as a girl easily moved by flattery. She admires Sergius’ victories but is also troubled by the reports of sufferings accompanying war. Raina had imagined war as grand and exciting until she met Bluntschli and came face to face with the reality of war. Bluntschli brings Raina out of her romantic world and she leaves Sergius. Instead, she marries plain Bluntschli, her Chocolate Cream Soldier, whose common sense and six hotels in Switzerland will give her stability and comfort in life.

At the beginning of the play Raina is fond of reading Byron and Pushkin and even thinks that her romantic notions of heroism exist only in literature and not in reality. She however continues to live in her dream world of romance and heroism until Bluntschli shows her the mirror of reality. Raina is bold when she says, “Do you know, sir, that though I am only a woman, I think I am at heart as brave as you” (p.12,13). She is intelligent and considers herself to be superior because of her family lineage. Her curiosity is revealed by her habit of listening secretly to other people’s conversation.

Raina wants to prove herself worthy of any man and wants to go out into the world like Sergius. Her presence of mind is focused by Shaw when she mistakenly calls Bluntschli “The Chocolate Cream Soldier” (p.42) in presence of Sergius and her father and makes up the story of Nicola spoiling her ice-pudding. Raina idealized Sergius and when she saw Sergius making love with Louka, the veil of Sergius’ love restricts her to believe his deceit. Bluntschli describes her as “rich, young, beautiful, with her imagination full of fairy princess and noble natures of cavalry charges and goodness know what!” When her parents want Raina to marry Bluntschli seeing his wealth, although she loves him, she refuses to be “sold to the highest bidder” (p. 75). But finally she agrees to marry her “chocolate cream soldier” (p. 75).

Shaw presents Louka as a strong willed woman to show his socialist principle of equality among the classes. For Shaw, servants do not constitute an inferior class and therefore shows Louka rising from her working class background to aristocracy by marrying Sergius. As Nicola points out, Louka is not content with her social status. She through her gestures and physical charms persuades Sergius to marry her and to fulfill her ends she even

creates doubt about Raina's character in his mind. She tells Nicola "You have the soul of a servant, Nicola... You will never put the soul of a servant into me" (p.24). She, like Eliza in *Pygmalion*, is an educated woman feeling out of place in both classes. She has no soul of a servant. She is jealous of Raina and even blackmails the family by threatening to reveal their secrets to meet her ends. Sergius falls in her traps and finally caught in his own words to marry her. In *Louka*, Shaw again illustrates the triumph of women in the chase of men of their desire.

Shaw is a master of characterization and has created several memorable women characters. He has a purpose in creating each of these women characters that has already been discussed. Elizabeth Doolittle is created by Shaw to show how language can be a barrier between the classes and how more than noble birth, refined speech can be useful in creating an individual's identity. *Louka* is Shaw's embodiment of the upward climbing working class. Raina is the romantic heroine who lets her mind develop till she is able to take her own decisions. Ann Whitefield is Shaw's perfect embodiment of the Life Force.

We see that all these women have a voice and mind of their own, and though they are subdued or pretend to be subdued at certain times, at the end they reach their goals. Shaw's heroines are unconventional and not exceptionally beautiful. They are ordinary women possessing some extraordinary qualities. Shaw can thus be called a writer writing about women in a way that does not promote gender bias and gender stereotypes that prevailed during his times. He is in a way the creator of modern free-minded and independent woman in literature.

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