

Feminism and Democracy, Shaw's Perspective

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Abstract—Bernard Shaw is one of the greatest dramatists of modern drama. He has been a great source of instruction and inspiration to me throughout. Especially I was attracted by his themes on Parliamentary democracy, feminism, Plutocracy, War and his deep faith in Socialism and Creative Evolution.

My study in the following paper will tell us about his views regarding democracy and feminism. Throughout his career Bernard Shaw served as a rigorous exponent of women's freedom to be themselves, to liberate from their traditional roles and traditional subservience. Shaw believes that people should produce electorates capable of doing anything by their votes except pave the way for their destiny. In fact in many of his plays we find his plea for dictatorship because he believes that common man is not intelligent enough to choose the ruler and mainly the popularly elected ministers are easily excitable political Bobbies who waste their time in bungling and squabbling. Thus my study of 'Feminism and democracy – Shaw's perspective' tells me that he has applied his great genius in giving an objective and clear picture of the society of his time.

1. FEMINISM & DEMOCRACY

As we all know that feminism in the advocacy of women's right on the ground of the equality of the sexes. Here, in my work I'm discussing the same as the perception of George Bernard Shaw, a great Irish playwright who was born on July 26, 1856 in Dublin, Ireland. From an early age Shaw identified himself, as a socialist. He was an extremely prolific writer who completed over fifty plays before his death at the age of 94.

In many of his plays he has emphasized upon the advocacy of feminism, he has created such a strong female characters who are a matter of studies. Some of his important plays are Arms And The Man, The Doctors Dilemma, Major Barbara, Mrs. Warren's Profession, Pygmalion, Saint Joan, and Man and Superman etc. He had lived through a crucial period of radical changes in social, economical and political circumstances in European societies from the late 19th century to the early 20th century, including two devastating World Wars that put humanity in great depression. At the turn of the century the major social movements of Realism and Feminism became prominent ideologies in part as a result of the intellectual and scientific developments provided by the works of Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud. He was one of the leading members of the Fabians Society, a British socialist

association whose objectives concerned the equality of men. The principles of Socialism were parallel to the feminist movements which primarily aimed for women's suffrage. Shaw who was an active Socialist and Feminist, attempted to educate women about the fundamentals of socialism in his "Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism".

The feminist movements at the turn of the twentieth century that aimed for women's equality and questioned the conventional femininity became an argumentative subject in the society. The shift in feminist movement went beyond the questioning of the limitations and the conventional female roles imposed on women as mothers and housewives. Many social and political campaigns for women emancipation mostly concerned with women's need to have "more choices and more control" over their own livesⁱ. The demand of equality for women came with the rise of educational and occupational opportunities women. Modern women had begun to consider themselves as human being with capabilities and the society should treat them equally as same as men had. Therefore a feminist ideal of "New Women" was introduced in Winifred Harper Cooley's The New Womanhood".

"The finest achievements of the new woman have been personal liberty. This is the foundation of civilization; and as long as any one clavers in watched suspiciously, even fondly guarded, and protected, so long that clavers not only be weak, and treacherous, individually, but parasitic, and a collective danger to the community...". The New Woman, in the sense of the best woman, the flower of all the womanhood of past ages, has come to stay – if civilization is to endure. The sufferings of the past have but strengthened her, maternity has deepened her, education is broadening her – and she now knows she must perfect herself if she would perfect the race, and leave her imprint upon immortality, through her off springs or her works.ⁱⁱ

Shaw's Mrs. Warren's Profession, which concerns the issues of marriage and prostitution, dramatizes the struggle of New Woman figures striving over their limitations. The play points out about the new Womanish Characters' attitude towards conventional middle-class Victorian woman. Shaw suggests that feminism ideal about woman emancipation in compatible with socialism in his play. Socialism and

Capitalism as effective method used by modern Women to gain equality and independent for woman in general.

Of his later plays 'Shaw is best remembered for Saint Joan (1923) and John Bull's Other Island (1904) Written four years after Joan of Arc was recognized as a saint. Saint Joan portrays the French Woman as a stubborn individual who was ahead of her time. Another theatrical invention of Shaw is his exceptionally talkative characters as "Shavian persona", especially his leading ladies. The heroines of his plays like Joan of Arc, Vivie Warren, Candida and Barbara, are significantly dramatized as the most dominant characters of each play that convey the modern themes that concerned with problematic social issue of British Society at the turn of century. Distinctly influenced by Feminism ideals, these Shavian heroines draw the reader's attention to consider the play wrights view on woman and reformation of dramatic convention of his days. Thus we see that his female characters are vivid samples of Feminist Women who try to be free from restrictions and, in the end, be true to their own values to follow their conscience instead of what considered "natural" for women or fulfil society's expectations.

The play 'Mrs. Warren Profession' is as message that as long as woman are overworked and underpaid in industries that threaten their health, prostitution will continue to seem better option. Mrs. Warren is part-owner of an international chain of brothels, not so much a prostitute, more a business woman.

Shaw addresses lot of problem concerning women, and allows us to hear a number of different opinions on them, many spoken by any female characters.

'Mrs. Warren's Profession' is a play for women; that it has been performed and produced mainly through the determination of women that it should be performed and produced; that the enthusiasm of women made its first performance excitingly successful, and that not one of these women had any inducement to support it except their belief in the timelines and the power of the lesson the play teachesG.B. Shaw, The Author's Apology in Mrs. Warren's Profession".

When Shaw wrote Pygmalion woman couldn't vote in the U.K. in 1918 women over the age of thirty were given the rights.

The plot of Major Barbara revolves around a young lady named Barbara who is in the Salvation Army; and her awesome efforts and fearlessness.

Shaw Introduced Candida a play in his plays pleasant sequel in 1998. The play's title is named after the central female character of a middle-aged housewife, Candida, whose name implies his 'candid' thoughts and straight-forward actions towards love, marriage and the role of woman in the 19th century English Society.

Through many of his plays Shaw expresses his feminist stand point in the characterization of his heroines that woman are not conducted by the marriage but a practical living together with their couples. He points out that woman need to emancipate from men's exploitation in the form of marriage and motherhood for equality in sex. It is necessary for women to abandon their woman hood, or embrace it in which it depends on their free wills to achieve sexual equality and freedom as an individual. The different opinions debated on Shaw's 'Candida' emphasize the playwright's realistic point of view on the complexity of womanliness for he gives the play's subtitle – 'A Mystery'.

Later in life, Shaw was recognized for his talents. In 1925 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature.

The basic premise of mine is that Shaw was an immensely important thinker of the 20th century who made a tremendous contribution to practically everything that happened and failure to write him into feminist history in inexcusable.

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Democracy

Now I will share some of his views regarding democracy. Government is perhaps the most important phenomenon in politics. Government is the institution that governs the activities of state or nation and it is of various types: Monarchy, Plutocracy, and Democracy etc. Shaw has carried the same in his plays. He gives us a clear-cut picture of Democracy in the preface of 'The Apple Cart':

"We have to solve two man inseparable problems : the economic problem of how to produce and distribute or subsistence, and the political problem of how to select our rulers and prevent them from abusing their authorities in their own interests or those of their class and religions". and he adds : "Our solution of the of the political problem is "Votes of Everybody and Every Authority elected by Votes an expedient originally devised to prevent rulers from tyrannizing by the very effectual method of preventing them from doing anything wrong and thus leaving everything to irresponsible private enterprise,.....Its planned evolved machinery of parliament and part system and cabinet is so effective in abstraction that we take thirty years by constitutional method to do a thirty minute work.

Shaw believes that people should produce electorates capable of doing anything by their votes. If we examine a more poetic conception of democracy Abraham Lincoln, quoted Democracy as:

"Government of the people, for the people and by the people"

For the three articles of the definition number one: Government of the people: that evidently is necessary. A Human community can no mere exists without a government. Number two: Government for the people; is most important. In fact Democracy is a form of government which means equal consideration for all in all economical, social, and political aspects.

But Government by the people is quite a different matter. He believes that all must be governed with equal consideration for all the repudiate number three on the ground that the people cannot govern. This is a physical impossibility. Every citizen cannot be a ruler in the way as everybody can not be a engine driver or a pirate king.

Now comes the question; if we cannot govern ourselves, what can we do to save ourselves from being at the mercy of those who can govern. The primitive answer is that as we are always in a huge majority, we can, if rulers oppress us intolerably, burn the houses and tear them into pieces.

In the prefaces of many of his plays he puts his views. His play 'The Apple Cart' exposes present day democracy as a hopeless fraud. Most of the popularly elected ministers are easily excitable political Bobbies who waste their time in bungling and squabbling without exercising any control over the real work of administration. But there are some in the Cabinet who have brains. In the play, Proteus, the Prime Minister is, as King Magnus says, a clever fellow. Though he is capable, he cannot apply his faculties to real problems because his energies are wasted in managing the ministers. Most of them play in the hands of greedy capitalists. Thus in a capitalist society with an ignorant and illiterate electorates, democracy is bound to flounder. Shaw attacks democracy as the root of many evils. It is obvious that any ambitious idiot with a platform trick of gulling the publican win democratic elections. The voters have no real choice of candidates, nor do they have the capacity to judge who are really competent to rule. Democratic elections as a means of selecting the best qualified rulers, is an illusion.

He attacked democracy in 'Heart-Break House', 'The Apple Cart', and in the 'Preface to the Millionaire 'On The Rock' is an attack on Democracy and a plea for dictatorship. Somehow I find his inclination towards dictatorship. He believes that any good and noble dictator is better than a cabinet of ministers, playing with the people. They are always in a plan to make their personal profits.

Conclusion

In fact Shaw locked upon himself as a social and political philosopher and vehemently asserted that he cared more for his nation's good conditions. He was always occupied with the problems of his time. He was a feminist who always wanted to strengthen womanhood as he knew that women are the base of civilizations. If they are provided with freedom to choose their things, education, career and all, they will be able to produce

good citizens, who will play an important role in the destiny formation of any nation. He was more of a thinker, a social reformer, propagandist and a literacy humanist than a dramatic artist. I can conclude the whole in Bernard Shaw's own words:

"I write plays with the deliberate object of converting the nation to my opinion sexual and social matters. I have no other incentive to write plays as I am not dependent on it for my livelihood....."

ⁱ Calder, 1976, p. 162

ⁱⁱ Emphasis added, Cooley, p. 13, 1904.