

## WOMAN REDEFINED IN G.B.SHAW'S ELIZA DOOLITTLE AND MRS. WARREN

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### INTRODUCTION

Feminism is both a political stance and a theory that focuses on gender as a subject of analysis and as a platform to demand equality, rights and justice. Feminism's key assumption is that gender roles are pre-determined by society and

the woman is trained to fit into those roles. This means that roles like 'daughter' or 'mother' are not natural but social because the woman has to be trained to think, talk and act in particular ways that suit the role. Feminist literary and cultural theory draws a link between the representation of woman in art and the real, material conditions in which she lives. Feminism, therefore, does not delink art from existing social conditions and practices. Religion, the family, education, the arts, knowledge systems are all social and cultural structures that enable the perpetual reinforcement of this inequality. These structures are effective means of reinforcing male domination because they do not appear oppressive.

### CONCEPT OF NEW WOMAN:

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the attitude towards woman had begun to change and her position in society improved in several ways in law, education and employment. Bernard If any single person set the course of British Drama towards the emancipation of woman, from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was George Bernard Shaw. The woman in Shaw's plays starts changing and discovering a new world through an intellectual evolution. The woman in his plays is strong, educated, bold, and assertive and does not rely on the male. The New Woman was inducted into the early and middle plays of Shaw. His woman characters set a new trend by challenging the male authority and attempting to remake the world created by men. We find him clearly protesting against the Victorian ideal of femininity in glorifying the unfeminine woman and championing the woman who is clever, and independent. He eventually conceived an ideal for a woman who was both equal to man and simultaneously uniquely feminine. Shaw's woman epitomises the manifestation of his unorthodox frame of mind which discredited the prevalent conventions and institutions regarding the status of the woman both in the society and at home. Shaw was forever keen to shock society into thinking and agreeing to a great extent, that the woman is not less intelligent than her male counterpart but is only fundamentally different. Shaw's creation of woman characters, who were real people, who escaped the confines of the stereo-type, to triumph as individuals was his idea of emancipation of woman. An accurate self-evaluation, self-awareness and a sense of personal worth are the characteristics of the female heroines of Shaw that also match with those of today's modern liberated woman.

In any case, Shaw's woman seems innately unsuited to the role of a dependent inferior being. Each is put in the position of working out a conflict between a full expression of her true abilities and the repressive demands of society. Shaw's woman characters exemplify their liberation primarily through their independence: socially, economically and psychologically. The New Woman of Shaw was consistently a symbol of protest against societal norms threatening to dissolve the boundaries of gender and disrupt the maternal activities that Nature was thought to have ordained for woman. There is a particular type of woman, the advanced woman, that, Shaw specializes in depicting. She is a woman who has the liberty of thought, of outlook, of will. Shaw's heroine would do what she thinks is best and will act in a way she likes best. Shaw's woman will not hesitate in saying 'yes' to her natural impulses.

The post modernists in order to declare the empowerment of woman gave a term, 'feminism', which Shaw has already used in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Shaw protested against romanticizing the woman. With his keen insight into female nature, Shaw has tried to put woman on a high pedestal. She is adored and she must also be loved, but the love must be lifted to a higher plane of consciousness. He appreciated the Feminist Movement which had started with the object of making woman march out of the homes and share the labour of life with her

counterpart. The woman was not to remain anymore confined to the hearth and home but walk shoulder to shoulder with the male in the economic activities outside the home. Shaw depicted the independent working woman in his woman characters as a woman who works for her livelihood and accepts no insults. Shaw has portrayed the dilemma of the professional woman realistically. His working woman confronts the social conventions set for the woman and proves herself to be self-made and self-driven. His professional woman does not care about social conventions. Shaw does not portray a secretary, a research assistant or a dietician as his characters as these designations represent a new kind of female subjugation. His successful women are possessed with 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.

From Romantic and Victorian periods to the Modern period, a revolutionary dramatic metamorphosis took place in the literary field. By 1900, the theatre was a theatre of realism. The touch of reality was provided by staging, acting, and costuming as well as all the other aspects of dramatic production. The new drama, the drama of serious artistic and realistic concern, began with T. W. Robertson (1829-1871). His work played an important role in the transition and transformation of drama from Victorian period to Modern period. Jones, Pinero, Gilbert, Wilde and even Shaw were Robertson's real heirs. Of all the dramatists, Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) was the most influential. Shaw endorsed Ibsen's ideals and ideas presenting a complete justification which geared his views further.

Barbara Bellow Watson very rightly says about Shaw in her essay on *The New Woman and the New Comedy*, *The trick is Shaw's creation of a long list of interesting characters who happen to be females and that contribution alone should make him a patron saint of the woman's movement. Beginning nearly a hundred years ago with the independent and intelligent women in his novels and continuing through his last plays, Shaw turned out a distinctive product, the Shavian Woman the quintessence of the New Woman.*

*Eliza Doolittle of Pygmalion:*

Woman, in Shaw's plays was not only more important, but important in a quite different way. Through women like Eliza Doolittle in *Pygmalion* Shaw has explored the realm of women's heart providing her with the equal opportunity to verbalize her choice. Eliza has been portrayed as a typical Victorian woman, conscious of her womanly feelings and passions. The story of *Pygmalion* is the story of the making of a woman. She 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 her inner soul in the process. She achieves final personal fulfilment through successive stages of inspiration, purgation, illumination and despair. Eliza goes through these stages in her relationship with Prof. Higgins. She devotes herself completely to her master. When Prof. Higgins does not pay heed to Eliza's work and this indifference to her sincerity makes her rebel against him. Eliza's relationship with Prof. Higgins is a relationship of cold hearted professor and a student which she realizes later on and acts instinctively and accordingly. Sangeeta Jain exclaims about Eliza,

*"She repudiates the notion that all women want to be mastered and asserts her own individuality. She wants natural love not somebody to bully her. She understands the wretchedness of being an experimental object."*(pp.65)

Norbert F. O'Donnell writes,

*Liza Doolittle is transformed from a subhuman flower girl into a truly human being because she shakes off her fear, develops her will of her own, and is able to meet Higgins as an equal in the strife of wills which is human condition...*(pp.77)

Eliza's final attitude to Higgins is that of exultation of having achieved her freedom from his domination: *"Aha! That's done you, Henry Higgins, it has. Now I don't care that (snapping her fingers) for your bullying and your big talk....."* (Act V)

In Act IV and V of *Pygmalion* we see Eliza grow into a mature woman. In spite, or rather because, of her tremendous success at the embassy ball, Eliza becomes aware of her loss of identity. She cannot sell flowers with her newly acquired refined English nor can she go on playing the lady at balls as she is a mere fraud. Eliza has awakened as a human being but Higgins is insensitive to her despairing soul. Moreover he irresponsibly suggests that she gets married. To this suggestion she emphatically retorts:

LIZA: *"We were above that at the corner of Tottenham Court Road. HIGGINS: [waking up] what do you mean?"*

LIZA: *I sold flowers. I didn't sell myself. Now you've made a lady of me, I'm not fit to sell anything else. I wish you'd left me where you found me."* (Act IV)

Finally Eliza declares her independence and that she can do without him. She says she will marry Freddy because she knows he needs her. To use Higgins's words, Eliza is awakened to her own "spark of divine fire" in Act V. She has grown into an independent woman who can do without Higgins. Eliza Doolittle seems at the end of 'Pygmalion' well on her way to becoming a liberated woman.

Mrs. Warren of Mrs. Warren's Profession:

George Bernard Shaw created a non-traditional fallen woman in his 1893 play *Mrs. Warren's Profession*. This play created much scandal in its portrayal of characters openly discussing prostitution. Shaw depicts an unconventional fallen woman who is not at all like the ordinary fallen character of the Victorian period. The play's open discussion of the subject of incest created havoc in the theatre world of the time, eventually banning it from being performed.

To understand and evaluate the character of Mrs. Warren and the kind of 'fallen woman', the social context of the time in which the play is set, needs consideration too. The character of Mrs. Warren openly destroys many of the illusions and false ideals which were so much a part of the 'civilized' late 19<sup>th</sup> century society. The Victorian rawasaharsh time for the Victorian working woman as many factory owners, commoners from non-aristocratic backgrounds and other men of 'commerce' began to make financial rewards from business ventures, big and small. Employers knew they could get away by paying women paltry wages due to the fact that it was difficult for a woman to make money anyway, so this was a way to take advantage of it. Therefore many women turned to prostitution in order to financially make ends meet.

Prostitution as a social fact increased during the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as industrialisation and urbanisation saw many women moving from the countryside to the city in order to seek out higher paid employment. Prostitution clashed with the values of conventional morality which dictated that selling sex was wrong. A woman such as Mrs. Warren whose social status had in reality been built upon a foundation of precisely this immoral activity had a necessity to maintain the utmost secrecy about the business which provided her with the money to enjoy her 'respectable' social standing.

Shaw propagandized for equality between man and woman through most of his major plays in which the contemporary theatre-goer and reader encountered female characters of a new kind. Shaw's New Woman, contrasted to the 'womanly woman' who had been the ideal, was labelled by him as the unwomanly woman. The New Woman was consistently a symbol of upheaval, threatening to dissolve the boundaries of gender and disrupt the maternal activities which nature was thought to have ordained for women. *Mrs. Warren's Profession* is a perfect example. In this play Shaw attacked one of the most revolting abuses against womanhood of contemporary society: prostitution.

Mrs. Warren is described as 'rather spoilt and domineering, and decidedly vulgar', but Shaw stresses her vitality, thrift, energy and outspokenness. She has made her way from the slums to wealth, independence and an exciting life as the manager of a chain of brothels in Brussels and other towns; and even if it is dirty work it is stimulating and gives her satisfaction. She is indeed a modern career woman, though her work is suspect. As Mrs. Warren confesses, "I must have work and excitement or I shall go melancholy mad .... The life suits me: I am fit for it and not anything else....I can't give up- not for anybody." (Act III)

Mrs. Warren is a 'society made courtesan not a self-made whore.' She represents all those victimized women of society who had no other alternative but prostitution. She is forced into this profession since there is no other option for her to survive. She was one of those women who were created to love and to be loved. Even Mrs. Warren has sacrificed the role of being a traditional mother to her daughter in order to be able to provide and give her the best education possible. Therefore, these women are stronger than "all of England" (Act III) because they do not just think about themselves in all of this but also others.

It can be construed that it is the fault of the social system which did not prevent the falling of woman of the time. Mrs. Warren, at one point, confesses that she wanted to be a good woman and that she tried honest work. But the stark reality of the capitalist society brings her to believe from within those definitions of morality and honest work that was taught in school was not the actual right ones. It was all pretence and the reality was what the 'big' people did by exploiting the needy. Another reason was the working conditions of the white lead factory which were worse than that of a brothel:

*"The house in Brussels was real high class: a much better place for a woman to be in than the factory where Anne got poisoned."* (Act IV)

Victorian society was just money- minded and this caused some to seek money 'immorally' where you did not have to pretend but could just work for fantastic sums of money. Mrs. Warren constantly speaks of the clergymen; she wishes she could go back to *"talk to that lying clergymen in the school"* (Act III) who assured her as a child that the moral path is the best path.

This feminine consciousness was raised by many movements to liberate and encourage women to take initiative and come out from the long oppressed womanhood. Women started striving hard in order to be recognised as human beings and not as commodity. Mrs. Warren has been intelligent enough to maintain her image and wealth without the source of where it came being exposed, the corrupted underworld has led Mrs. Warren to become devoid of all her womanly feelings, attitudes and obligations. Mrs. Warren has had to work in a male dominated world and therefore, has also had to take on male attributes in order to survive and succeed at prostitution and the brothel owning profession. In the heavily male- dominated business of brothel management, Mrs. Warren becomes constructed as a male- thinking character. She abandons the role of a helpless victim and sees prostitution as a profitable business. Putting forward his argument in favour of the production of the play, Shaw in his *'The Author's Apology'* very clearly states, that,

*Mrs. Warren's Profession is a play for women; that it has been performed and produced mainly through the determination of women...*(pp.19)

The dictatorial Shavian woman fights the oppressive society face to face. She remains un-crucified and un-penalized. Although Mrs. Warren is somewhat shunned by nature and society, she is not ashamed of her profession nor is she conscience- stricken and humiliated. Mrs. Warren's last words show the mental agony and trauma of a 'survivor' not a victim, as Shaw intends to project her:

*"I always wanted to be a good woman. I tried honest work; and I was slave- driven until I cursed the day I ever heard of honest work. I was a good mother, and because I made my daughter a good woman, she turns me out as if I was a leper. Oh, if I only had my life to live over again!..I'd do wrong and nothing but wrong and prosper on it."* (Act IV)

## CONCLUSION :

To conclude, these woman characters of the plays show Shaw's unorthodox turn of mind and distrust of conventions and institutions as far as the status of woman was concerned. Shaw never made his woman rest on the superhumanly virtues of chastity, selflessness and other ideals. Shaw rationalised his ideal of equality between men and women. Basic to Shaw's feminism was the advocacy for moral, physical and social emancipation of woman with dignity and self-respect for every individual woman, which would transform the family relationships contributing to the evolution of a new society. Shaw's plays illustrate his continuing relevance to woman as she continues to probe her role in today's complex world. Feminism and Shavian thinking come together in three post-modern themes that can often be seen in Shaw's depiction of woman: ambivalence, identity and incompleteness. Shaw was never at a loss for things to say about the always vexing question of woman's identity including the factors that may- or may not- make woman different from the male. As each wave of feminism crests and falls, we can expect woman to continue to find much that is wise, provocative, prophetic and profound in Shaw's literary output.

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