



AN APPRAISAL OF MALE-FEMALE CHAUVINISM IN 'MAN AND SUPERMAN'

DR. GANGA NAND SINGH

Assistant Professor,
University Dept. of English
Vinoba Bhave University, Hazaribag
(JH) INDIA

AMISHA KUMARI

Student,
University Department of English
Vinoba Bhave University, Hazaribag
(JH) INDIA

ABSTRACT

This study examines the intricacies of man & woman relationship in George Bernard Shaw's famous drama 'Man and Superman'. The play, written in 1903, is a social satire which puts major emphasis on relationships. All the characters are woven together with a binding force, which is actually Shaw's concept of Life Force or Elan Vital. G. B. Shaw is considered to be an iconoclast. He was revolutionary since childhood. He, through his plays attempts to convey his ideas to the society. He tries to do the same with Man and Superman i.e. to show his belief in the conflict between man as the spiritual creator and woman as the guardian of the biological continuity of the human race. He through the use of wit and humour tries to express the male-female chauvinism to his readers in the perspective of superior prospective procreation. He was an absolutist in mental process and realist in action, therefore, he tries to test the set values & traditions every now and then. The characters in his plays often discuss male and female roles in courtship.

Keywords: Life-force, New woman, Creative Selection, Conflict, Superman, Chauvinism.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship of a man and a woman is the centre of focus for almost every writer and reader but not everybody tries to get into the depth of this to get a view of the reality. In many

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AMISHA KUMARI

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of the great epics, it is said that *a man and a woman complete each other*. In Hinduism, there's the concept of *Ardhangini*. It is said that a woman is a man's better half. Both the halves are equal and one-half is incomplete without the other. There's oneness in love. Two bodies but one soul. Even in Christianity and other religion, it is believed that a man needs a woman to lead a better life.

G. B. Shaw believes woman as a creature superior to man because of the duties she performs and tries to present her as a force which drives life. In most of his plays, he attempts to prove this. He creates women who break the barriers set by the society and lives by her own will. These are the women who are free-thinkers or women who want to be the icon of change that they want to see in the society. Women who choose their partners by themselves or women who choose a life and career of their own. His plays such as *Pygmalion*, *Arms and the Man*, *Candida*, *Mrs. Warren's Profession* and of course, *Man and Superman* presents some extraordinary female characters which are pure embodiment of his thoughts and ideas.

This study deals with the conflict in man and woman relationship in *Man and Superman*. G. B. Shaw believed in the life to come. Since life keeps evolving and society keeps changing, he believed in '*making experiments in order to create better forms of life*'. The good looking and vital young woman, Ann Whitefield is looking for a good husband and hopes to find him in the wealthy & political John (Jack) Tanner, who also happens to be her guardian. Aware of her intentions, Tanner tries to escape the situation but soon, he too is drawn towards Ann Whitefield with a strong feeling which makes it unable for him to leave.

Aims and Objectives

This study aims to get into the depth of man & woman relationship and the prevailing conflicts in regards with *G.B. Shaw's Man and Superman*. It also deals with the interdependence of opposite sexes on each other. It talks about Shaw's *theory of Life Force* and role of women in a relationship and in the production of *Superman*. This study also tries to delve deeper into platonic relationships as well as evolution of humankind. One of the major objective of this study is to present a straight-forward analysis of Shaw's thoughts and ideas as a person living in a society which doesn't matches upto his expectations.

Literature Review

Eric Bentley, a British-born American theatre critic & playwright called *Man and Superman* as "*The supreme triumph of Shaw's dramaturgical dialects*". *Arthur Bingham Walkey* praised Shaw as '*a man who can give us a refined intellectual pleasure*'. Critics also find the *Don Juan* reference in the play very interesting. *Sally Peter Vogt* proposes: *Thematically, the*



fluid Don Juan myth becomes a favorable milieu for Creative Evolution, and that 'the legend... becomes in Man and Superman the vehicle through which Shaw communicates his cosmic philosophy. Essayist and critic G.K. Chesterton, as quoted in George Bernard Shaw: The Critical Heritage, considered the book 'fascinating and delightful' and called his friend Shaw to task for showing little faith in humanity. Max Beerbohm wrote in the Saturday Review that Shaw's characters are too flat & priggish and that, the life-force could find no use for them.

Textual Study

Max Beerbohm once said,

'Shaw's judgements are often scatterbrained, but at least he has brains to scatter'.

This statement proves his intellectual capacity to blend realistic ideas in his plays smoothly. Shaw used to pick issues that were left untouched by many and dared to present his own critical opinion on them. Shaw was very clear with his concepts and believed in making his plays a mouthpiece for social problems. In his dedicatory epistle to *Man and Superman* addressed to *Arthur Bingham Walkey*, he wrote

My conscience is the genuine pulpit article: it annoys me to see people comfort-able when they ought to be uncomfortable; and I insist on making them think in order to bring them to conviction of sin. If you don't like my preaching you must lump it. I really cannot help it.

Shaw was also a women's right advocate. In his *Saturday Review*, he talks about several important issues relating drama and theatre as well as women's rights and their role in the society. He had written *Man and Superman* as '*a pretext for a propaganda of our own views of life*'. With his *Life-Force theory*, he created a storm in the world of literature as well as the contemporary society. Many of his novels are backed by this theory and *Man and Superman* is no exception to it. Life is gradually evolving and to make the world a better place, better humans should be created. Greater power of contemplation and self-realization is needed to choose a better partner. According to Shaw, *woman is the life-force* and she is free to choose a better partner for herself in order to bring a superior mankind into the world.

Life force, literally, means 'vitality' (ability to live or exist). *Creative Evolution* is the way through which a better and greater (beyond the one already developed) life-form is created. Shaw is said to be the creator of *New Drama* as well as *New Woman*. The women of his plays



behave differently from the pre-conceived notions set about women. They are confident and have a mind of their own which was considered to be rare during those times. His female characters are determined to achieve what they desire (as we see in the case of Ann Whitefield). Shaw never wrote a woman who succumbed to the situations in front of her. His woman characters are soft, delicate, pretty yet strong-willed. They search for an independent man who can be good husband and have the capability to bear children. Now when we talk about the male characters, they are presented as extraordinary, revolutionary and intellectual beings. Jack Tanner, the author of the *Revolutionist's Handbook* is a wealthy left wing thinker while Octavius Robinson is a handsome, sincere, romantic and naïve suitor.

The conflict between the male and the female characters is evident not only in the major characters but also in the minor characters. Louisa Straker refuses to marry her lover, Mendoza because of his social status. Mendoza is a revolutionary socialist cum anarchist. Louisa can't spend her life with someone who can't fit her expectations. The relationship of Violet Robinson and Hector Malone Jr. is also the one of struggles and conflicts. Violet was secretly married to Malone Jr. but when she gets pregnant, people think that she is unmarried yet pregnant which creates a major chaos in the play. Difference in social status becomes a hurdle in their relationship. When Ramsden comes with the news that Violet is about to become an unmarried mother, all but Tanner are greatly shocked. Tanner declares that the girl should be congratulated on

'the fulfillment of her highest purpose and greatest function – to increase, multiply, and replenish the earth'.

This shows the beauty of platonic relationships presented by Shaw and also glorifies the importance of his life-force theory. The process of reproduction of a child is said to be one of the greatest function performed by a woman and a man. To produce a child, a woman needs a man. It is their duty to bring into the world a superior man. In *Man and Superman*, Jack Tanner says

'Woman is pursuer and Man is pursued.... It is the business of a woman to get married as soon as possible and a man to remain bachelor as long as possible'.

A woman is the life force in nature. In the play, we see that even Octavius Robinson tries to persuade Ann Whitefield. He tries to woo her and she plays along while keeping an eye on Tanner. Tanner knows about Ann's intentions and tries to escape but fails miserably. Ann believes that poetic hearts like Octavius can never be a good husband. It is revolutionary men like Tanner who marry and prove to be better life partners. Tanner can provide her financial



security and will be more efficient in production of Superman. As *German* Philosopher, *Friedrich Nietzsche* writes: *Superman* (German *Urbemensch*), in Philosophy, the superior man, who justifies the existence of human race. Shaw believed in Nietzsche's idea that mankind evolves through a process of natural selection and woman plays an important role in it.

The conflict between Ann and Tanner is pretty much evident in the play. Ann who appears to naïve and docile manipulates the situation, involving her mother and convinces both Ramsden and Tanner to be her guardian. She leaves no opportunity to entice Tanner into marrying her so that she can fulfill the purpose of nature. Love is only a part of the greater reality and necessity. In the end, we realize that it was Ann who had suggested her father to make Tanner her co-guardian. So, it was all planned since the beginning. Shaw proclaimed that life is about creative selection. It's about choosing the one using trial and error method. It's about making mistakes and correcting them on your own.

In the Epistle Dedicatory to *Man and Superman*, Shaw wrote:

“Man is no longer, like Don Juan, victor on the duel of sex. Whether he has ever really been maybe doubted: at all events the enormous superiority of woman's natural positive in this matter is telling with greater and greater force.”

Woman is the greater and aggressive pursuer of man. The best woman seek out and tries to conquer the smartest and most creative man for themselves leading to higher evolutionary state as she persuades them to marry and procreate. Shaw provides options to his female characters which further helps her in creative selection of her partner. He presents different male characters who have charms and qualities of their own which often lead to conflicts. Love triangle is the most basic conflict that we see in the plays. However, there are many reasons which lead to conflict between the male & female character's relationship. Some of them are social class, financial status, caste difference etc.

His plays are about life and interest in life. One of his famous plays, *Pygmalion* talks about the importance of speech like how the way of talking and dressing describes a person's social class. It presents conflict between the major characters, *Eliza Doolittle* and *Professor Higgins*. In the same way, *Raina* from *Arms and the Man* is engaged to *Sergius* but she gradually changes her opinion and falls for *Bluntschli* who appears more realistic to her. However, some major conflicts arise due to her decision but she remains firm on her belief. Some other plays like *Candida*, *Back to Methuselah* etc. also support the same idea.



CONCLUSION

All the ideas that we discussed above reinforces the major conflict which is actually the belief that *man is a spiritual creator and woman is the guardian of the biological continuity of human race*. Each and every conflict that arises amidst the male and the female characters is actually a byproduct of the same belief and to be honest, these conflicts serve as the basis for the creation of the superman. The conflicts helps to understand the viewpoint of each of the characters in a better way and also helps the women in creative selection. Shaw has woven a beautiful web of life and relationships through his characters. One incident is related to another which helps in making the plot stronger. His plays have paved way for many coming writers and have given them the confidence to express their psyche.

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