

Arms And The Man: A Problem Play

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Abstract

The present research paper is an attempt to present the realism in Shaw's play *Arms and the Man*. In this play through the character of Bluntchili the romantic view of love and war has been shattered. The play shows that life is based on reality and not on romance. The play also depicts the real meaning of love and war. The paper wants to depict Shaw's aim in this play that is to debunk the romantic heroics of war and love.

Key Words: War, Romance, Love, Marriage, Idealism.

Introduction

The term problem play was coined by Sydney Grundy. The problem play has not been precisely defined though it is supposed to deal with problems and Shaw defined it as "the presentation in parable of the conflict between man's will and his environment." This does not furnish a certain basis or criterion because drama always presupposes the existence of a conflict in which human destinies are involved and invariably presents the issue in the form of a concrete problem which calls for a solution. Eric Bentley says "that problem play ends with a question mark. He says that the dramatist's business is to state the problem clearly and effectively and not to present a readymade solution or to suggest a specific remedy."

Aim Of Study: The aim of the study is the present the play 'Arms and the Man' as a problem play.

The problem play is supposed to have arisen out of the sentimental drama of the 18th century and has often been identified with 'serious drama'. The dramatic form distinctly serious but not tragic. It aims at presenting life's blend of smiles and tears. It is believed that the problem play differs from tragedy. It normally exhibits ideas, situations and feelings that lack tragic dimensions. It is distinguished from comedy, not only by the lack of episodes designed simply to amuse, but on account of its serious temper and didactic aim. Characters in problem play are all ordinary, commonplace men and women such as we might meet with everybody life.

The problem plays are valuable social documents they express the spirit of 20th century as Shakespeare's tragedies enshrined the spirit of Renaissance. The pioneers of problem play in England were George Bernard Shaw, John Masefield, John Galsworthy and so on. *Arms and the Man* is a play written by George Bernard Shaw. Shaw was an Irish playwright. He was born on 26th July, 1856 in Dublin, Ireland and died on 2nd November, 1950 in England. He was an Irish comic, dramatist, literary critic and socialist propagandist. He won Nobel prize for literature in 1925. *Arms and the Man* is one of the most celebrated plays of G. B Shaw. Other major plays of his are *Man and Superman*, *Candida*, *Caesar and Cleopatra*, *Pygmalion*, *St. Joan* and *The Apple Cart*. The play was published in 1894 and was first staged at the

Avenue theatre, London on 21st April, 1894. The title of the play has been taken from Virgil's Aeneid in Latin: Arma Viroqua Cano (of arms and the man I sing).

George Bernard Shaw was an advocate of the new problem and social drama of Ibsen, who had ruthlessly torn away the veil of respectability to expose the rottenness of the heart of contemporary social life. In the words of E. Albert, "Shaw's fundamental aim in his drama was the bettering of the lot of humanity. Scoffing at the romantic view of life he examined man and his social institutions with intellectual courage and shrewd, irreverent insight into slum, landlords, marriage, conventions, social prejudices, the glamorous historical figure, the medical profession, the critics, religion-these are but some of the people and things which came under the microscope of his rationalism."

In his play, *Arms and the Man*, he stripped war of heroism and of all its romantic glamour. The romantic view of war, as Shaw held, is based on the idealistic notion that men fight because they are heroes and the soldier who takes the biggest risks wins the greatest glory and is the greatest hero. In the opening scene of the play, we find Raina Petcoff is engaged to Sergius. News has arrived to Raina and her mother that Sergius has ridden bravely at the head of a victorious cavalry charge. Raina rejoices his victory and believes that she is lucky to be betrothed with a man like Sergius. She says:

Oh, to think that it was all true-that Sergius is just as splendid
and noble as he looks- that the world is really a glorious world for
woman who can see its glory and men who can act its romance!¹

Arms and the Man is an attack on heroism in war. It shows Shaw's views of war. He criticizes in it the contemporary conventional outlook. The popular conception of romantic hero is severely attacked in this play. Bluntchili, a Swiss, is a professional soldier. His views about war are without illusions. He is a rational realist. According to him, the chief objective of an efficient soldier is not the public reputation at the canon's mouth but practical success and the presentation of life. In Act I when Raina mocks at him by saying, that "some soldiers, I know are afraid to die"² Bluntchili replies:

All of them, dear lady, all of them, believe me. It is our
duty to live as long as we can, and kill as many of the
enemy we can.³

Sergius after the war does not get promotion even after helping his army to win. He is disappointed and decides to resign from army. He is a romantic soldier who idealises war and risks his life. But soon he realizes that the battlefield is not a romantic place. We need rationality and practical wisdom in war. He is sad and thinks him misfit for army. The romantic glamour seems away to fade away in the end. He says:

I am no longer a soldier. Soldiering my dear Madam, is a coward's
act of attacking mercilessly when you are strong and keeping out
of harm's way, when you are weak. That is the whole secret of
successful fighting. Get your enemy at disadvantage and never, on
any account fight him on equal terms.⁴

Shaw was opposed to the romantic view of war because he was a realist. Through his plays he condemns the romanticism about war. Shaw endeavours to show that war is not only a foolish act but socially and morally dangerous. Shaw regarded himself as an anti-romantic person. Bluntchili is the mouthpiece of Shaw and through his character he Shaw talks about his own ideas on war.

The Swiss soldier in *Arms and the Man* behaved as Shaw maintained

a soldier actually does behave, not as the conventions of Victorian melodrama would have a soldier behave: the play exhibited what Shaw called 'natural morality' as against the 'romantic morality' of those who objected to it. But Shaw was too clever to present his natural morality directly⁵

Shaw's realism is absolutely unsentimental and unromantic. His plays are based on genuinely scientific natural history and is opposed to romance. He hated sentimentalism. He never like to portray a woman in love. He lacks imaginative passion for this passion. He believes in realism and intellectualism. He attacks love severely. He considers it as an artificial and fictitious show. He like to look at love realistically. He is a realist in his exposition of the method.

In the play Raina Petcoff loves Sergius. It is more in the nature of worship than of love. When she is in ecstasy of at the beginning of the play, she merely takes up the portrait of Sergius and adores it. Sergius, too, meets with her with a feeling of worship after his return from war. They call their love a 'higher love' but it was unreal love. Sergius calls it, "a very fatiguing thing to keep up for any length of time."⁶ And as soon as Raina's back is turned, he tries to flirt with Louka. This experience makes him know the difference between real love and the so-called higher love. Raina's eyes are also opened. She comes to know at last that Sergius is not a hero or a God but a fickle minded man. Sergius himself is aware of his nature. While flirting with Louka after an adoring love-scene with Raina, he frankly speaks to Louka.

I am surprised at myself Louka, what would Sergius, the hero of
Slivnitza, say, , say if he saw me now? What would Sergius, the apostle
of higher love say if he saw me now?⁷

Bluntchili, is a man who cures Raina of the romantic illusion about love. She comes to know that real love means to be real in front of your love and not artificial. When Raina is with Bluntchili, she behaves naturally but in front of Sergius, her behaviour becomes artificial. This difference is noticed by Louka and she is confirmed that Raina would marry Bluntchili and this is what happens at the last of the play. George Bernard Shaw in this play also talks about an important issue that is marriage. His conception of marriage is a lofty as well as a realistic one. According to him marriage is not a means of satisfying personal desires of individual man and woman. Man and woman marry because it is a physical and biological necessity. It is not a romantic union between a romantic maiden and handsome young man. To Shaw, marriage is a solemn contract not a frivolous domestic excursion. According to him, romantic love is not found in real life. In this play, he depicts a heroic figure in Captain Bluntchili and contrasts him with the romantic fool Major Sergius Saranoff. When Sergius comes to know about Bluntchili's night stay in Raina's bedroom and gets a hint from Louka that Raina loves Bluntchili, he challenges him for a duel. He even proposes to give him one of the best horses. But Bluntchili, in a satire replies that he does not need a horse as he is a man of artillery. He replies to Sergius:

Oh! thank you that's a cavalry man's proposal. I'm in the artillery; and
I have the choice of weapons. If I go, I shall take a machine gun. And
there shall be no mistake about the cartridges this time.⁸

The dialogue between Sergius and Bluntchili shows the contrast between their mental level. Bluntchili mocks at Sergius cavalry attack at the battle. Sergius is a confused character. He is not able to fix his choice. It is Louka, who helps him to take his decision. Raina, romanticizes love as she romanticizes war. Her contact with Bluntchili brings her from romanticism to realism. She no longer thinks of marriage, "as a mating of a beautiful heroine and a handsome hero in a lifelong romantic dream." Instead

of the unstable Sergius, she chooses the plain Bluntchili, whose common sense and six hotels in Switzerland will give her stability and comfort. Just as Raina's union with Bluntchili cures her of her romanticism, in the same Sergius union with Louka cures him of his heroic ideas.

Shaw considers marriage as a transaction when a woman and a man are brought together by the creative force, arrangement like marriage is inevitable. But it does not bring conjugal happiness as it is based more on consideration of money, family, social and economic security than on intellectual and temperamental compatibility. Their happiness is only a veil to conceal their inner dissatisfaction and unhappiness. He tears the veil of hypocrisy mercilessly but realises that the problem does not have a permanent solution. The realities of love and marriage became one of the recurrent themes in the plays of Bernard Shaw. For Shaw, marriage is a union for procreation of healthy generation.

Conclusion: To conclude we can say that George Bernard Shaw depicts the follies of that time of society. He discusses the problems, speaks and compares romanticism and realism to his readers. We can at last say that Shaw has been successful in depicting realism and making the people aware of the distinction between romance and reality through his play, *Arms and the Man*.

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