



# I am a first class ladies tailor: George Bernard Shaw's multifarious expressions of 'New Woman'.

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Throughout the last decade of the century, perhaps no one wrote more about women than George Bernard Shaw, whose advanced views on the "woman question" earned him significant notice as an ardent champion of early feminism. Casting himself as Henry Ibsen's dramatic disciple, Shaw took up the cause and wrote the female parts in his own plays with depth and complexity in motivation and thought, placing women squarely center stage to argue their case and earning himself a place alongside Ibsen as one of modernism's great feminist playwrights. An ardent Socialist and Issues like Education, marriage, religion, government, healthcare, and class privilege engaged Shaw's attention.

Bernard Shaw, thus, was a feminist long before the term became familiar. In his plays and prefaces, he exposes the iniquities suffered by women; his women characters do not conform to the Victorian notions of femininity. Shavian Women are drawn in contrast with their Victorian Contemporaries and much akin to the 'New Woman' faces that were emerging in the then society. However, they were different from other fictional new women in that they did not preferably give up their femininity for becoming a mirror image of their male counterparts.

In his Writings he addresses prevailing social problems with a vein of comedy which makes the stark themes more palatable. Shaw was an active member of the Fabian Society and wrote many brochures and speeches for it. He became an accomplished orator in the furtherance of its causes- gaining equal rights for both men and women, alleviating abuses of the working class etc. He is also a Nobel Prize winner for his work which is marked by both idealism and humanity, its stimulating satire often being infused with a singular poetic beauty. Little attention, however, has been given by the literary critics to his relationship to women because of the presence of the Shavian Wit and showy verbiage and the soft pedalling of his official biographer as it is hostile to see in both his biography and his work. Like Shakespeare his name became an adjective i.e 'Shavian'. His Ironic wit endowed English with the adjective 'Shavian' used to characterize observations such as, "My way of joking is to tell the truth. It's the funniest joke in the world".

There were many women in Shaw's life whose ultra-modern ideas and actions had an influence on his campaign of feminism, especially his mother, Lucinda who left her young son and her husband, George Carr Shaw, once she realized that he was alcoholic and inept in supporting the family. Lucinda became Shaw's ideal of an independent Feminist woman who did not conform to conventional women's role as a mother and a wife; Shaw said about his mother that she was simply not a wife or mother at all. Her liberated

sexuality, self-efficiency and career fulfilment|| agreed with the Feminist hypothesis of the 'New Woman', a figure of modern woman who refused to submit to the Victorian ideals of Womanliness.

It was difficult to avoid the amiability of Shaw's impersonal embrace. Everything he seemed to say was what it was and another thing on women were the same as men; but different. Shaw admitted to Mrs Patrick Campbell in *Women and the Body Politic*, "I am a first class ladies tailor". The best of Shaw in this respect was his insistence on the virtue of independence. Mrs. Warren in Shaw's *Mrs Warren Profession* (1894) response to Vivie's question of whether she wishes she had made a living some other way than prostitution.

"What sort of mother do you take me for! How could you keep your self-respect in such starvation and slavery? And what's a woman worth? what's life worth? without self-respect! (67)

Vivie has asked her mother whether she feels ashamed of her profession, having worked as a prostitute and then run a brothel for young girls. Mrs. Warren's answer points to the need for independence and assertion of power for women, in a world where very little power was afforded them.

"If people arrange the world that way for women, there's no good pretending it's arranged the other way. No: I never was a bit ashamed really" (68).

Mrs Warren despises the convention of pretending that women are respected and honored, when really they must sacrifice their own interests no matter which path they choose. Her choice demonstrates a disdain for convention and she refuses to apologize for it.

The central conflict of *Mrs Warren's Profession* is seemingly one of opposition. The two women in the play are mother and daughter and they live their lives very differently. Mrs Warren, the mother, is a prostitute and the owner of at least one brothel and her daughter Vivie appears to be the perfect image of the new woman, an ideal of womanhood which became popular at the end of the 19th century. Each of them break with conventions and use their own ways to escape the patriarchy and social oppression of women at the time as best they can.

Vivie Warren was very intentionally used by Shaw to portray an example of the new woman. In the play her role is essential to provide a counterexample of her mother, Mrs Warren. Vivie seems to break several stereotypes - unlike a soft womanly touch she has —a resolute and hearty grip; apart from the air of high education that seem to surround her, her appearance gives the impression of a strong and confident business-person; the chatelaine she wears around her dress doesn't hang domestic stuff but —a fountain pen and a paper knife. She represents a more classic picture of the new woman who gains independence through education and a sort of sexual freedom.

A woman could be educated and therefore financially independent, Vivie experienced a new kind of sexual freedom in which she was not forced to marry for money; quintessentially she threatened the patriarchy that was new and scary to a male dominated society. Vivie's explanation to her mother to get to this point in her education and career, she has been dependent on her mother's income, and she resents that dependency. So in order to be completely independent, she must sever that tie. It hearkens back to the theme of the "New Woman," while drawing attention to the different ways the mother and daughter achieve this ideal.

I am my mother's daughter. I am like you: I must have work, and must make more money than I spend. But my work is not your work, and my way is not your way. We must part. It will not make much difference to us: instead of meeting one another for perhaps a few months in twenty years, we shall never meet: that's all. (*Mrs Warren's Profession* 102)

Vivie is educated, financially independent, she has a notable masculine side to her and she refuses to marry for comfort or convention. Vivie has devoted herself to this new idea of womanhood that she has learned from a young age and that was provided by her mother and it fits her personality well.

Shaw's other play *Pygmalion* (1913) also highlights New Woman strongly as Shaw rejected the traditional romantic ending in his play and made Eliza Doolittle a strong independent woman able to survive using her own skills and talents. The central theme of the play is the contrast between language professor Higgins and his passion for improving humanity and Eliza, an ordinary girl, who desires affection and a better life. *Pygmalion's* Eliza changes from a street flower seller to an independent and knowledgeable woman. Historically, education had been a male domain and in being educated Eliza from *Pygmalion* presents an enigma to the men of the play who are intimidated by her intelligence and ambitiousness. Shaw makes a point of portraying how Eliza's male environment reacts to her and her education. She establishes her independence through education. When she is introduced to Pickering her real education began with him and not with Higgins, Eliza says:

You see, really and truly, apart from the things anyone can pick up (the dressing and the proper way of speaking, and so on), the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated. I shall always be a flower girl to Professor Higgins, because he always treats me as a flower girl, and always will; but I know I can be a lady to you, because you always treat me as a lady, and always will. (*Pygmalion* Act V)

Eliza explains to Pickering how a lady does not equal excellence in dressing and speaking properly as these are superficial skills, easily learned. A lady equals the consideration that is shown to her by others - by showing her that she was worthy of respect, Pickering sparked the spiritual transformation that genuinely turned the flower girl into a lady. This is something that Higgins will never understand. The challenge of being women was also shown in Shaw's *Pygmalion* where Eliza must rise against odds to become a better woman as demanded by the society. Given her poor background, she chose education as her way out.

Shaw also says that no extra courtesy should be shown to women because they are equal to men whereas other feminists want women to be treated more graciously. He does not consider a woman as a prophetess but only as a comrade. This can be best seen in his play *Pygmalion*. In this play, Prof. Henry Higgins presents the outlook of Shaw treating Eliza as a comrade and thus does not show her any extra courtesy while Colonel Pickering, a thorough gentleman, represents the outlook of contemporary feminists. Professor Higgins takes on the challenge to tutor her in speech and manners, wagering that in six months, the "squashed cabbage leaf" will pass for a duchess. Shaw utilizes Eliza's lowborn speech as derogatory towards British society, though this same criticism is cast upon the upper class during the whole book. It is also transparent that the higher classes' only judgment relies on speech.

Professor Higgins and Pickering's treatment of Eliza throughout the book and her personal growth differentiated from each other due to their varying classes of society. The ideal noble lady of British society in the world of Shaw's play is a kind of fake, only a role that Eliza must learn to play. *Pygmalion* can thus be seen as showing how oppressive unrealistic ideals of femininity can be: to attain these ideals, Eliza has to be coached, disciplined, and taught. She has to pretend to be someone other than who she really is. In the process of educating her, Higgins forgot that Eliza's purpose of seeking his help in pronunciation wasn't any bet but her desire to raise her position as a lady in the florist shop. He trained Eliza as a robot feeding in her the data that suited him with instructions of not divulging from it. Thus, Eliza became more of the shadow of the two men than an independent soul that she once was. Shaw's 'New Woman' wasn't an independent soul on account of her education but it was something innate in her and her education actually became the reason for her bondage. Despite her condition as a poor flower girl Eliza, she endeavored to be

something more, thus she says, “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” (*Pygmalion* Act V)

Eliza also realized that she cannot go back to her old life and sell flowers and now she has no work left for her, other than getting married and remain in the upper class. She realizes the decrease in responsibilities and usefulness she will have and regrets her for Higgins changing her social status. Therefore, through Eliza, Shaw beautifully brings forth the difference between upper and lower class women. The latter ones hold more work and responsibilities than those of the upper class.

The first impression of Higgins' appearance in *Pygmalion* is that he is a robust and vital man. Higgins does not care about himself and perhaps even less about others and especially their feelings. Knowing this, one is not surprised that he avoids any friendly contact with women. He reasons his rough behaviour towards them by saying they would only bring chaos into his working system.

This becomes obvious when you take a closer look at his behaviour towards Eliza. He treats her like a servant although she is one of his customers and pays for her lessons.

“Yes, you squashed cabbage leaf, you disgrace to the noble architecture of these columns, you incarnate insult to the English language. I could pass you off as the queen of Sheba” (Act I).

Higgins tells her that he can definitely transform her speech in three months. She is no better than a crushed cabbage leaf. Also, he regards her as a disgrace to the fine English architecture of the pillars of the church. That is, she seems to be an insult to the English language. Next he claims that if he were to train her for three months she would appear to everyone as a queen. This is the beginning of the main incident of the play where Higgins arouses queer anxiety and interest in the poor flower girl to learn correct speech and manners of high class society.

Higgins' objectification to Eliza is the main component of his experiment, even bullying her at times. It is only when Eliza takes a stand for her own dignity after the ambassador's party that Higgins begins to perceive Eliza no longer as a sort of millstone around his neck, but as a person who is deserving of his admiration:

“It was just like learning to dance in the fashionable way: there was nothing more than that in it. But do you know what began my real education?”

Pickering: What?

“Your calling me Miss Doolittle that day when I first came to Wimpole Street. That was the beginning of self-respect for me. [She resumes her stitching]. And there were a hundred little things you never noticed, because they came naturally to you. Things about standing up and taking off your hat and opening door” (*Pygmalion* Act v)

Eliza's statement seems curiously *anti-feminist*. It makes sense that Eliza would feel more special or important after receiving that kind of treatment, but at the same time the sincerity of her words has to be called into question. She does tell Pickering this in the presence of Higgins, perhaps in order to infuriate her teacher? Eliza also tells Higgins two things: that she has no place in society anymore and that lower-class women have a stronger sense of morality than most ladies.

Women emerged in Shaw's plays are strong and independent and educated, bold and assertive. The ‘New Women’ were inducted into the early and middle plays of Shaw. They eschewed their traditional roles of dutiful daughters and submissive wives and seized the role of the protagonist. Shaw believes that individual aspiration rather than the survival of species gives purpose and meaning to life. In *Saint Joan* (1923) he presents a woman in her true role as prime mover of the evolutionary process. He uses a real

example of Joan of Arc to show women that they can be strong and succeed. There is a reason why Shaw was so realistic about Joan's voice. He did not believe in their supernatural source. Shaw's unwomanly women often shocked Victorian audiences. Through his literary work he actively engaged in the fight against the romantic depiction of love, marriage, and sex in the popular fiction and drama of his time.

Feminists want women to be as much interested in physical activities as men and argue that they should become soldiers if necessary. But Shaw states that women have been soldiers even in the past in his *Saint Joan*. He does not plea for the emancipation of one sex at the cost of the other, nor does he want the women to be ill-treated. He has developed this type of equality of the sexes in his early plays. However, from the Romantic and Victorian period, a revolutionary metamorphosis took place in the literary field. All the concepts inclusive of conventions, techniques, structure, character, purpose as well as dramatic perceptions were reversed.

Further, new women had added men's wear to their wardrobe and popularised it as a fashion among other Victorian ladies. They created quite a sensation among their contemporaries by cutting their hair short. However, Joan took to men's attire and bob hair as early as fourteenth century when a woman dressed in man's clothing was frowned upon, as is evident from the reaction of the ladies when Joan entered the Royal Court of England in Act II of the play *Saint Joan*: Joan, dressed as a soldier, with her hair bobbed and hanging thickly round her face, is led in by a bashful and speechless nobleman, from whom she detaches herself to stop and look around eagerly for the Dauphin.

Joan didn't give up the feminine attire to be observed as being equivalent to men but because of the demands of her profession and in this she proved to be an avant-garde. Even in the face of death, she gives the same reason governed by pure logic and not rebellion:

Why, yes: what can be plainer commonsense? I was a soldier living among soldiers. I am a prisoner guarded by the soldiers If I were to dress as a woman they would think of me as a woman; and then what would become of me? If I dress as a soldier they think of me as a soldier, and I can live with them as I do at home with my brothers. (*Saint Joan* 76)

Despite her claim of hearing voices, it's her own discretion that she trusts. She stood alone against the mighty institutions of Church, class and patriarchy for what she believed. This strong rebel in her that preferred death to imprisonment of a lifetime is what makes her unconventional. In the Era where being able to sustain oneself was the major concern for women, Joan decides to give up an existence that would have been meaningless.

Like Shaw's other heroines, Joan also lacked some qualities expected of a typical new woman. But instead of those qualities she possessed those which make women equivalent to men in their status and not just in appearance. She remains firm on her opinions and successfully turns the opinion of others to coincide with her own. And all this she achieved by the sheer force of her will power. And indeed it was Shaw's master skill at characterisation that coloured a historical figure like Joan convincingly with contemporary 'New Woman' hues.

The female characters in both plays are faced with a mutiny of challenges from marginalization to being treated as lesser beings to their limited understanding of the male world. Society heaps upon women a lot of expectations that they have to contend with. Gender roles are defined harshly, especially for women. In the Victorian society of the play's time, men were viewed as superior beings to women. The comparison in these plays is in their diminishing of women characters and their demands for women to be desirable to men. Therefore, this discussion seeks to shed light on issues women faced in the old times as outlined by Shaw through his plays. For instance, Mrs. Warren's Profession points out society's unacknowledged responsibility for prostitution; St. Joan demonstrates successful partnership with nature for a sustainable existence; and Pygmalion proves how equal opportunities of education can bring about a classless society.

The unique feature about Shaw's stand for feminist cause was that he actually showed that women are superior to their male counterparts and intellectually evolved. Eliza showed in the sequel of *Pygmalion* that women can be the bread earners in a middle-class or even higher middle class household, thereby exchanging the positions with their spouse. Shaw tried to create equality among various classes of society, and women owing to their doubly marginalised status in a class divided society didn't escape their inclusion in his agenda. Shaw's ardent support to the cause of women and belief in their superiority over their male counterparts had always guided him in the creation of women who stand as milestones on the road of Feminism. He serves as a bridge to connect the thoughts from Wollstonecraft's to Beauvoir's and also as a flyover to divert the abundance of traffic of ideas with regard to feminism leading directly to the third wave feminism. Critics argued that art was a means of communicating human experience, not a forum to teach or preach. Shaw's plays were seriously flawed because of their wordiness, their excessive argument and their lack of interesting stories. While also, defended his position by saying that 'Social criticism is the most important function of all art, and that literature should imitate life so that we might act on it rather than on some misrepresentation of life.

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