



Lapis Lazuli -An International Literary Journal (LLILJ)

Vol.3/ NO.1/Spring 2013

Women and Life Force in Shaw's '*Widower's House*' and '*Man and Superman*'

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ABSTRACT

Literature can be seen as a barometer of the time, it holds the views and opinions dear to each author. George Bernard Shaw was a writer who did not care what waves he made because he wanted that turbulence. In his classic work '*Man and Superman*' Shaw used character interactions to voice his objections to common institutions. There is more to this play than a love story and a son's struggle for his father's approval. The present paper discusses the women in his two plays viz. Ann in '*Man and Superman*' and Blanche in '*Widower's House*' who pursue their heartthrobs to ensure the continuance of the race and its improvement through evolution.

Since centuries, women have been looked down upon as the 'Object' and men the 'Subject'; selecting women for marriage and love without any conscious approach of knowing women's wish and will. Shaw has turned the table by giving his women characters an open platform to put their own choice of their mates. Romance in the plays of Thomas Robertson,

Lapis Lazuli -An International Literary Journal (LLILJ) ISSN 2249-4529, Vol.3/ NO.1/Spring2013

URL of the Issue: <http://pintersociety.com/vol-3-no-1spring-2013/>

URL of the article: <http://pintersociety.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Niraja-Saraswat-11.pdf>

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Arnold Bennett, Edward Knoblock, Edward Bulwer Lytton and James Sheridan Knowles etc. had been the story of man hunting the reluctant but finally yielding woman. Shaw hurled defiance at the basic conventions of the character on the Victorian stage and repudiated the myth of hunting. Unlike other Victorian female characters, they never meet bad ends; Shavian society and Shavian characters never criticize the individualities of Shavian women. They openly chase their heartthrobs and entice them with their cunning, unscrupulous tricks. Love, Shaw asserts, is a trick of nature to ensure the continuance of the race and its improvement through evolution. It is the most powerful emotion as it is the chief vehicle of Life-Force for carrying out its plan.

"Most womanly women of course are pursuers of men either openly or furtively. The majority of Shaw's women are pursuers in one form or another"(Nethercot 7). The Shavian women who rise in love (not fall in love because they learn true love) have different shades, which in turn have different consequences. Some are childish and impudent who learn the lesson. Julia in, *The Philanderer* is an immature siren who learns lessons of love. Ann is a representative of those women who are huntresses hunting for the superior men. She is 'everywoman' because she does what a woman would naturally do. It seems love is the axis around which all these women revolve, articulating the desire for passionate love. Raina has a dream like element in her; she believes in higher love beyond any real existence. Her disillusionment shatters all the illusions of love and makes her realize what real love is. According to Maurice Valency:

Raina passes from the one to another, and in the process is redefined something more closely approximating her true self. The action thus describes an educational experience which

foreshadows the education of Cleopatra, Eliza Doolittle and Barbara Undershaft (not in the sense of love but realism).(Valency 109)

Eliza Doolittle in *Pygmalion* and Hypatia in *Misalliance* are also in this category personifying nuances of love. Eliza, a flower girl, turns into a glorious maiden, learning to love a human being and not a superman. Hypatia is in love with the concept of love; she wants love because she wants something to happen. Through these women, Shaw has explored the realm of a woman's heart providing her with the equal opportunity to verbalize her choice. Whether they win or lose is not a matter for concern; rather the concern is that they flout the conventions. In fact, all these women are the agents of life force and are in search of better fathers for their future children. Blanche Sartorius, the heroine of Shaw's first play *Widower's House* is alive with all the characteristics of a huntress heroine but Shaw in his first step does not name it.

Blanche has been described by Shaw as “none the worse for being vital and energetic rather than delicate and refined”(Shaw 2). Here in his creation of Blanche, Shaw completely breaks off with the traditional pattern of heroines such as Maud of Robertson's play *Society*, Marian of Sheridan Knowles's play *The Daughters* and Emily of Arnold Bennett. Blanche is the first of those many heroines who embody Shaw's ideas on love and courtship. The Victorian heroine had listened with trembling and blushing hesitancy to the ardent wooing of a strong male. While in all Victorian plays it is the man, in Shaw's it is the woman to be the first to speak. Blanche shatters all Victorian beliefs and is bold enough to express her inner urge:

BLANCHE. When shall we be married?

TRENCH .At the first church we met: the Appollinaries church, if you like

Women and Life Force in Shaw's '*Widower's House*' and '*Man and Superman*'

BLANCHE.No, but seriously. This is serious Harry. You mustn't joke about it.(Shaw 5)

No Victorian heroine had ever dared to talk with a man in the manner Blanche does with Trench. In Pinero's *Benefit of Doubt* Justine, the heroine conceals her real feelings even from her aunt:

MRS CLOY'S. H'm! you are not married yet I believe?

JUSTINE. No, I haven't the slightest inclination that way.

MRS CLOY'S. Oh, my dear, you still tell fibs, then. (Act I)

The women in these serious plays are the chief sufferers in life: and in the hackneyed phrase of the day it is they who pay a disproportionate penalty through their bodies and through their souls for delinquencies and misfortunes not wholly their own creation.(Rideling 12)

The slightest reference of Jack Allingham overwhelms her with shyness, to the extent that she is incapable of saying anything. Unlike Justine, Blanche is highly aggressive. She would not be timid and shy like Justine; she would argue with her betrothed and win her point. When Trench hesitates in telling her that he could not accept the money from Blanche's father, she says: "I hate secrets: and I don't like to be treated as if I were a child (Shaw15). He revealed that the money

“was made out of a parcel of unfortunate creatures that have hardly enough to keep body and soul together - made by screwing and bullying, and threatening , and all sorts of pettifogging tyranny”(Shaw17). Blanche breaks off the engagement. Trench discovers that his own money comes from that source. The sudden realization makes him bitterly humiliated but it enables Blanche to recapture him through provocative advances. Her aggressive, provocative and taunting attitude was a sort of pretence to entrap Trench.

Blanche has been given the right to choose her partner as also the right to argue. Nineteenth century audience could not have expected a girl to talk with her betrothed in such tantrum:

TRENCH. (together, each trying to shout down the other)

BLANCHE. I am doing nothing of the sort you know what else is it but throwing me over? But well what you are saying is disregard fully I don't care for you. I hate you. I always: untrue. It's damned lie. I won't stand, hated you .Beastly, dirty, vile.(Shaw16)

Blanche's intense rage and passions find expression in various ways. Thus in utter rage, she seizes the parlor maid by the hair and throat and strikes her down on the floor .She can't control her temper easily. Indignant heroes had been involved in bodily violence on the stage so far, heroines were hitherto excluded. The ideal lady of the plays of Robertson, Sheridan, and Bennett etc never strikes, never swears, never smokes, never gambles, never makes advances to entrap lovers and never excites the anger of others. The orthodox heroine is the emblem of pity and gentleness. But Blanche will discuss, argue and if her view point is not understood, she will move heaven and earth. Shaw writes in his preface:"The author resolved to redress this injustice

Women and Life Force in Shaw's '*Widower's House*' and '*Man and Superman*'

to woman by making his heroine attack her servant much as Othello attacks his ancient"(Shaw 711).Martin Meisel aptly writes that "Blanche's passion is not the expression of her depravity but her Vitality"(Meisel 30).

Man and Superman is a play wherein comedy is dovetailed with philosophy very cleverly. Comedy of sexual relationships between man and woman has been merged with an exposition of the idea of Life force. C.B. Purdom writes:

Man and Superman is an exposition of the idea of 'Life Force' expressed in the comedy of the eternal chase of man by woman to create a better mankind, and more profoundly in the Don Juan episode in hell, which is a plea for the extension of consciousness in men so that we may choose to do the world's will, not our own... It is the idea of God depending on man to get his work done which gives human life meaning. (Purdom 195-196)

Life Force, Shaw feels, makes man and woman comical, sexual puppets for its higher and superior purpose wherein a woman is assigned the role of a huntress in search of a suitable competent prey to fulfill nature's purpose of evolving a superman. Shaw's extreme faith in 'Eugenics' is the underlying theme of *Man and Superman*. Through Ann, Shaw has propounded an explosive concept of woman initiating physical relationships. Commenting on this startling idea of Shaw's, Purdom writes:

The relations between the sexes are displayed as the love chase of the man by the woman. Man is not victor in the duel of sex is the idea around which the simple

comedy is built: an idea of natural biology. Man is helpless in a woman's hands; says Shaw and in 1903 when the play was published, people found it shocking for it was not nice to say that the initiative in sex was with the woman. (Purdom 198)

Shaw's concept of women is that they are the driving force that gives birth, and which makes men overcome their natural inertia and become creators, as women naturally are. Shaw has depicted Ann as an incarnation of the idea of the driving force. Sean Cashman writes:

When Shaw wrote *Man & Superman*, he showed his manipulative and assertive heroine, Ann Whitefield as a superman, a Donna Anna who is more than a man for her Don Juan, Jack Tanner. (Cashman 231)

In his *Epistle Dedicatory*, Shaw frankly warns the reader what to expect from the prototype of predatory females. Generalizing philosophically, he remarks that as a result of woman's new power and aggressiveness which have come through her recent emancipation:

Man is no longer, like Don Juan, Victor in the duel of sex. Whether he has ever really been may be doubted; at all events the enormous superiority of woman's natural position in this matter is telling with greater and greater force. (Shaw 18)

Ann has two potential marriage partners and the plot unfolds the rejection of one and capitulation to the other. These two partners are Octavius, Robinson and John Tanner respectively. Octavius is madly in love with Ann or in other words Octavius' 'whole soul is absorbed by Ann'. (Act-I) Ann is clever enough to grind her own axe. Despite Tanner's direct allusions to Ann's unscrupulousness, Octavius keeps extolling her charm and beauty. She never disillusioned him. Shaw verbalizes this illusion:

Women and Life Force in Shaw's '*Widower's House*' and '*Man and Superman*'

To Octavius she is an enchantingly beautiful woman, in whose presence the world becomes transfigured. She is to him the reality of romance, the inner good sense of nonsense, the unveiling of his eyes, the freeing of his soul, the abolition of time place and circumstance, the etherealisation of his blood into rapturous rivers of the very water of life itself, the revelation of all the mysteries and the sanctification of all the dogmas." (Shaw 18)

Ann is Octovius's inspiration, yet she rejects him. Ann coaxes him, cajoles him to give up his love- chase; at the same time he should sustain his adulation:

Ann Always is a long word, Tavy. You see, I shall have to live up always to your idea of my divinity; and I don't think I could do that if we were married. But if I marry Jack, you'll never be disillusioned - at least not until I grow old (Shaw19)

Ann's refusal of Octavius exemplifies the concept that a Shavian woman never believes in romantic ideals. Whenever there is confrontation between real life pursuits and politic life, the Shavian woman takes the side of real life. As Barbara Watson has written:

The Shavian heroine is expected to assess herself and her choices without illusion. And between her alternatives, she is expected to choose fearlessly on the side of life. No price is too high for the vital person to pay, even if the irony of life demands that one chooses the right to life.(Watson 61)

Whether it is Major Barbara, Candida or Ann Whitefield, all are duty bound to life and fulfill nature's purpose of the creation of superman. The attraction between man and woman made Desmond MacCarthy remark that Shaw:

.... attempted to reveal the underlying nature of a passionate mutual attraction between particular man and a particular woman.... As the great German pessimist, Schopenhauer had also interpreted it (Love, attraction) namely as the will of the race expressing and often contrary to his or her happiness. As an individual she is excellently drawn. Instinct leads her to mark down Tanner as the father of her future children. But her deeper instincts and through these according to Shaw the Life Force works- leads her to refuse him (Octavius - the poetical, chivalrous, romantic, idealizes of women) as a husband; the poetic temperament is barren - the Life Force passes it by.(Maccarthy 33-34)

On the other hand is Tanner, who in spite of his flat refusal and foreknowledge of Ann's real nature comes in the Grip of Life Force. He could not escape Ann's 'liquid' and 'ensnaring' eyes and ultimately puts his head in the lioness's mouth. Tanner's perception about Ann has a stance contrary to Octavius's.

Tanner expresses the real nature of Ann:

....She is a liar. And since she has plunged Tavy head over ears in love with her without any intention of marrying him, she is a coquette, according to the standard definition of a coquette as a woman who rouses passions she has no intention of gratifying ... She is a bully as well. She can't bully men as she bullies

Women and Life Force in Shaw's '*Widower's House*' and '*Man and Superman*'

woman; so she habitually and unscrupulously uses her personal fascination to make men give her whatever she wants... (Shaw 185-186)

But ultimately Ann is victorious in her purpose as she gets victory over Tanner and he realizes it .With Ann evolves the idea that woman with her hunting impulse seeks man not for her own pleasure or for her like but for the sake of Nature. She can't resist the urges of Life Force. Don Juan in Hell-Scene confesses.

..... Sexually woman is Nature's contrivance for perpetuating the higher achievement. Sexually Man is Woman's contrivance for fulfilling Nature's behest in the most economical way. She knows by instinct that far back in the evolution process she invented him, differentiated him, and created him in order to produce something better than the single sexed process can produce...(Shaw 340)

Tanner forgets that he himself is the victim, the bee, the 'destined prey'. In vain, he struggles hard to escape from the coils of Ann which have been tightened already around his very self. In vain, he tries to keep himself away from marriage which he thinks means 'capture and defeat.' He falls a victim to the mechanism of Ann. Tanner is to yield himself before the will and purpose of Ann.

Ann, as a potential mother of man thinks it is her duty to choose a fitting father for her children and comes to believe that women in the past were wronged and hindered in their purpose by the artificial conditions of society. Ann knows that in nature such inequity and such failure of her powers will be regarded sinful. So she will suffer her great primary purpose of

breeding the race of superman. She will go neither with the Devil nor with Don Juan to heaven because her task on earth is still unfinished.

Winsten writes that Shaw's cunning and attractive woman disguises her strength as 'Womanly defenselessness'; simple men are duped by them. For this she is unashamed because the aim for which she works so unscrupulously is something higher than her own pleasure, either the "pleasure of physical sensations or the vanity which is so large a sexual motive" (Winsten 309). Her aim is as Ann tells the universe in the last words of the colloquy "A father! a father for the superman"(Shaw 119).

The terms and epithets, used by the dramatist to denote Ann, give negative meaning to her character. Describing her traits and personality Shaw writes that the weaker of her own sex sometimes call her a 'cat'. While describing a violet Shaw writes that "a violet is not a siren, like Ann"(Shaw 109) Such phrases like 'Boa constrictor' and 'Lady Mephistopheles' evoke a degrading and denigrating feeling towards Ann. On the other hand he calls her 'Every woman' and 'one of the vital geniuses... she is a perfectly respectable, perfectly self-controlled woman and looks it. It appears that Shaw feels that every woman tries to beguile men by her charm and decorous modest manners although he has sublimated life force that it fulfils its purpose through woman.

Barbara Watson writes:

Although Shaw acknowledges that every woman is not Ann. Yet Ann is Every woman in the sense that she does what women commonly would like to do, her success is due in large part to the fact that she is unashamed.(Watson 60)

Women and Life Force in Shaw's 'Widower's House' and 'Man and Superman'

She articulates her own desires very adroitly in the name of mother, father or uncle. Regarding this unashamed, proclamation of her choice Gareth Griffith in *Socialism and Superior Brains* writes:

In their business dealings women are unscrupulous, Shaw said, No trick is too low, no web too intricate for the determined huntress as she ensnares the man most likely to father superior children. Her unscrupulousness was the product of her biologically determined duty to ensure the welfare of the race; women must marry because the race must perish without her travail. (Griffith 178)

Ann has certain instincts which may appear paradoxical. Sometimes she plays the role of a morale booster, beloved of Octavius and sometimes an innocent, stubborn adamant beloved of Tanner. If her intention and ulterior motive is to marry Tanner, why does she unknowingly coax Octavius into believing that she loves him? She is a modern woman as she speaks her ardent passion of possessing Tanner and works accordingly. She does so not with conviction and courage but with cunning and guile. She herself admits:

ANN. ... I have a great respect for Violet, she gets her own always.

OCTAVIUS. Yes; but somehow she gets it without coaxing- without having to make people sentimental about her. (Shaw 182)

Ann does not deceive herself unlike conventional women who want themselves to prove their own faithfulness. She is a hypocrite as far as her dalliances and flirtations with Tanner and

Octavius are concerned but she remains true to herself and far from being prudish and self sacrificing for hypocrisies of society which has always set the self sacrificing womanly woman on a high pedestal.

There is much of criticism leveled against the portrayal of Ann. Griffith writes:

Feminists have abhorred the portrait of Ann and the attendant theory of which among other things mother women seems to confirm the traditional view of man's superior capacity for abstract thought. (Griffith 179)

Basically Shaw's interest in Eugenics is more intense in this play. He has loved a political dimension of sexual relation and has transformed into practical race welfare and not ethics. Griffith writes.

.....In *Man and Superman* where his interest in Eugenics was especially intense, he noted there was a political aspect to the sex question. He claimed in fact that the initiative in sex transaction is politically the most important of all the initiatives, because our political experiment of democracy, the last refuge of cheap misgovernment will ruin us if our citizens are ill bred. (Griffith 179)

Moreover with Ann, Bernard Shaw succeeds in proving that Life through woman makes man to carry life to higher levels. In the words of Morgan, "The play *Man and Superman* whilst destructive of the time worn and faded figure of the modest heroine progressed beyond Mr. Shaw's earlier works in embodying a very definite philosophy of love"(Morgan 49).

Crawford summarizes her character in these words:

Women and Life Force in Shaw's 'Widower's House' and 'Man and Superman'

Ann Whitefield is the true protagonist of *Man and Superman*, the initiator and the propeller of the dramatic action and appearances notwithstanding, decidedly not the typical feminine stage persona of the period ...Ann is a dramatic character who causes female conventionalist and male chauvinists alike to grit their teeth as a result of her audacity. (Crawford 157)

Thus Shaw's huntress women lay a trap for men, fit to be the father of superman into which they unwillingly fall, and out of which they are not allowed to escape until they are tied to them with a wedding ring. All these heroines show an instinctive drive or impulse towards mating. They do not suffer from social or moral inhibitions and offer a glaring contrast to their predecessors in Victorian Drama. They are the agents of Life Force which knows no compromise with conventional standards of morality and womanliness. Consequently these heroines are aggressive and outspoken. They are good talkers and discuss their problems in an inhibited manner. They cease to be mere bundles of sentiments and they can think and act for themselves instead of being mere preys to whims and fancies of man.

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