



Lapis Lazuli -An International Literary Journal (LLILJ)

Vol.3/ NO.1/Spring 2013

Treatment of Love and War as a hollow sham in Arms and the Man by G.B. Shaw

Renu Singh

Arjun Dubey

ABSTRACT

G.B.Shaw's Arms and the Man is based on the two realistic issues; romance and realism. These two themes have been welded into a single whole with great skill. The dramatist has tried to show that it is the romance of war that leads to the romance of love. Further the dramatist's treatment of these two themes is characterized by realism. The contrast between realism and idealism is constantly stressed, and this results in a number of entertaining situations. Arms and the Man is an anti-romantic comedy dealing with the human real needs which surpass the chivalrous emotion. Though the play, primarily, focuses on the issues of war and love in dramatic manner, it brings out the real human emotions dominated by human logic which governs the human mind before it dwells into irrational sentiments and feelings which may result into starvation and suffering only. Shaw has brilliantly selected the characters belonging to opposite sexes who represent their own class. However, his treatment with the characters is so fair that the reader is spell bound to observe everything that relates to their personality.

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/Renu-Singh-6.pdf>

© www.pintersociety.com

Treatment of Love and War as a hollow sham in Arms and the Man by G.B. Shaw

Shaw's views on war are expressed in the play through the mouth of Bluntschli, a Swiss soldier. As the play opens, we are introduced to Raina, a pretty, young lady with her head full of romantic views of love and war, that is the result of her reading Byron and Pushkin. When she hears Sergius's being victorious, she is in ecstasy, and in rapturous state, kisses the portrait of her lover, her betrothed and her knight. She feels that she has been a 'prosaic little coward' in her doubts about the heroism of Sergius, and that she is unworthy of him. The reports of heroic deeds of Sergius in the battle field, infuses romantic love in her heart for him. She is full of idealistic notions of love and war. However, her romantic notions of war and soldiering receive a rude shock with the arrival of the fugitive Bluntschli. Further, we are told that it is the duty of a soldier to live as long as he can and that he must run away to save his life. Bluntschli bluntly tells her that all soldiers are afraid of dying, and further tells that it is a wise part of soldiers' life to escape from war as and when required and live healthily and happily as long as they can.. Bluntschli himself runs away and enters the bedroom of Raina to save his life. The objective of writing this paper on 'Treatment of love and war as hollow sham in Arms and the Man' is to cinematograph the two issues romanticism and realism in true and touching manner.

Key Words: Heroism, Life, Love, Protagonist, Romance, Realism, War

Introduction:

G. B. Shaw, popularly known as G.B.S. is a Nobel laureate of literature in 1925. His career ran from 1892 to 1940 and during this he wrote 58 plays. He made a good beginning with *Widower's House* (1892) with moral purpose in which characters do not attract us. In this period he was dragging life to look about materials like housing, religion, finance, prostitution, love, marriage, war and so on and he was very prompt to use the above collected materials for stage in the form of drama. His dramas are the realistic portrait of the present time and they truly mirror the contemporary society. For example *The Philanderer* (1893) has fictitious characters.

George Bernard Shaw takes the title for this play from the opening line of Virgil's epic poem the "Aeneid," written in 19 B.C., which begins with "Of arms and the man I sing." Virgil glorified war and the heroic feats of Aeneas on the battlefield. However, Shaw's purpose in this play is to attack the romantic notion of war by presenting a more realistic depiction of war, devoid of the idea that such a death and destruction speaks to nobility. Still, "Arms and the Man" is not an anti-war drama, but rather a satirical assault on those who would glorify the horrors of war.

Love and war are two themes which are always regarded as societal ideals. Shaw's 'Arms and the Man' is a pleasant and humorous attack on both. To Shaw, romance stands for untruth, whereas life without romance but full of realism is ever truthful. Shaw wrote this play at the time when people in England were fond of an exaggerated form of romanticism in comedies. Shaw's phrase 'anti romantic comedy' succeeds in registering a protest against the much exalted notion of love and war that people have cherished for long. In this play, the dramatist has represented love and the war from anti-romantic points of view so as to mow down the romantic conceptions of love and war. For a long time, bravery in war was considered to be one of the greatest distinctions that a man can achieve. People think that soldiers go in a war obsessed with the sense of patriotism and heroism. But the dramatist Shaw discovers that jingoism many a time result into cruel disposition of war. This anti-romantic comedy begins in a romantic way.

Structure of the Paper:

Before we take up the treatment of love and war by GB Shaw, the Second Shakespeare in the history of play-writing, we find Homer's Iliad as the most universally appealing play in which men and women of any country can get the idealistic portrayal of love and war. But here the case appears to be different. The success of this play has been consistent right from its first production. The original staging of the play was so well received that Shaw's reputation, as one of the greatest wits in the London drama scene, was almost instantly established. This play was published four years later in a collection called The Plays Pleasant. Shaw, behind a very trivial setting, catching picturesque attention of the people, delightfully tries to depict the nature and the habits of his characters namely Bluntschli, Riana, Louka, Sergius and Nicola. His characters are

the witness of the outset of a new understanding of romance and realism, the ideal and the real. He drains too much of the heroism and romance to find some logical precise and ignoble madness considerably pursued amid blood, bullet, sweat, dirt and flirt. In Shaw's eyes, there is something significant and a vital character in love, love seeking, love making and a situation of higher love. Perhaps he wants Sergius to come out with a cataclysmic image when Bluntschli tells young Riana about the reality of the victorious cavalry formation. Sergius also finds the higher love quite unrealistic and tiresome. He finds Louka more satisfying than Raina for his sexual gratifications. He asks:

Sergius: 'Louka, Do you know what the higher love is?

Louka (astonished): No sir.

Sergius: Very fatiguing thing to keep up for any length of time, Louka .One feels the need of some relief after it. (1)

The situation is comparable to Philip Larkin's idea;

"The difficult part of love

Is being selfish enough

is having the blind persistence

to upset an existence just for your own sake. (2)

'Arms and the Man,' in fact, is both an amusing and thought-provoking play that retains its relevance even today, more than a century after it was first conceived. George Bernard Shaw mocks at the popular theories on war, love and coalesces a military satire with a taunt on love and family structure. The play is replete with brilliant dialogues, flashing wits, buoyant humours and bitter sarcasms which reach their zenith during conversation between Captain Bluntschli and Sergius, when the former tells the latter "I'm a professional soldier: I fight when I have to, and very glad to get out of it when I haven't to. You're only an amateur; you think fighting's an amusement". Indeed as a Swiss hotel-keeper's son, Bluntschli had no reason whatsoever to get involved in war and it's in this absurdity that Shaw questions patriotic sentiments. Shaw explores

the whole concept of war and military both from the victors as well as the vanquisher's angles and in the end shows that the feelings surfacing in both the camps aren't different at all.

More about the Play:

Shaw selects irony as well as satire in the title of this play which is taken from the opening line of the renowned poem, *The Aeneid* in which the poet glorifies the war. But Shaw's objective of this drama is to attack the romantic idea of the war and to present the actuality that persists during the war period.

The conflict in this play is between opposing belief and ideas; the romantic or idealistic notions of war and love which are respectively held by Raina and Bluntschli; as well as the practical side of love and marriage as expressed by Louka and Nicola. Here, this is to be observed that the comedy of the play always depends on contrasts of characters, unexpected turns of events, mistaken identities, surprising opinions, irony, wit and satire.

Shaw is a strong supporter of women's rights, a teetotaler, a vegetarian, a music critic, one of the most popular speakers of his time, a great wit, a critic of Shakespeare's writings, an advocate of simplifying the alphabet and spelling of English, an Oscar winner, a Nobel prize winner, an avid socialist and one of the most performed playwrights in the English literature. He had opinions on almost any topic and gave them quite freely. His plays call attention to problems such as class snobbery, prostitution, slum landlords, the folly of war, the evils of capitalism, the benefits of capitalism and the hypocrisy of do-gooders, to name a few. To expose the problems of the society he did not present a hero versus a villain representing good against evil, but he instead tried to create life-like people who are a mixture of good and evil.

However, the play *The Arms and the Men* (1894) came in the volume of *Plays Pleasant* along with *Candida* (1897) and *You Never Can Tell* (1900) and the one-act creation *Man of Destiny* (1900). The first work of these volumes, as described by many critics, is the masterpiece even if one analyses them psychologically or theoretically. *The Arms and the Man* is one of the most successful Shaw's plays on the stage. It treats love and war but at the same time it carries the tendency of self-conscious burlesque instead of full-toned romantic comedy. G. B. Shaw himself attributed in the preface to *The Plays Pleasant* that;

“I could explain the matter easily enough if I choose but the result would be that the people who misunderstand the plays would misunderstand explanation ten times more.”(3)

Bluntschli is the foremost personality of this play, creating records between romantic morality and natural morality. He saved the play from the attack of the critics by exploring self-defending dialogue in the same preface;

“I am quite aware that the much criticized Swiss Officer in *Arms and the Man* is not a conventional stage soldier. He suffers from want of food and sleep; his nerves go to pieces after three days under fire, ending in the horrors of a rout and pursuit; he has found by experience that it is more important to have a few bits of chocolate to eat in the field than cartridges for his revolver.”(4)

Sergius, Major Saranaff, is a briskly handsome romantic hero filled with audacity and idealistic morals. He, too, has gained his high military rank in the Bulgarian Army through charm and family position rather than through common sense or training. He is engaged to Raina but flirts with Louka. But Bluntschli, on the other hand, is energetic, practical, well trained and of “undistinguished appearance”. He accepts that it is better to be fortified with chocolates than with ammunitions in the battlefield.

The play is a disfiguring narrative in the matter of fact that girls like Raina with the higher love as their fancy and enthusiasm for the soldiers like Sergius are, very much, the parts of our day today drama of life. The play also explains broadly the disagreement disbelief of Shaw that soldiering is exceptionally heroic and patriotic. Soldiering is a profession like any other profession. Bluntschli has served in many countries but he is not the hero of the play. He is a Swiss by birth but a machine by profession. He tells Raina that he fights for Serbia not because he loves it but because it fell on his way. Shaw has beautifully intertwined the idea that;

“Life not death is the object of the soldiers in a war ground. The soldiers with no experience risk their life rashly in the warfare. The experienced soldiers are free from any heroic sentiment or enthusiasm. They save themselves to the last. (5)

The playwright has tried to satirize militarism, firstly through Sergius, when he speaks to Catherine;

“Soldiering, my dear madam, is the coward’s art of attacking mercilessly when you are strong and keeping out of harm’s way when you are weak.” (6)

Ultimately Petkoff says;

“I think soldiering has to be a trade like any other trade.”(7)

And a similar feeling comes in the mind of Sergius for Bluntschli that war is a fraud, a hollow sham like love;

“And how ridiculous! Oh, war! War! The dream of patriot and heroes! A fraud Bluntschli. A hollow shame, like love.”(8)

It is worthy to notice that Shaw’s attitude towards war was affected by the Ibsenite opposition between romance and reality. He has, in ‘Arms and the Man’, tempered on war and romance so much that it gains a good logic. He objects not on war but the attractiveness of the nations and men of war. He gives his comments in 'Geneva'; a satirical and controversial comedy in 1938;

“You call this patriotism, courage, glory. There are a thousand good things to be done in your countries. They remain undone for hundreds of years; but the five and the poison is always up-to-date.”(9)

Bernard Shaw sees all the ideas related to war, heroism and patriotism as fictitious morals and good conducts. He disdained anything and everything which are fictitious as glory, cruelty, crime, drink, war, and cupidity and so on as told in news paper even today. He propagated reality and respected it. He has clarified his views and objects incorporated in his plays, as he has said;

“I do merely to please the people who convinced that the World is held together only by the force of unanimous, Strenuous, eloquent trumpet- lounged lying. To me the Tragedy and comedy of the life lie in the consequences.”(10)

Similar is the feeling of the romantic heroin Raina. She finds Sergius as a mere romantic soldier who is not suitable to be her husband. She prefers Bluntschli because of his straight forward

businessman like credibility it results in marriage of Raina with Bluntschli and Louka with Sergius. At the same time, Nicola misses Louka due to mechanism of the dramatist who believes that coupling between man and woman must be proper for better generation. "Life force is always intent upon producing more intelligent man and for this purpose Nicola, the dull servant is no match for Louka, the mistress."

Many critics were astonished at the deal of such self made truth by Shaw upon romantic view of war and love. Some called him skeptical to the reality and emotion; others called it cynical extravaganza. Notwithstanding, we may have doubts to make it fit as a Romantic Comedy or a Farce, yet, the characters are bright, clever and superficial. He dragged the incidental good sense and made the readers to realize the core and corner of the heart. He has clothed his characters in the flesh and blood as he wished and believed. It is all together the gap between knowingness and knowledge.

The play has two major themes or issues; war and marriage. A romantic illusion about war as held by Sergius and Raina leads to disasters in the same way that romantic notions of love lead to unhappy married life. A minor theme dealing with the relationship between the upper and lower classes are represented by Petkoff who is somewhat frivolous and incompetent and his servants, Nicola and Louka who are intelligent, practical and focused on clear goals. Shaw chose what seemed like an insignificant little conflict between minor countries as the starting point for his anti war play. His warnings were prophetic, however, since the conflict in the Balkans during the late 19th century eventually led to the first world war of 1914-1918. It was only through the senseless horror of this conflict that the British People and the rest of the world came to realize the folly of their romantic vision of war.

To sum up, George Bernard Shaw has brilliantly propagated his idea about love and war. In Today's era, romantic girls like Raina with higher perception of love, may fancy for Sergius-like-life partner. Love is the essential part of the drama and as well of the life too. His phenomena in Preface to *Plays Pleasant* are noteworthy;

To me the tragedy and comedy of life like in the consequences; sometimes terrible, sometimes ludicrous, of our persistent attempts to find our institutions on the ideals suggested to our imaginations by our half satisfied passions, instead of genuinely scientific natural history.(11)

Thus, through the play the play right seems to present the whole philosophy of love and war. He does not believe in presenting the hero's character performing in heroic and romantic manner and changing the entire picture by his extra ordinary and super capability, but prefers to present him as he really is. His main character is not a hero like the dramatist of Elizabethan period, where the heroes, who belong to Royal families and upper class society, are glorified, but his are the protagonists coming from the masses and they depict the life as it is.

Works Cited

- (1) S. Sen. Gupta 'Arms and the Man' p.xv, (Surjeet Publication, Kamala Nagar Delhi,1980)
- (2) Philip Larkin 'The North Ship', 22 (Reginald A. Caton's Fortune Press, 1945, new edition, Faber, 1966)
- (3) S. Sen. Gupta 'Arms and the Man' p.xv, (Surjeet Publication, Kamala Nagar Delhi,1980)
- (4) Ibid
- (5) Ibid act ii p-35
- (6) Ibid act ii p- 36
- (7) Ibid p-115
- (8) Ibid p-118
- (9) Ibid p- 120

(10) Idem

(11) S. Sen. Gupta 'Candida', p.xv-1980 (Surjeet Publication, Kamala Nagar Delhi)

Bio-note- Dr. Renu Singh (Assistant Professor),Dept. of Applied Sciences & Humanities, Madan Mohan Malviya Engg. College, Gorakhpur-273010 (U.P.) India

Email: drrsingh1981@gmail.com, Mob- 09415208196

Dr. Arjun Dubey (Professor and Head), Dept. of Applied Sciences & Humanities, Madan Mohan Malviya Engg. College, Gorakhpur-273010 (U.P.) India

Email: Arjun.dubey@rediffmail.com, Mob- 09450886113