

# Shaw's Drama of Idea's: A Revolt against the Conventional Theatre

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**Abstract:** *This research is an attempt to highlight Bernard Shaw as a “dramatist of ideas” whose technical methods and treatment of themes made the contemporary drama underwent a relevant transformation. The late nineteenth century witnessed a new drama, consisting of life force was introduced to the English theatre. The essential characteristic of the Shavian drama was not only ‘action’ but ‘discussion’ as well. Through his plays he revolted against conventional morality and lack of action. A new concept of characterization and symbolism were the characteristics of the new Shavian drama. He introduced new standards for the contemporary drama which were revolutionary not only in theme but in treatment as well. The realism, as the main theme of the new drama was derived from the usual customary problems of the common man. The change of attitude towards many notions such as love, glory of war, comedy etc began and reasoning overpowered ramification.*

**Keywords:** *drama, ideas, Shavian, theatre, theme, contemporary, life force.*

## 1. Introduction:

Throughout the history of English Literature, Drama has inhabited a foremost remarkable position. Unlike to poetry or novel the effect of drama is distinct and instantaneous. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the theatre was almost void of any remarkable work. Poets of the time like Shelly and Wordsworth attempted Drama but a great part of their work was not staged. To quote E. Albert - "From the dramatic point of view, the first half of the nineteenth century was almost completely barren" [1]. Sentimental comedies, melodrama, and farce, lacking literary calibre, attributes and reality, were domineering and favoured.

Till the middle of the nineteenth century, the realistic movement was initiated by T W Robertson, and later by Herrick Ibsen. Both of them made a remarkable development in transforming romantic and historical settings towards more pragmatic, realistic themes in English theatre. Henrik Ibsen did much to create a tradition of natural dialogue and gave an enormous impetus to the realistic movement with a deeper understanding of character and plot. Bernard Shaw emerged as a dramatist in 1885. He wrote his first play "Widower's Houses", which appeared in 1893. Shaw as a follower and disciple of Ibsen was greatly influenced by him. Bernard Shaw's plays are not merely reproductions of popular melodrama and farce, as some critics say. He was against many of the established institutions and views that were acceptable of the time. As A. Nicoll, pointed out "He regarded most of the existing views of economics, religion, sexual relationships, etc., as entirely wrong and therefore, he sought to change them by tearing them topsy turvy in his plays" [2].

Shaw ultimately gained a reputation as the leading platform debater and "the dramatist of ideas" of the twentieth century. Shaw's evolution of "a drama of intellectual squabble and discourse" and revitalizing the comedy of manners helped to shape the theatre of his time and thereafter.

## 2. Some Other Background Observation:

Drama as defined by Aristotle is however, “an imitated human action.” Aristotle mentioned some indispensable elements as the constituents of any drama, namely, plot, thought, character, diction, music, and spectacle. For centuries these elements remained the norms, and criteria of drama, until a new drama appeared, that is the drama of ideas. In the fifteenth century a kind of religious drama emerged with themes dominant in Christian beliefs and instructions from Old Testament and dominated English theatre till the beginning of Renaissance period. The Renaissance theatre turned out to be revolutionary with some serious changes. It reached its highest point with distinguished contribution of William Shakespeare.

In the eighteenth century a new kind of comedy framed up, that is the comedy of manner. It was prospered and developed by great writers like, Oliver Goldsmith. William Congreve, R.B. Sheridan and few others. The English Drama in the nineteenth century underwent a serious decline, and also endured several alterations, and revolution, until it was revived by T.W. Robertson and later by Henrik Ibsen. Both were responsible for laying the foundation of realistic drama. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the people suffered with the misery of wars that broke out in different parts of the world. World War first and World War second initiated literary figures to establish and conclude that, chaos and

disorder were tools behind every unreasonable act. The impact was such that it resulted into the appearance of “Absurd Theatre.” The themes of absurd theatre were dominated with futility, hopelessness, and lack of rational plot. It represented life as full of chaos, disorder and absurdity. The absurd drama is associated with distinguished dramatists such as Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco and Harold Pinter. The realistic themes came to dominate the English theatre and the plays now dealt with concerns belonging to a real contemporary society.

The new drama created a lot of controversies but a revolutionary technique was adapted by new dramatists that bestowed fresh energy and vitality to plot, characters and ideas. In this new concept, confrontation of characters was inhabited by “conflicting ideas.” The Theatre of Absurd and the Theatre of Bernard Shaw laid out the keystone of the “Drama of Ideas.”

### 3. The Main Trends of the Shavian Drama as a New Drama:

The new drama tried to create the tradition of a natural dialogue. The essential elements of the Shavian drama consist of the following constituents-

- **Realism:** The new drama ceased to deal with historical themes and settings remote in time or place. It tried to create the tradition of a natural dialogue by talking of the problems of common man.
- **Revolt against Conventional Morality:** Everything that was on stage was under investigation now. The old certainties were demolished and the prevailing views, beliefs and ideas were severely attacked by the new dramatists. New interpretations came up to the surface, and the people started questioning the old phenomena, even those of religion.
- **Lack of Action:** ‘Action’ has remained for centuries the central element in traditional drama. The outer conflict remained dominant until the new drama over-emphasized the inner conflict. By adopting the mental arguments, the modern theatre has tended to be more static. The study of mind interested many people and none other than the dramatists of the “new wave” [3].
- **Adopting Scientific Theories:** During the last years of the nineteenth century, new investigations in different fields of science prevailed and therefore started creeping in various aspects of life including the theatre. And since then, dramatists, in attempt to be more realistic made use of scientifically accepted views in their plays. New investigations into the meaning of love and sex, which the philosophy of Schopenhauer gave to the nineteenth century and that of Freud to the twentieth, were now staged and that made people to shatter their previous notions. The new dramatists took a scientific view of life and torn off what A. Nicoll calls “the veils of prudery with which the Victorians had covered the fact of sex” [4].
- **The New Comedy of Manner:** When the dramatists tried to investigate the behaviours of people in a witty satirical way, there emerges the comedy of manner. The comedy of manners revived in the new drama is more or less the same as the comedy of manners of the eighteenth century. The purpose of both was to awaken people out of their ‘lethargy in thought’ [5].
- **Symbolism:** Since the new drama turned from outer conflict to inward contradiction, symbolism has been adapted as a tool to express the inexpressible ideas, emotions, instincts, etc. The new dramatists found that ordinary and direct words were not sufficient, and that accounts for the extensive use of symbolism in modern drama.

Bernard Shaw once wrote in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, “what we wanted as the basis of our plays was not romance, but a really scientific natural history” [6]. The Victorian Romanticism was replaced and revolted by, “Realism.” Shaw’s first play *Widowers House* was begun as early as 1885, whereas his most recent work *Buoyant Billions* appeared in 1949, over sixty years later. Shaw’s uncountable theatrical techniques displayed his genius in innumerable ways. The arrival of his first collection of plays *Pleasant and Unpleasant* (1898) developed the drama of rational, cognitive conflict and debate between the characters.

The Shavian drama proved to be a breakthrough from weak, absurd, melodramatic conventional themes. Accordingly, the problems, complications, and issues of the religion, youth, capital, labour, domestic affairs, politics etc., became the themes of the new drama. Thus dealing with the treatment of actual English life, the Shavian Drama became more and more drama of ideas.

Life Force became a concept and recurrent theme of Bernard Shaw’s plays. Shaw himself defines Life Force as “vitality with a direction.” The purpose of Shaw’s Life Force is to evolve into lofty, finer and better forms of life. For Shaw this doesn’t at all mean evolving into a distinguished beauty nor into greater physical power, but into higher form

and next level of intelligence. The brilliance of depicting Life Force, is very well expressed in his play, 'Man and Superman' (1903), and 'Back to Methuselah (1921). In some of his other plays like Major Barbara (1905), The Shewing-up of Blanco Posnet (1911), Heartbreak House (1913-1916), Androcles and The Lion (1916), life force is used as a hidden drive of the main action.

Shaw's technique as new drama of ideas as Sen Gupta calls, "an art expression individual and distinct" which resulted into the genesis of the great Shavian era.

#### 4. Shaw's Comedy of Purpose

As said by Archibald Henderson, Bernard Shaw's comedy of manner makes the spectator, "laugh with one side of his mouth and cry with the other." Until recent times according to its substance, drama consists of three categories, the idealistic plays, the satire of manners, and the realistic plays. To quote A Nicoll here, "Looking at English Drama as a whole, it seems that we may trace four main forms within this comic sphere. The first is Shakespeare's comedy of romance, distinguished by its all-pervading humour. The second is that of Ben Jonson. Here the aim is directly satirical, not of social manners, but of individual follies. In the comedy of Congreve there is another and distinct aim. Here the dramatist is no longer concerned with individual follies. Finally, we reach what, for want of a better term, we may style the sentimental comedy" [7].

Here it is pertinent to say that Shaw categorically belonged to none of these classes, but exhibit characteristics of all. He recreated his own work which was distinct, unique, and unparalleled. The main purpose of Shaw, in his plays, was to propagate certain ideas and comedy of manner was just a tool to exhibit and spread his convictions. In his plays, Shaw tries to propagate certain ideas and uses the drama as an instrument for the spread of his convictions. He came to the theatre via critical journalism, fiction and public speaking, all of which activities he pursued as a means of propagating his views on political and social issues.

One of his literary 'Pygmalion' is a skilful example of a comedy of manners, comprising a combination of satire, witty language, and peculiar behaviour of a particular class of people. This farce of mockery became the trend setter of the contemporary times. Some of his other comedies like, "Heartbreak House, Major Barbara and Saint Joan" perused and extended his views on politics, morals, philosophy and social reforms. His, "Man and Superman" as a comedy of purpose, not only generates and provoke laughter, but this laughter has a meaning which invokes thought as well. By his comedies, he aimed at reforming the society, with a clear objective to make people recognize, the truth as he sees, and act upon the truth. Wherefore, his comedy is called the "comedy of purpose" which forwarded his drama of ideas to a new realm. In 1909, Bernard Shaw once said "I am not an ordinary playwright in the general practice. I am a specialist in immoral and heretical plays. My reputation has been gained by my persistent struggle to force the public to consider its moral"[8].

#### 5. Shaw's concept of characterization and stagecraft:

Shaw's concept of characterization was fresh, novel, and unique. His theatre consists of characters that were different and unheard earlier. To quote A Nicoll, "Not only Shaw brought to the drama a new incisiveness of utterance and given what is virtually a new dramatic dialogue, but he has also provided a fresh principle of characterization"[9]. They give rational and intellectual reactions to a given problem in the play, and for this reason the conflict in a Shavian play arises more from the clash of ideas rather than the characters itself. Mental sentiments were just the tool to initiate the dramatic action of the characters. The characters in *Candida* (1904), exhibits the influence of dialect, such artistically that it gives a wider impact and deeper understanding about conflict of ideas. In the play *Higgins* have a mastery to approximate the slang, dialect, intonation and conduct of a particular class, while another character Eliza's physical, intellectual and verbal metamorphosis had been done extensively. Shaw candidly gave minute details about his characters and goes to the history of them. For instance, in the opening of his play, *Man & Superman* (1903), he gives a full length picture of Roebuck Ramsden, which was followed by an account of his age and his antecedents. In contrast to the acting characters of other dramatists, Shaw's vocal characters were equally important. So, one may identify Shaw's characters as "talking characters".

After approaching and experimenting several methods and platforms Shaw concluded that stage was the finest and effective platform in the world to propagate the drama of ideas. To quote A.C. Ward "He climbed on the stage, taught himself the dramatist's job, and in addition to being a great controversialist became an almost supremely great dramatist"[10]. Shavian stagecraft, rightly points out that Shaw was a highly-skilled dramatist. His genius lies in his fusing of different elements of immediate present into the future. The stage provided him a platform to illustrate his ideas and to satisfy his proffering deliveries. Shaw's discourse of life force along with his comedy of intelligence on stage gave an effectual change of themes from the present stress and complexity of the contemporary society towards advancement and outcome.

## 6. Conclusion:

To conclude, it is indisputable that Shaw and his dramatic evaluation considerably contributed in transforming the English theatre, in the first half of the twentieth century. In the contemporary drama, he expounds his doctrine of creative evolution and condemns the plot that disables hope, evolution and positivity. This new drama of ideas provided a meaningful relationship between the stage properties and dramatic situations. The characters became more self-defining and the context of harmony with use of rational devices became the characteristics of the Shavian drama. Shaw believes that a man's potentials are unbeatable, and he can work his way upward to produce higher and better being. Through his plays Shaw asserts that the life force is not meant to be defeated and will follow its own course to achieve the triumph. The thematic structure of his plays, and his powerful literary experience, does not lie in the number and the conceptual strength of the ideas, nor even the skill with which these ideas have been made to cohere into an integrated and unified vision but the extraordinary rhetorical sharpness and vigour with which the ideas have been expressed in words. Shaw may claim credit more than any other dramatist for evolving the drama of ideas and extending the scope of modern drama. Shaw's contribution, made the contemporary drama underwent a huge transition, just by simplifying, discussing and making aware of the problems that closely touched the ordinary man.

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