



Foucauldian Discourse Analysis of G. B. Shaw's *Pygmalion*

Nitesh Rajpurohit

Research Scholar, Department of English, Jai Narain Vyas University, Jodhpur, Rajasthan- 342005, India
Email: niteshraj013@gmail.com

Abstract: George Bernard Shaw is a renowned playwright whose works center on problems and ideas. His plays discuss prevalent issues in society and explore possible solutions. Female characters in his plays are particularly notable. In *Pygmalion*, Eliza Doolittle, a poor flower seller, becomes the subject of a language acquisition experiment by Higgins, a phonetics scientist who ridicules her speech. This experiment has lasting consequences for Eliza, who struggles to return to her former life. Michel Foucault's Discourse theory examines the relationship between language, power, and social relations. It explores how certain languages are excluded due to the imposition of rules that favor particular forms of language, creating power imbalances. This paper analyzes *Pygmalion* as a feminist text using Foucault's theory of Discourse to explore Eliza's marginalization and her transformation into a stronger woman.

Keywords: Knowledge, Discourse, Power, Marginalized Society, Societal Injustice.

1. INTRODUCTION:

George Bernard Shaw, widely regarded as the greatest playwright of the twentieth century, forged his own path in the English stage, which at the time was dominated by translations of French plays or playwrights such as Jones and Pinero. While he held high opinions of W.S. Gilbert and Oscar Wilde, Shaw was greatly influenced by Ibsen, and began as a proponent of realism and a champion of problem-plays. He viewed the stage as a vehicle for social propaganda and wrote well-known socialist tracts as an active member of the Fabian society. Shaw believed in creative evolution, progress of mankind to higher levels, and social progress. He rejected conventional doctrines of faith and instead believed in the evolution of inner qualities of the species. His theory of "Life Force" (Shaw 5) reflected his passion for betterment, and he saw woman as the embodiment of creative power and the impulse to create a better world. Arthur Miller, read a lot of Shaw's works. When it is asked to Miller, what attracted him to Shaw? Miller replied, "Laughs. The irony of his plays. Terrific style and stylishness. And his ability to handle ideas—which I think is unapproachable" (Roudane 274). Shaw's plays showcase his high regard for women, advocating for their economic independence and placing them on equal footing with men. His female characters are emancipated and strong, although not necessarily charming, and his portrayal of women is realistic. Some of his most notable portraits of women include Candida, Lilith, Lysistrata, and Joan of Arc.

2. Foucault 'Discourse' and Shaw's *Pygmalion*:

In Act 1 of *Pygmalion*, a play subtitled *A Romance in Five Acts*, various members of society seek shelter from the rain under the portico of a church in London. Among them is a flower selling girl attempts to gather the crowd. A man taking notes, Mr. Higgins, is mistaken for a police officer by those under the portico, and they inform the flower girl that she is being followed. The flower girl pleads with Mr. Higgins, claiming that she is a good girl. Later, the girl Eliza Doolittle visits Mr. Higgins at his home and offers him money to teach her to speak proper English so she can find work in a flower shop. Mr. Higgins agrees to teach her, intending to teach her the language and manners of the upper class in order to pass her off as a duchess at an ambassador's party. Eliza becomes Mr. Higgins' student for several months.



The paper seeks to examine *Pygmalion* as a feminist text, using Michel Foucault's theory of Discourse. Eliza Doolittle is the illegitimate daughter of Alfred Doolittle, who shows no responsibility towards her. Eliza “ain’t got no parents. They told [her], [she] was big enough to earn the living and turned her out of the house” (Shaw 32). Shaw draws attention to the plight of such children who are marginalized in society. Eliza is also humiliated by Mr. Higgins, enhancing her marginalization. Shaw believes that poverty is the root cause of all social injustices and that it is impossible to live a good life without money. Eliza, being poor, considers cleanliness to be a virtue. Shaw asserts that poverty drives people to commit sin. *Pygmalion* is a reflection of Shaw's desire to eradicate poverty, which he sees as the solution to social ills. Overall, the paper argues that *Pygmalion* is a feminist text that highlights the struggles of marginalized women in society. This article discusses Michel Foucault's concept of Discourse and how it applies to the play *Pygmalion*. Discourse “is made up of a limited number of statements for which a group of conditions of existence can be defined” (Foucault 131). In *Pygmalion*, the language experiment conducted by Higgins can be seen as a discourse that teaches the language of the upper class to Eliza, representative of lower class. This language of the upper class is acceptable discourse, while the language of the lower class is considered unacceptable discourse. The marginalization of Eliza, who comes from a poor background, is highlighted in the play, and Shaw's concern for abolishing poverty is seen as a solution to social evils. Foucault's focus is on the analysis of statements that lead to the estimation of social stratification, and the discourse used in *Pygmalion* is a reflection of the societal rules and structures that create such stratification. This power dynamic is further emphasized in the play by the way in which Higgins treats Eliza. He constantly belittles her and uses derogatory language, which reinforces the notion that the language of the upper class is superior and the language of the lower class is inferior. He says, “We can throw her back to the gutter; and then it will be her own business again” (Shaw 35). This treatment of Eliza also highlights the gendered aspect of discourse, as Higgins' attacks on Eliza's language and femininity are intertwined. In this way, *Pygmalion* can be seen as a critique of the power dynamics at play in discourse and how they perpetuate social stratification and exclusion. Indeed, the language in *Pygmalion* plays a crucial role in defining social status and power relations. The play highlights the fact that language is not just a tool of communication but also an instrument of social differentiation and exclusion. The language of the upper class is seen as more refined, elegant and sophisticated, while the language of the lower class is regarded as vulgar, uncivilized and unfit for polite company. This division of language is a reflection of the social hierarchy, where the upper class is seen as superior and the lower class is deemed inferior. Moreover, as Foucault noted, knowledge is closely linked with discourse. The knowledge produced by the upper class is legitimized and circulated through their language, which is perceived as authoritative and reliable. In contrast, the knowledge produced by the lower class is often disregarded or marginalized because of their language. This reinforces the power dynamics between the two classes, where the upper class holds the monopoly over knowledge and controls the discourse surrounding it.

Overall, *Pygmalion* provides a commentary on the role of language in shaping social hierarchies and power relations. It illustrates how discourse is a means of constructing and reinforcing knowledge, and how the language we use is not just a matter of individual preference but a reflection of our social status and identity. Foucault believed that discourse plays a significant role in conditioning people's lives and shaping their thoughts. He emphasized power as the central factor in human relationships. Whoever controls the discourse has power over the subjects in those discourses, and this construction of discourse legitimates unequal power relations. “Power is neither given nor recovered but rather exercised, and that it only exists in action” (Foucault 89). In *Pygmalion*, Eliza and Alfred Doolittle are portrayed as powerless due to their economic status, and discourse constructs and justifies their subjugation. Institutions and popular representations, such as art and literature, create corrective mechanisms to keep these sections controlled. Eliza learns better English, but her marginalized status remains unchanged. Higgins treats her as a poor flower girl throughout the play, and the discourse and institutional structures give power to specific classes or authorities. The will to power manifests itself in the creation and control of particular discourses, where structures of power retain their power over the marginalized and subordinates. In the end, Eliza fails to gain respect from Higgins.

According to Foucault, power and discourse are interrelated, where discourse is both the source and the outcome of power. Discourse can facilitate the operation of power, but it can also be a significant obstacle in the exercise of power. It can lead to resistance, and can also be a strategy adopted to resist power. Foucault argues that “Discourse transmits and produces power, reinforces it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (Foucault 101). “Power doesn’t repress. In particular, it invites people to speak: to assess and articulate themselves” (During 131). In *Pygmalion*, Eliza's English lessons make her better equipped to seek better opportunities in life, and her act of throwing slippers at Higgins when he was looking



for them reflects her frustration and resistance. Higgins fails to understand Eliza's perspective and feelings, possibly because he still views her as a "gutter girl" (Shaw 52). Foucault's ideas about the relationship between power and discourse can help us understand the dynamics of Eliza's situation in *Pygmalion*. Eliza's social status as a flower girl is reinforced by the discourses of power that operate in society. The statements made by people in authority, such as Higgins, are considered true, while those made by people outside of power are considered false. Eliza's desire to learn proper English is an attempt to acquire the discourses of power and thereby change her social status. However, Foucault also suggests that the production of knowledge is not wholly oppressive and can lead to changes in power relations. "Where there are imbalance of power relations between groups of people or between institutions, there will be production of knowledge" (Mills 69). In Eliza's case, learning proper English does not immediately change her social status, but it does help her in her eventual fight against Higgins. Eliza's throwing of the slippers is an act of resistance against the power dynamic between her and Higgins, and her decision to leave Higgins and marry Freddy is a way of taking control of her own life and changing her social status. Overall, Foucault's ideas about power and discourse can help us understand the ways in which power operates in society and how language and knowledge can be used as tools of resistance and change. Indeed, Foucault's views on power and knowledge suggest that knowledge is not neutral or objective, but is always intertwined with power. In the case of Eliza, learning the language of the upper class not only allowed her to communicate with them, but also gave her a new perspective and a new sense of agency. By acquiring this knowledge, she was able to challenge the power structures that had previously oppressed her and forge a new path for herself. This suggests that knowledge can be empowering, but only if it is used in a way that challenges existing power structures and promotes social justice. The central theme of the play is the imbalance of power between the wealthy and the poor, the educated and the uneducated. Eliza is a symbol of the underprivileged who is denied access to education and knowledge. Higgins, on the other hand, represents the privileged class who has access to knowledge and education. The playwright uses the character of Eliza to voice his demand for the imparting of knowledge to the underprivileged for the betterment of society. Eliza is shown to be put under circumstances to learn to speak a language, which is not her own, and the burden of learning is entirely on her. The play highlights the fact that knowledge is centralized in the hands of the wealthy and the educated, and this centralization of knowledge perpetuates inequalities in society. Higgins' bet to turn Eliza into a duchess is a reflection of the power dynamics and inequalities in society. It is an attempt to show that knowledge is not just a tool for personal growth and development but can also be used to gain power and control over others. The play suggests that the only way to address the imbalance of power and inequalities in society is by imparting knowledge and education to the underprivileged. Furthermore, Shaw's plays often critique societal imbalances of power, particularly in relation to gender and class. In *Pygmalion*, the imbalance of power is highlighted by the fact that Higgins, a wealthy and educated man, takes it upon himself to transform Eliza, who is economically and socially disadvantaged, into a lady who can pass as a member of the upper class. This power dynamic is further complicated by the fact that Eliza resists and challenges Higgins' authority throughout the play, demonstrating her own agency and strength of character. The play also explores the idea that language itself is a tool of power and privilege. Higgins' insistence on teaching Eliza to speak with Received Pronunciation, a dialect associated with the upper classes, is indicative of the way in which language can be used to reinforce class distinctions and power imbalances. Shaw thinks that education should not 'create', "household pets or chattel slaves" (Griffith 149). Overall, Shaw's works often serve as social commentaries, highlighting and challenging the power structures and inequalities of his time.

3. CONCLUSION:

Foucault aims to explain that knowledge is not only acquired through scholarly study, but is also created and maintained through various institutions and practices in society. In *Pygmalion*, Higgins represents the institution of a refined language and teaches Eliza, a girl from a lower class, to speak in a genteel manner. This challenges the idea that knowledge is only accessible to a privileged few. Eliza quickly learns and adapts to her new language and uses it to improve her social standing, which goes against Higgins' expectations. The play demonstrates the interconnectedness of power, knowledge, and discourse in shaping social hierarchies. Language is shown to be a powerful tool in determining an individual's status in a society that is divided by social stratification. The play also highlights the struggles of those from lower classes who aspire to rise up but are still deemed inferior by the upper class. Overall, *Pygmalion* portrays the discourse on femininity and sheds light on the societal struggles of those who seek to improve their social status.



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