

Review

THE DRAMATIC DEVICES IN *ARMS AND THE MAN*

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Arms and the Man, one of the pleasant plays by Shaw, popularly known as anti-romantic comedy is both humorous and intriguingly provocative. The authors have, in this paper, attempted to examine how Shaw has used various dramatic devices in the play to bring out the indispensable themes. Attempts have also been made to see the manner in which the playwright has tried to project a real picture of the contemporary society. One of the obvious features of Shaw's *Arms and the Man* is his attacks on the romantic notions of war and love. In effect, this paper endeavours to highlight the various dramatic devices used by Shaw to add effect to his satire.

Key Words: dramatic devices, love, war, play, satire

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BACKGROUND

Arms and the Man draws its context from the brief and rarely remembered Serbo-Bulgarian War of 1885. The war emerged as a result of the nationalistic and sectarian conflicts that swept across Ottoman empire, triggered by corruption and European interference Europe resulting in various ethnic groups to break free from the Ottoman empire largely governed by the Turks. September 1885 was a witness to the unification of Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia, a semi-autonomous province of the Ottoman Empire. Serbia finding itself in a precarious situation at this event, declared war on Bulgaria on 14th of November of 1885 with the aid of Austria, while the newly unified Bulgaria enjoyed Russia's support. Eventually, Bulgaria lost Russia's support; nevertheless, at the Battle of Slivnitza on 19th November Bulgaria emerged victorious. Peace finally reigned supreme on 3rd March, 1886. In *Arms and the Man*, Slivnitza serves as the setting for Sergiu's prosaic cavalry charge.

INTRODUCTION

Shaw's plays propagated his critical views on genuine social evils with the use of conventional dramatic devices, to challenge his audience to reconsider their attitude to society. Shaw used drama as an instrument of social reform and communicated his ideas on the evils of society without making his audience disinterested in his drama. He made appropriate use of witty dialogues, physical comedy, irony, etc. to educate his audience while also entertaining them.

Arms and the Man, the earliest of Shaw's 'pleasant plays' is a satirical comedy which employs conventional dramatic devices that dominated the theatre in the 1890's. Shaw very candidly juxtaposes comedy and solemnity in this play. What George Orwell (1940) said about Shaw's *Arms and the Man* bears testimony to this: "it is probably the wittiest play he ever wrote, the most flawless technically, and in spite of being very light comedy, the most telling." The title of the play is extracted from the first line of the epic poem *The Aeneid* (Virgil: 19BC) wherein the great Roman poet effectively

satirizes it for romanticizing war and worshipping heroes.

Shaw disseminates his critical ideas on the idealization of love, the reality of war, and class differences while mocking unrealistic attitude towards love and war. The play is set in a traditionally idyllic location in the Balkan region, foreign to the British audience, to augment the playwright's attack on romantic falsification of love and war. In effect, the description of the stage-- a peak of Balkans, wonderfully white in the starlit snow-- is conventionally romantic.

From the romantic set, the play progresses in episodes with significant coherence. For example, Raina's encounter with Bluntschli or Sergiu's flirting with Louka or the Coat episode or even Raina's souvenir to Bluntschli, to name a few, are some of the episodes interspersed with debate on love, bravery and wealth, all weaved together with witty dialogues and continuum. The entries and exits of the characters are organized so well that it really appears seamless. Every character enters with essential theme and views guiding the play to its climax while replacing the ones on the stage. In Act three, for instance, Bluntschli debunks Raina's idealistic notions, while Louka approaches Bluntschli with telegrams, which necessitates his exiting the scene. Raina leaves Louka alone on the stage where Nichola joins her, carrying 'logs for the stove'. Being alone on the stage with Louka, Nichola discusses the possible future when Sergius comes in and Nichola leaves them. Louka then instigates Sergius to dare marry a woman below his social status and acquaints him that Bluntschli is his rival and would beat him in love besides war. Bluntschli joins Sergius, followed by Raina, then Louka, then Petkoff, then Nicola and finally Catherine as the play nears its climax.

Bernard Shaw uses the characters to juxtapose and contrast views on love and war. Catherine and Raina's celebration of war presents one view of love and war, which is set in contrast with Bluntschli's realism. Bluntschli demeans Sergius's accomplishments at Slivnitsa as 'sheer ignorance of the art of war' and 'unprofessional' while Catherine glorifies with surging enthusiasm thus:

"You can't guess how splendid it is. A cavalry charge! Think of that! He defied our Russian commanders—acted without orders—led a charge on his own responsibility—headed it himself—was the first man to sweep through their guns. Can't you see it Raina: our gallant splendid Bulgarians with their swords and eyes flashing, thundering down like an avalanche and scattering the wretched Serbs and their dandified Austrian officers like chaff. And you! You kept Sergius waiting a year before you would be betrothed to him" (Shaw:2011).

Catherine's unrealistic glamour of the war ignores the realities of war – suffering, loss, bloodshed-- that are clad with the romantic and lofty ideas disseminated by literature and opera at that time. Sergius and Bluntschli, contradict each other not only as soldiers but as lovers

also. Sergius, a young aristocrat talks of 'higher love' and addresses Raina as 'my queen', 'my lady' and 'my saint' while enjoying similar worship from her. He later says, "Higher love is a very fatiguing thing to keep up for any length of time" (Shaw:2011) and finds relief in flirting with Louka. Whereas Bluntschli with 'incurably romantic disposition' bears a disillusioned sense of love and romance. The excerpts below testify Bluntschli's realistic view on war:

THE MAN: well, I don't intend to get killed if I can help it. (Still more formidably) Do you understand that? (He locks the door but quietly)

RAINA (disdainfully): I suppose not. (She draws herself up superbly, and looks him straight in the face, adding, with cutting emphasis) Some soldiers, I know, are afraid to die.

THE MAN (with grim good humor): All of them, dear lady, all of them, believe me. It is our duty to live as long as we can. Now, if you raise an alarm--

RAINA (cutting him short). You will shoot me. How do you know that I am afraid to die? (Shaw: 2011)

In the above scene, Shaw portrays the fact that no one wants to die. Bluntschli makes it very clear to Raina that not 'some soldiers' but all are afraid of death. In this scene, Shaw candidly exhibits the elements of realism in the play.

Nicola and Louka too have shown antithetical approach to life and work, as shown in Nichola's chastisement of the latter in Act two and three. Louka, 'a handsome proud' servant girl in the Petkoff household, looks down upon servility and expresses the practical side of love and war. Shaw uses his words and words alone as dramatic devices to cause the exchange of partners. The following scene explains well:

RAINA (superbly): Captain Bluntschli!

BLUNTSCHLI (unmoved): Yes?

RAINA (coming a little towards him, as if she could not believe her senses): Do you mean what you said just now? Do you know what you said just now?

BLUNTSCHLI: I do.

RAINA (gasping): !! !!!! (She points to herself incredulously, meaning, "I, Raina Petkoff, tell lies!") He meets her gaze unflinchingly. She suddenly sits down beside him, and adds, with a complete change of manner from heroic to the familiar) How did you find me out?

With this Raina who is betrothed to Major Sergius, "an extremely handsome officer, whose lofty bearing and magnetic can be felt even from the portrait yields to her

chocolate cream soldier". (Shaw: 2011).

Shaw uses several dramatic devices to advance the plot and enrich its themes with humor and comedy. Shaw adds humor in the situation of Bluntschli, 'a professional soldier' who carries chocolates instead of cartridges 'like a school boy' in a battlefield and would cry as if he were 'a little boy'. Major Petkoff has limited knowledge and understanding of affairs at the battlefield and in his own home introduces humorous misunderstandings in the play.

Shaw employs Louka to express the true and practical side of love and marriage as observed by AC Ward (1954): "Shaw never swerved from the conviction that marriage is a solemn contract, not a frivolous domestic excursion". Louka gnawed by her inferior social positions works as an ambitious servant at the Petkoff's who enjoy the social privileges and think of themselves better and more civilized than their neighbors with an electric bell in the library. Through this, Shaw depicts the social hierarchy wherein the peasants (like Nichola and Louka) are far below the wealthy (like Petkoffs and the Saranoffs). These are the examples of the literary realism used by Shaw in a very palatable format to present things and people as they are in real life while opposing romanticism and idealism.

Arms and the Man is replete with bathos, and not pathos, along with the anticlimax to bring humor in the play. The play displays an officer appearing heroic and filled with bravado, and later everyone mocks him. In Act one when the play opens into a melodramatic atmosphere, Raina is rapt in her heroic romance. Similarly, Sergius, to whom Raina is betrothed is heroically leading a cavalry charge and sweeping through guns. Wait until Bluntschli, the Swiss professional soldier makes his entry, dispels Raina's military illusions and romantic ideals, and causes everyone to laugh at Sergius. In Act two, Catherine portrays her Bulgarian pride before Bluntschli and requests him to leave immediately without being found by her husband who at that hour was 'like a lion baulked of his prey' to prevent terrible consequences. When Petkoff enters the scene and, instead of the forewarned terrible consequences, is welcomed heartily. In Act three, it comes as a surprise that the library with an electric bell consists of "a single fixed shelf stocked with old pare covered novels, broken backs, coffee stained, torn and thumbled, and a couple of little hanging shelves with a few gift books on them" (Shaw:2011). Shaw employs anti-climaxes not in the disenchantment of Raina and Sergius of their military illusions and romantic ideals of love and war but the revelation that Bluntschli despite his sagacity and realistic ideals is 'incurably romantic'.

Shaw has also used satire as one of his main tools to ridicule war and idyllic notions of romance, comparing Sergius with Don Quixote and his faulty cavalry charge to 'slinging a handful of peas against a window pane'.

Shaw's detailed description of the stage and setting and of the characters are attempts to aid vivid imagining while carrying on the emotional and physical movements on the stage. His use of the dramatic devices makes the play humorous and extremely funny besides subverting the unopposed ideas of love and war. *Arms and the Man* is an attempt to reject the flaws of society and dare the society to accept the realities of life.

CONCLUSION

Arms and the Man is one of Shaw's masterpieces wherein he has vividly brought out the motifs of love, war and class differences with the extensive use of dramatic devices such as realism, satire, antithesis, humour etc. While criticizing the idealistic views on war and love and propagating his opinions on the genuine social issues, Shaw's *Arms and the Man* is thought-provoking and entertaining besides educating the mass with unrivalled and realistic ideas of love and war. Shaw's realistic approach in critically examining the disturbing and serious aspects of everyday life has stripped falsified ideals of love and war of its bogus glamour and appeal.

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