

Review Of Research

Abstract:

Shaw was primarily concerned in making fundamental social criticism through his creative works. A sense of injustice in various social norms, ideas and institution can be identified throughout his Plays. Shaw's concept of economy and social recognition had its origin in contemporary political thoughts that emerged in London. He joined the Fabian Society which advocated a slow and revolutionary change from capitalism to socialism. Shaw in his problem plays had voiced for many social evils and was one of the dramatists who used art for social propaganda. In writing Mrs. Warren's Profession Shaw was far ahead of his time onstaging a play on prostitution. In my paper I intend to portray how Shaw weaved the fabric of his play through individual compromise and social recognition.

INDIVIDUAL COMPROMISE AND SOCIAL RECOGNITION: A STUDY IN G.B. SHAW'S MRS. WARREN'S PROFESSION



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INTRODUCTION

Shaw was primarily concerned in making fundamental social criticism through his creative works both novels and plays. A sense of injustice in various social norms, ideas and institution can be identified throughout his Plays. Shaw had a very unhappy childhood with liquor addicted irresponsible father and as Shaw describes ‘shocking bad mother’ and ‘the worst mother conceivable’. Mostly Shaw and his siblings were brought up by servants who were no less detestable. A perennial feeling of injustice and personal depravation led him to make his plays a powerful instrument for proposing changes in society. The childhood experience of maternal negligence and lack of affection have been considered by critics as the root of his mother-fixation that surfaces in various forms in his representation of mother figures in plays like Lady Britomart in *Major Barbara*, Mrs. Clandon in *You Never Can Tell* and Mrs. Warren in *Mrs. Warren's Profession*. Though Shaw in a sense has never got any motherly affection in his childhood but he acquainted his ear for music from his mother which later helped him to start his career as a music critic and gave him a precise sense of time in his plays.

Shaw was far ahead of his time when he attempted to stage a play on prostitution. He wrote *Mrs. Warren's Profession* in 1893 and it was banned from the stage at the outset and was first staged for public performance in New York in 1905. It took another twenty years for the ban to be lifted in England and was first publicly staged on July 27, 1925. Though the word ‘prostitution’ has never been uttered throughout this play the motif of the play revolves round it. Shaw’s anti-sentimentalist approach can be traced throughout the fabric of this play; prostitution, instead of being interpreted moral depravity at the individual level is explained in terms of the collective material reality of the exploitation of the majority by the minority. Therefore, Shaw boldly professes his preface:

“*Mrs. Warren's Profession* was written in 1894 to draw attention to the truth that prostitution is caused, not by female depravity and male licentiousness, but simply by underpaying, undervaluing, and overworking women so shamefully that the poorest of them are forced to resort to prostitution to keep body and soul together.” (G. B. Shaw Preface to *Mrs. Warren's Profession*)

Shaw’s concept of economy and social recognition had its origin in his political thoughts. During his stay in London he was joined many political societies and attended many public meeting. American economist Henry George’s lecture in London in September 1884 had a great impact on him. But Henry’s lecture was not the sole stimuli in his conversion to socialism, his early experience of poverty and deprivation paved the way of his conversion. The immediate result of this conversion was his joining into newly founded Fabian Society. This society advocated a slow and revolutionary change from capitalism to socialism. In the next few decades Fabians had a great influence on British social and political life.

While Shaw was jotting down the play his primary intention was to address the root cause of injustice and poverty in the lower sections of the society. His familiarity with the works of Henry George and Karl Marx further strengthen his strand. The economic and other forms of exploitation in contemporary society became his chief objects of analysis. The socio-economic analysis of the profession of prostitution has given the play the stature that it deserves. This profession in this play has not been seen as a moral weakness in the protagonist and there it creates a different mark from conventional Victorian plays. Therefore, the compromise of Mrs. Warren taking the career of a prostitute never becomes the object of attack. Here the social condition of being economic dependency in the part of an individual compels her to compromise her social prestige self before individual choice.

To Shaw prostitution is not caused “by female depravity and male licentiousness” rather it depends upon economic factors lying behind it. Therefore, when Vivie, the daughter of Mrs. Warren gets to know the truth behind her mother’s fortune and her decision behind her choice she in her response to Sir George Crofts stands beside her mother:

VIVIE: My mother was a very poor woman who had no reasonable choice but to do as she did. You were a rich gentleman; and you did the same for the sake of 35 per cent. You are a pretty common sort of scoundrel, I think. That is my opinion of you.

CROFTS: [after a stare: not at all displeased, and much more at his ease on these frank terms than on their former ceremonious ones] Ha! ha! ha! ha! Go it, little missie, go it: it doesn't hurt me and it amuses you. Why the devil shouldn't I invest my money that way? I take the interest on my capital like other people: I hope you don't think I dirty my own hands with the work.

Come! you wouldn't refuse the acquaintance of my mother's cousin the Duke of Belgravia because some of the rents he gets are earned in queer ways. You wouldn't cut the Archbishop of Canterbury, I suppose, because the Ecclesiastical Commissioners have a few publicans and sinners among their tenants. Do you remember your Crofts scholarship at Newnham? Well, that was founded by my brother the M.P. He gets his 22 per cent out of a factory with 600 girls in it, and not one of them getting wages enough to live on. How d'ye suppose they manage when they have no family to fall back on? Ask your mother. And do you expect me to turn my back on 35 per cent when all the rest are pocketing what they can, like sensible men? No such fool! If you're going to pick and choose your acquaintances on moral principles, you'd better clear out of this country, unless you want to cut yourself out of all decent society. (G. B. Shaw, *Mrs. Warren's Profession* p. 41)

Shaw’s foregrounding of the new female subjectivity takes as its medium not only in Cambridge educated, enlightened Vivie, but also her mother Mrs. Warren. Her compromise in choosing her profession was not of mere choice, but of compulsion, imposed upon her by male-dominated society. The profession of

prostitution as shown in this play is depending upon capitalist economy. It is not a place where women chooses this profession freely and independently; rather it is a controlled business where there are several figures who are directly or indirectly associated with this profession. One of such character is Sir George Crofts and we know from Vivie that he has partnership in this business: "...and you did the same for the sake of 35 percent."

In the profession of prostitution patriarchy therefore creates a space from where certain percentage has to be taken back. In spite of these economic limitations Mrs. Warren gradually acquires the ability to exploit the source of her exploitation; to possess material comfort and prosperity from it. Therefore she somewhat subverts the hold of patriarchy by using her profession to fulfill her ambition. So, Shaw's anti-romantic approach towards this profession is very evident from his play. Therefore, looking into this perspective realistically, we can observe that here Mrs. Warren becomes the sole proprietor of her body and it is her decision to use them in accordance with her own will. But ironically enough though her Cambridge educated daughter understands the compulsion of her mother's choice of prostitution as a profession but fails to identify the logic of her willful exploitation into financial security and comfort. Her very traditional puritan mentality and patriarchal notion of female body as a site of purity hinders her to accept her mother. Here Shaw's conceptualization of New Woman through the characterization of Vivie falls apart. Vivie's internalization of the patriarchal morality and puritanical ethos hinders her to understand the construction of the female sexuality; therefore, she fails to understand prostitution as a subversive measure against the workings of patriarchy. She devoid of her higher education remains trapped within the patriarchal norms that the New Woman sought to subvert.

Thus the individual compromise that Mrs. Warren had made by choosing his profession though gives her daughter Vivie social recognition but she never get to understand the compromise that her mother had made. Here puritanic patriarchal education system determines Vivie's mindset which though remains sympathetic towards her mother but fails to understand her mother's social struggle. Thus, this individual struggle and compromise though successfully gives social recognition and respectable position in society, it ultimately fails to achieve its proper goal.

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