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

**Tanmoy Baghira**

Assistant Professor in English, BCARE Institute of Management and Technology.  
&  
Research Scholar, Dept. of English, University of Kalyani.

**Abstract:-** Shaw was primarily concerned in making fundamental social criticism through his creative works. A sense of injustice in various social norms, ideas and institutions can be identified in his Plays. Shaw's concept of economy and social recognition had its origin in contemporary political thoughts that emerged in London during the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century. He joined the Fabian Society which advocated a slow and revolutionary change from capitalism to socialism. Shaw in his problem plays had voiced against many social evils and was among the dramatists who used art for social propaganda. In writing *Mrs. Warren's Profession* Shaw was far ahead of his time on staging 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.

**Keywords:** Social criticism, capitalism, socialism, individual compromise, social propaganda

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 institutions can be identified in his Plays. Shaw had a very unhappy childhood with liquor addicted irresponsible father and as Shaw describes 'shocking bad mother'<sup>1</sup> / 'the worst mother conceivable'<sup>2</sup>. 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 cause 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. It was banned from the stage 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 in England on July 27, 1925. Though the word 'prostitution' has never been used in this play, the motif of the play revolves round it. Shaw's anti-sentimentalist approach can be traced in his fabrication of this play; prostitution, instead of being interpreted as a moral depravity at individual level is explained in terms of the collective material reality of the exploitation of the majority by the minority. Thus, 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."

( 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 had 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 in this conversion. The immediate result of this conversion was his joining in the newly founded Fabian Society. The Fabians had advocated a slow and revolutionary change from capitalism to socialism. In the next few decades they 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 of the protagonist and there it creates a mark of different from the conventional Victorian plays. Therefore, the compromise of Mrs. Warren in taking the career of a prostitute never becomes the object of Shaw's attack. Here the economic insecurity of an individual compels to compromise the social prestige where the person hardly has a 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 mother's decision behind her choice Vivie, 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.

(*Mrs. Warren's Profession* p.41)

Shaw's foregrounding of the new female subjectivity takes 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 the women chooses the profession freely and independently; rather it is a controlled business where several patriarchal agents who are directly or indirectly associated with this profession are controlling it from inside. One of such agent is Sir George Crofts and we know from Vivie that he has partnership in this business when she says: "...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, to some extent she subverts the hold of patriarchy by using her profession to fulfil her ambition. So, Shaw's anti-romantic

approach towards this profession becomes evident from his treatment of the characters in this 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 to her own will. But ironically enough though her Cambridge educated daughter understands the compulsion of her mother's choice of prostitution as a profession, she fails to identify the logic of her wilful 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 hinders her to understand the construction of female sexuality; therefore, she fails to understand prostitution being 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 got to understand the importance of the compromise that her mother had made. Here the puritanical patriarchal education system becomes a controlling agent in creating Vivie's mind-set which though remains sympathetic towards her mother, fails to understand her social struggle. Thus, this individual struggle and compromise though successfully give social recognition and respectable position in society; it ultimately fails to achieve its proper goal.

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### Tanmoy Baghira

Assistant Professor in English, BCARE Institute of Management and Technology.  
&  
Research Scholar, Dept. of English, University of Kalyani.

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