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Shaw's Concept of Marriage in *Man and Superman*: A Critical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Marriage is undoubtedly the most discussed concept in literary history without which the society is dispensed with its most necessary building block to function properly. Clearly, marriage is a happy union of two individuals who love each other; nonetheless, its joyful aspect was overshadowed from the Victorian period. Even this negative perspective was taken into an extreme extent by authors like George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950). Shaw's views on marriage are based on his positive theory of creative evolution. He is not against the institution of marriage but he is against its present customs and laws which has made the marriage a mere means of unlimited and unrestrained sexual pleasure and away from the betterment of species. For Shaw, true love has faded away and sentimentality created all the unreality and romance of married life. As such, he believes that the best role performed by woman is that of a huntress or a chaser in seek of a husband to supply her financially. Thus, the present paper, briefly address the Shavian Philosophy of marriage in *Man and Superman* and show a thorough critical evolution of his vision for an amiable society and a peaceful life.

Keywords: Marriage, Shaw, *Man and Superman*, Woman, Victorian Period

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1. Introduction

Marriage, as a thematic notion, is a concept that can be analyzed from different aspects. Beside self-satisfaction in courting, it can be even considered as the pillar of the smallest community in the world known as family. In this regard, if the concept of marriage is overlooked, the most important building block of any society is neglected. As such, it is no surprising to see the theme of marriage in any literary work along the line of history of English literature. As it is expected, through the history, one can see various perspectives toward the concept of marriage. As such within this study, it is tried to explore Shaw's unprecedented view toward marriage at the beginning of twentieth century. In this respect, Shaw's *Man and Superman* is selected to express his unprecedented view which is known as Shavian Philosophy of marriage.

2. Review of Literature:

If one follows the theme of marriage from the earliest written material like Homer's story of Helen and Sophocles's of Oedipus to the present age, he/she can notice the importance of the theme of marriage. Ian Watt in his influential book,

The Rise of the Novel is of the view that in marriage:

There are signs of the reconciliation between courtly love and the institution of marriage at least as early as Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*, and it is very evident in Spenser's *Faerie Queen*. Later the Puritanism that is already strong in Spenser finds its supreme expressions in *Paradise Lost* which is, among other things, the greatest and indeed the only epic of married life. (1957, P:154)

As it is clear, Watt is claiming that the concept of marriage is not only a stimulus to the beginning of one of the first masterpiece ever written in English literature but also an added incentive to the formulation of the first epic poem in the modern English language. Moreover, David Daiches (1976) also reminds us of the fact that:

Victorian novelists were both critical of the institution through which social and economic life was organized and in varying ways and degrees trapped in them. Of those institutions, marriage and the family were the ones that most directly engaged the novelists' imagination. (P: 9)

In Daiches's (1976) view of the marriage, the grimmer side of this previously heavenly notion is forwarded which can show the Victorian's opposition toward this concept. The prominent novelists of the Victorian period like Charles Dickens (1812-1870), George Eliot (1819-1880), and Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) were undoubtedly critical of marriage as an institution and what Daiches describes as "critical of" and "trapped in" shows the opposing and negative view of the institution of marriage.

In the nineteenth century, however, marriage is no longer a subject for concluding a story either happily or tragically. According to, Wendell Johnson, "It [marriage] may be an institution to be analyzed, questioned, perhaps redefined, and an idea that has deep social as well as symbolic implications"(P: 38). This perspective equips us with the common base for our particular purpose which is to investigate Shaw's view of the concept of marriage in his play, *Man and Superman*.

Shaw's solemn belief in marriage expresses the exploitation of a woman in every aspect of life since a wife is expected to give herself to her husband thoroughly. In fact, Shaw's view of marriage deems the usefulness of marriage as the continuation of human race. Instead, his preoccupation with the concept of marriage is well described in most of his play. As an example in the preface to *Getting Married*, Shaw (1965) states that:

It is no doubt necessary . . . for a woman without property to be sexually attractive, because she must get married to secure a livelihood; and the illusions of sexual attraction will cause the imagination of young men to endow her with every accomplishment and virtue that can make a wife a treasure. (PP:353-54).

Shaw sees women's salvation in seeking a suitable mate which only provides her financially and after a while their life is deprived of any warmth and love. The same situation is shown in *Man and Superman*. The play has the simple plot of Ann Whitefield's determined and inexorable attempt to bear John Tanner's children. In proceeding the story, Tanner's discussion of the concept of marriage with Ann, highlights Shaw's view on the concept as Tanner is Shaw's mouthpiece in *Man and Superman*. As such, the aim of this paper is to study and comment on Shaw's view of marriage by referring to Tanner's words as Shaw's mouthpiece.

3. Background to Shaw & his Works:

"I am pure Dublin . . . We are a family of Pooh Bahs – snobs to the backbone. Drink and lunacy are minor specialties" (Mckernan, 2013, 421). George Bernard Shaw was born in Dublin on July 1856. He was never in favor of schooling and performed poorly and irregularly on his subjects at school. However he put all his effort on action to complete all of his formal education at the Dublin English Scientific and Commercial Day School. After that at 15 he decided to work in a land agent's office and in 1876 left Dublin with the aim of settling in London where "he vowed never to do another honest day of work"(Mckernan, 2013, 422). A remarkable and self-educated man, he began his long honorable career of literary writing which ended to two great prizes. Indeed he became the only person to win both the Nobel Prize in literature and Oscar Prize for his film productions specifically *Pygmalion*. All these rewards came from his satirical view of the society. His satirical view brought forward new forms of not only dramas but definitions of such basic concept as woman and marriage, a new perspective which should be studied with respect to its own laws and regulations.

Shaw's major contributions are summarized in his great plays which are more than sixty ones. In those plays, he wrote a new kind of drama which introduced a new form of women to the society. His new definition of women was totally different with the precedent views as his women were not only confident but also had a mind of their own which was rare in his time, and they were determined to achieve what they desired. He never situated his women on the same level with the angels but showed them in a realistic way while having some heroic qualities. Woman, according to Shaw, is a Life Force which compels her to get married and bring into world a superior mankind. Shaw explains that a woman is always in search of a man who would prove to be a good husband by giving her children and thereafter earning bread for them. The theme of Life Force is most prominently discussed in Shaw's *Man and Superman*. In this respect, the concept of marriage also takes a new perspective on Shaw's plays as the role of woman is defined differently.

4. Man and Superman and Shaw's views about Marriage: Critical Analysis

That marriage in English literature has always been a theme is a fact already mentioned here and elsewhere .In this



regard, Shaw's views on marriage are based on his positive theory of creative evolution and his faith in woman's part therein. However, this may not be the case for other European writers such as Ibsen or Strindberg, who criticized the institution of Marriage without explicating their oppositions thoroughly. Nevertheless, Shaw has made his best endeavors to expound his view of marriage in his different plays. One of his plays which have thoroughly expounded this view is *Man and Superman* which is a four-act play written in 1903.

Indeed, Shaw wrote *Man and Superman* as a response to the Victorian society which had an unquenchable desire for sex but desperately frightened of even mentioning the subject: "At that time (Victorian period), the average middle-class English man was a sort of prurient Puritan, too timid even to pronounce the word sex, yet entranced by the topic (Carpenter, 1975: 70)". As a result, Shaw felt this need and tried to fulfil it by writing a "romantic play: that is, the play in which [sex] is carefully kept off the stage, whilst it is alleged as the motive of all the actions (Shaw, 1971, 23). As such, his aim is fully fulfilled in *Man and Superman*. Therefore, John Tanner as a prototype of Don Juan in *Man and Superman* acts as the mouth-piece of Shaw when he says to Ana:

Let us face the facts dear Ana, the Life force respects marriage only because marriage is a contrivance of its own to secure – The greatest number of children and the closest care of them. For honor, chastity and all the rest of your moral figments if cares not rap. Marriage is the most licentious of human institutions. (Shaw, 1962: 156)

Before delving into the concept of marriage expounded by Shaw, it is necessary to mention that the excerpts taken from the play are derived by the philosophical John Tanner (Don Juan) of the third act as opposed to the amorous one of the first two acts. Shaw's view of marriage is expressed through the philosophical Tanner since he was repellent of his amorous hero of the first two acts and decided to represent it into a more philosophical one. In this respect, John Austen is of the view that:

Shaw made his Don Juan a philosopher because he was repelled and bewildered by the demeanor and behavior of Don Juan in Tirso de Molina's *El Burlador de Sevilla*. The original Don Juan's serious pursuit of crime, his profound belief in the powers of the supernatural, and his arrogant defiance of them all compelled

Shaw to explain Don Juan philosophically (as cited in Mills, 216).

By referring to Shaw's Don Juan, we are faced with the philosophical Don Juan who persistently conveys his view on marriage in the third act and is mostly known as the Shaw's mouth-piece in the play. In this part, Shaw shows his interest in perpetuating and bettering the human race. He is not against the institution of marriage but he is against its present customs and laws. In the preface to getting married, Shaw proclaims: "Marriage remains practically inevitable and the sooner we acknowledge this, the sooner we shall set to work to make it decent and reasonable (Shaw, 1962: 454)". According to Shaw, marriage is the most healthy and indispensable institution. It is indispensable, particularly for the woman to fulfil her aim of breeding the superman. In the Hell-scene of *Man and superman*, Don Joan sets forth the purpose of a woman's life and tells Ana:

Sexually, woman is nature's contrivance for perpetuating its highest achievement. Sexually Man is Woman's contrivance for fulfilling nature's behest in the most economical way, she knows by instinct that for back in the evolutionary process she invented him, differentiated him, created him in order to produce something better than the single sexed process can produce (Shaw, 1962, 147).

Shaw analyses marriage from different perspectives. Along with the idea of marriage, he discusses sexuality, freedom of woman, the role of woman at home and women's love for her children. Therefore, in his plays that are saturated with the art of comedy, Shaw's ideal woman is presented as a huntress, chaser, mother, wife and the career woman. According to him, marriage is the only relationship which ensures a healthy and respectable growth for the next generation and protects the mother from all economic anxieties. The wedding ring assures of security and position while prescribes a certain code of morality. The greatest benefit of marriage is shared by mothers and children who, but for its economic safety, would be condemned to most deplorable conditions. If these defects are wiped out, in the long-run, this institution might determine the birth of the superior species. The Shavian Superman will embody and express a superior and better stage of intellectual attainment. And Shaw believes that marriage must result in the evolution of such a superman. Shaw holds that marriage in the modern world, instead

of adding to the population, is in part depopulating the earth. He is afraid that this process may defeat the purpose of Life-Force, the furtherance of race and betterment of species. Modern Marriages, according to Shaw, have become mere means of unlimited and unrestrained sexual pleasure.

To Shaw, marriage is a biological fact and factor. He proceeds to analyze and interpret it according to his own theory. Shaw has advocated revolutionary changes in the concept of marriage. He castigates the conventional romantic ideal of marriage of two persons who accept slavery to one another. What he says indeed is that if it is impossible to avoid this life force, the marriage should be sacrificed. There is no shirking it, he declares, "if marriage cannot be made to produce something better than we are, marriage will have to go, or else the nation will have to go" (466). And though we may answer that marriage is what men and women are made of, yet we have to accept that marriage essentially exists for making men and women; otherwise, they would not be any procreation and thus no race continuation. The conclusion Shaw comes to is that the only solution to the problem of marriage is to be found in making "The sexual relations between men and women decent and honorable by making women economically independent of men, and men economically in dependent of women"(544).

According to Chesterton, Shaw's philosophic view of marriage is that a woman, due to her necessity, makes advances or falls in love; she pursues her chosen one with all her might. If she does not marry, there is no place for her to serve her from privation and lives as a respected citizen even if she is a millionaire. In self-protection, marriage is a necessity for her. Then it is also admitted that women need children for their physical completeness. Shaw adds to this belief his own concept that life force wants her to better the race by giving birth to superman, in which lies her full physical and metal completeness. Indeed, a man does not gain even one tenth of what a woman would achieve by marriage. In this regard, a woman must pursue the man, be the huntress and chase her prey even if her way of preying is to elope away with him. As such, elopement is a boon for her and not a curve and chasing is a blessing in disguise for her.

Shaw believes that sex is the creative instinct. He views sex apart from romance which is not real. For him, sex is a

fundamental instinct that is ought to be satisfied not for pleasurable romance but because it is real, evolutionary, violent and the most imperative instinct. This is the most necessary sporadic and impersonal instinct that the scared Life-Force expresses itself through it. However, it does not require any intimate personal relationship. In *Man and Superman* Don Juan expresses his emotional instinct:

In the sex relation the universal creative energy, of which the parties are both the helpless agents, our rides and sweeps away all personal consideration, and dispenses with all personal consideration, and dispenses with all personal relations. The pair may be utter strangers to one another, speaking different languages, differing in race and color, in age, and disposition, with no bond between them but a possibility of that fecundity for the sake of which the Life Force throws them into one another's arms at the exchange of a glance (P: 161).

Sentimentality creates all the unreality and romance of married life, when husband and wife pretend that they are not only committed in mutual sexual enjoyment but also devoted to each other for the so-called nobler and beautiful motives i.e. romance, love and duty, under the protest of personal intimacy. All these things are unreal and do obscure the primal instinct. Shaw, primarily a biologist, was mistaken by some critics as a sensualist and by others, like Chesterton, as a puritan. No doubt Shaw's own unconsummated marriage might have led Chesterton to this assumption. However, Shaw once said, "As man and wife we found a new relation in which sex had no part. It ended the old gallantries, filtrations and Philandering for both of us" (Shaw, 1949, 115).

But to Shaw the aim of Life is neither pleasure for its own sake nor puritanical repression for the attainment of heavenly bliss. Shaw considers sexual experience as a necessary part of human growth and for him the substitution of sensuous ecstasy for intellectual activity is the very devil. In a letter to Frank Harris, Shaw said:

I like Sexual intercourse because of its amazing power of providing a celestial flood of emotion and excitation which, however momentary, gave me a sample of the ecstasy that may one day be the normal condition of conscious intellectual activity. (P: 115)

5. Conclusion:

Shaw is not merely an anthropologist and psychoanalyst, he is primarily a Eugenicist. He tries to see the inner will of the world in creative evolution and by shuttering the Victorian Veneer of romance;



he assigns woman the pious role of hunting and capturing the superman, not due to her just or sex obsession, but to give birth to another superman mentally and physically better the other ones. In this respect, Ana cries out in Act II of the play *Man and Superman*, "a father for superman"(Shaw, 1962, 155).

According to Shaw, all the creative energy of the universe is gathered in a woman to impel her to court her mate and to enforce a man to yield and respond to her biological urges. For this, women have to be passive and motionless like Ann Whitefield in *Man and Superman* who in the beginning, waits motionlessly and passively but when John Tanner tries to extricate himself from her pursuit, she unrelentingly goes after him until he is secured for her forever. The passivity is described by Marrow in his book *Lapuberts* as the passivity of the magnet, which in its apparent immobility is drawing the iron towards it (181).

It can be concluded that that the Shavian woman is not an ordinary woman. She is many things vested in one. Shaw has treated her as a caged-bird, economically dependent on her counterpart, the man. As a Fabian Socialist, Shaw pleaded for the liberation of woman from four walls of the 'prison-home' and struggled to give them a life of economic freedom. This great champion of woman's emancipation realized that economic dependence was a great hindrance in the way of woman's freedom of thought, speech and action in society. There is no salvation for her unless she makes herself self-dependent. That is why he emphasized the importance of a bread-winning job for her, in order to liberate her from economic thralldom to her husband or father and to secure her self-esteem.

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