

George Bernard Shaw- As an Iconoclast

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Abstract:

This Research Paper aims to highlight the elements revolution in George Bernard Shaw's work. Shaw was an iconoclast who attacked the romantic notions of war and love. Toward the middle of the nineteenth century, there can be traced a significant development from romantic and historical themes to more realistic themes, and this movement toward realism received considerable impetus.

Keywords: Iconoclast; Revolution; Religious; criticism; superstitions; beliefs;

Introduction:

Shaw was essentially a revolutionary. He wanted to destroy the old order and the traditions and replace them by the new ones. In this regard, he is called an iconoclast. in the technical sense of the term "iconoclast is a breaker of images; a destroyer or exposé of shams or superstitions ; or one who makes attack upon cherished beliefs". He aimed at destroying the old and accepted conventions and make place for new ideas and traditions. He proudly called himself a rebel and a destructive critic. It is in his very sense that we may call him as a revolutionary. He has himself given the definition of a revolutionary in his preface of the play Man and Superman, wherein he defines; Revolutionist is one who desires

to discard the existing social order and tries another.

Shaw had taken up the mission to discard the existing social order and tried another. This was the fundamental of his Iconoclastism.

Shaw's Iconoclasm:

Shaw believes that man, as he progressed from barbarism to civilisation, adopted certain institutions and conventions which are neither perfect nor divine, but with the passing of time they have come to be regarded as being of supernatural origin, and are accepted and glorified as such. The people, who have prospered by means of these institutions and whom Shaw calls Have and Holders, always try to encourage others in the belief that the especially recognised conventions and institutions are perfect and divine and, therefore, any criticism of them is sacrilege. All this is imposture, as the sacredness and perfection of these institutions has no basis in fact. Shaw's business as a dramatist is to shatter such romantic and idealistic notions. He is an iconoclast, who shatters all hypocrisy and illusions by the battering rod of truth.

Critical Rebellion:

Shaw wanted to carry out his iconoclasm through pain. He thought that through the

criticism of the existing social order in his plays, he could make a lot of change in the social order. In this regard, the following extract from Nicoll's "British drama" is quite important.

"So far as the content of this plays is concerned, the key notes of Shaw's work is iconoclasm and what may be styled critical rebellion. In the plays produced before 1920 he attacks things as they are, because by the application of the reason, he sees them vicious, useless or foolish. Whatever then, is sentimental and romantic, he has despised as false.

Revolution in the field of Psychology:

Shaw thought social order could be changed by bringing about a change in the psychology. According to him, it was the psychology that could bring about the social change. The following extract has made the correct observation:

"Whatever is contrary to the dictates of reason he has opposed. Whatever I set up as fetish by unthinking mass he has ruthlessly destroyed. His socialism is not of the emotional kind. He is not inspired with great pity for "the under-Dog" as Galsworthy is. Rather does look around him, and witness the many foolish in our management of life he strives to remedy the abuses, not by serious problem plays, but by turning topsy-turvy our society state. Shaw loves to show the others side he may point in moral complacency and romantic artificiality are the things he detests. He objects the typical assumptions of the sentimentalists dramatists just as much as he objects to the typical assumptions of the sentimentalists in real

life. Everything therefore, comes within the sphere of his caustic-pen literature, art, medicine, religion, politics, racial prejudice, social standard. He is a great destroyer of evil in our modern age, and out of his destructiveness he leads us towards a newer, fresher and more constructive thought".

Moral Revolution:

Shaw was interested in moral revolution more than anything else. In fact, he thought that if conscience could achieve victory against customs, it shall bring about the real social revolution and the social set-up. Shaw himself remarked:

"I am a moral revolutionary, interested not in a class war, but in the struggle between human vitality and the artificial system of morality, and distinguishing not between capitalists and proletarian but between moralist and natural historian."

William Jones has, in this regard, rightly remarked –

"To me Shaw's great service is the way he brings reality to the eyes, as it were the difference between convention and conscience, and the way that he shows that you can tell the truth successfully if you will only keep benignant enough while doing it."

Shaw's Moral Revolution and Revolutionary Criticism:

Shaw was a revolutionary, although his means of bringing about revolution are different from the accepted means of revolution. He has himself accepted that he is a moral revolutionary and in his plays, there is a lot of revolutionary criticism,

which is aimed at bringing about the alteration and the change in social institutions. Colbourne has rightly remarked –

“Now that we have an inkling of what Shaw is after we can return with profit to his plays. Strip of wit, cast out joy and the clown and what is left? All that matters: namely, a body of revolutionary criticism aimed at all our most cherished social institutions with the object of altering them. For what purpose? So that after alteration, they may fit conscience instead of custom.”

Social Reform Fact:

Shaw intended at bringing about social reforms. His plays were aimed at it. In fact, he carried out “persistent struggle to force the public to reconsider its morals.” In order to achieve this object, he wrote plays and his plays were difference from the accepted morals and conventions of the society. That is why he has called himself, “A specialist in immoral and heretical plays.” These plays were intended to make people to give up the customs. Customs are likely to grow stale and so they become meaningless. Unless they are changed, the society cannot progress and reform itself. It has rightly been remarked:

“Customs grow stale, law obsolete conventions meaningless. Yet we persist in observing them long after their usefulness is passed. They are dead, and in reverencing them. We are dealing with death instead of life. If they are not buried when they are dead, they become fetters, holding man back and hampering him in his journey towards Godhead and the life becomes more abandoned. It is from these dead tyrannies that Shaw would deliver us

as a good forester, strips a tree of the ivy strangling it. It is life that matts and nothing else. And life is dynamic never static; ever changing never still. Let men and women, then open their gates and the windows of their souls to the new and the changing and let the spirit of revolt and heresy and immorality blow freely through the rooms of their minds, for in these life. And to make way for these, let them first throw out their dead, ruthless and in a very real sense religiously. To use one of Shaw’s favourite metaphors we must be careful to empty out our dirty water before pouring in the clean.”

His plays are an attack on the Society:

They are not agencies of social reforms only. It has rightly been observed:

“instead of regarding his plays, then as mere vehicles for jokes or as acrobatic spectacles with most of his characters, on the heads and arguments turning cart wheels, we must regards them as essentially serious attacks upon society. Looked at from their author’s stand point, therefore the plays range not from farce to mere tragedy, or from comedy to melodrama but rather solemn landlordism to militarism from prostitution to marriage from husband hunting to politics, from professional tyrannise to totalitarian tyrannise, from the crosstianity that passes for Christianity to the question of conscience and creative evolution.”

Shaw wanted to convert his generation to his morals, ideas and outlook, these morals and attitudes were nothing but an attempt to reform the society. He has, therefore, tried to make critical study of various

aspects of social life, such as love, marriage, codes of social behaviour etc. All his plays display an attack on one or another aspect of the morality of the society.

In *Devil's Disciple* and *The Shewing of Blanco Posnet*, he has attacked current religious beliefs and tried to present their reformed shape. In *Major Barbara*, he has maintained this attack, although in a different manner.

In *John Bull's Other Island*, he has attacked English as well as Irish prejudices. This attack has been made in a good humoured and witty manner.

Doctor's Dilemma is an attempt to present a reformed picture of the medical profession. Here Shaw has ridiculed the conventional and wrong notion of medical profession.

Getting Married is a satire on the discrepancies of marriage system prevalent in England society.

Androcles and the Lion is again an attempt to present a critical view of the religious faith and religious experiences.

Pygmalion is a brilliant humorous and witty study of contemporary conventions. Shaw has made an attempt to reform these things.

Arms and the Man deals with the theme of war. War is neither an inevitability nor something glamorous and Shaw has tried to prove it in the play.

Man of Destiny is the play that deals with the life of Napoleon and in *Caesar and Cleopatra*, Shaw has attacked the old concept of the heroes of history and their

importance. In fact, this attitude needs change.

In *Man and Superman* Shaw has satirised the old and conventional, romantic concept of love. He has tried to prove that this attitude needs change.

In the same way, in the *Sanity of Art*, he has tried to attack the theory of art for art's sake.

Similarly, if Shaw has attacked certain models of literature and certain literary figure, he has done so with a view to bring about a change in the outlook and pattern. That is why Shaw is called Iconoclast and social reformer.

Conclusion:

Shaw's revolutionary social doctrines appear to many under the grip of old conventions as the tattle of an intellectual pervert. The vested interest that felt his shafts, cried him down for immorality and heresay. But there was in him an intellectual fearlessness that exceeded to the change of immorality and heresay and battled boldly against the accepted morality of a Cant-ridden society. Shaw of course, made some excess of emphasis and over simplifications in his assessment of the values of different things. But it was to lightening the burden of tyranny that Shaw gave his "heretical and immoral sermons – sermons too true to be good."

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