

War is Politics of Mass Hysteria: A Study of Shaw's *Arms and the Man*

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ABSTRACT

Bernard Shaw, a foremost Irish dramatist has taken up themes such as prostitution (*Mrs. Warren's Profession*), war, religious intolerance, the superiority of creativity (*Man and Superman*), the perils of democracy (*The Apple Cart*) and training in refinement (*Pygmalion*) etc. He's an iconoclast who has used humour to undermine traditional notions on each and every aspect of life. The intolerance of organized religion towards the vision of divinity is shown in *Saint Joan*. His wit and wisdom make the reader read through lengthy discussions without being bored. My paper, "War is politics of Mass Hysteria: A Study of Shaw's *Arms and the Man*" argues that the modern warfare which has become ferocious, senseless and unheroic makes no distinction between civilians and combatants. The Shavian argument that denounces and ridicules war as negative thing is pertinent even today when the lone super power has been waging one war after another in the name of democracy or combating terrorism. The need of the hour is to ask the question whether it's worthy to glorify and accept modern warfare in all its ugly manifestations or find an alternative means to achieve alternative world order based on 'equality amidst diversity'. My paper also compares and contrasts Shavian argument with ideas of Tolstoy, the author of *War and Peace* and Freud, the father of Modern Psychology.

KEYWORDS

War; Politics; Play; *Arms and the Man*.

The post-cold war era has seen the belligerence of the USA which has shown an ambivalent response to Iraq crisis. "War is dangerous; defusing the crisis without a demonstration of force is also an unwanted outcome." (Chomsky, *Democracy* 3) The end of "Soviet hobgoblin" (Chomsky, *Democracy* 93) has led America to find a new enemy in Islamic terrorism which it has supported earlier in its bid to drive out the Soviet Union from Afghanistan. It's difficult to speak about the necessity of peace when it appears that war is more gratifying in showing one's supremacy. AJ Muste, a famous radical

pacifist says, "The problem after a war is with the victor. He thinks he has just proved that war and violence pay. Who will now teach him a lesson?" (qtd. In Chomsky, *Democracy* 148)

It has been a historical fact that the western intervention in the internal affairs of other countries has been an ongoing exercise since the days of Soviet Revolution of 1917. American intervention in Panama, Granada and Dominican Republic before 1991 and later in Iraq, Afghanistan and its current interest in Syria prove that for it, its political and energy interests are paramount in

dominating and devastating other countries. When economic strangulation and gunboat diplomacy have not worked as in the case of Nicaragua, America has resorted to direct intervention in Dominican Republic in 1965. The military and diplomatic support of the USA to the governments of Turkey and Indonesia since 1997 has led to the killing of lakhs of people such as Kurds and East Timorese respectively. America has treated Latin Americans and Filipinos as 'naughty children' to be disciplined. (Chomsky, Hegemony, 64) "Atrocities in Colombia have included the displacement of population through chemical warfare (called "fumigation") under the guise of a drug war." (Chomsky, Hegemony, 59) International terrorism in Cuba, open aggression in South Vietnam and participation in mass slaughter of the mass-based political party in South Vietnam and Indonesia have been projected by America as "an act of legitimate self-defense or an act of benevolence that perhaps went astray" (Douglas Pike qtd. in Chomsky, hegemony,76).

We also find that in his work, *War and Peace*, Tolstoy allots nearly forty pages on theory of history and questions why millions of people followed Napoleon and perished in the battles. He writes that "modern history is like a deaf man answering questions which no one has asked him" (Tolstoy 1278). He probes the role of power in causing the war and asks, "How did millions of men come to combine to commit crimes, murders, war, and so on?" (Tolstoy 1297). Tolstoy also examines the issue of necessity and free will in case of sciences and history concluding that with regard to the latter, "it is as essential to surmount a consciousness of an unreal freedom and to recognize a dependence not perceived by our senses" (1315). Various factors such as racism, ideology or nationalism or religion or nationality have made people face hardships and follow the

leaders like Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin, Bush or Saddam. In the case of revolutionary communism, war has been seen as a means of liberation from insufferable social and political system. The paeans are sung to the martyrs and suffering is glorified. In the epic novel by Tolstoy, Andrew at last recognizes the futility of war.

The modern warfare has not maintained any distinction between civilians and combatants. America turned the other way:

when Iraq purchased US helicopters and transferred them to military use in violation of its promises, used poison gas against Iranian troops and its own Kurdish citizens and relocated half a million Kurds and Syrians by force, among other atrocities. (Michael Wines qtd. In Chomsky 195)

and Saddam turned unbearable "when his independent nationalism threatened US Interests" (Chomsky 211). In the context of this kind of decimation of the others as insects, it is pertinent to ask the question whether it's worthy to glorify modern war. The present paper looks at Shaw's *Arms and the Man* in the background of modern times and compares his ideas with those of Tolstoy, Freud and others.

Bernard Shaw, one of the foremost Irish dramatists changed from being a socialist to gradualist believed in the efficacy of laws to change society into a personal moralist. He has taken up themes such as prostitution (*Mrs. Warren's Profession*), war (*Arms and the Man*), religious intolerance (*St. Joan*), the superiority of creativity (*Man and Superman*), the perils of democracy (*The Apple Cart*) and training in refinement (*Pygmalion*) etc. He's an iconoclast who has used his wit and humour to undermine traditional notions on each and every aspect of life. The intolerance of organized religion towards the vision of divinity is shown in *Saint Joan*. His wit and wisdom make the reader read through lengthy

discussions without being bored. Levenson writes:

All Shaw's plays have standard narrative structures and retain the semblance of a naturalistic surface, as well as being (notoriously) intellectual. Yet Shaw uses the intellectual qualities of inversion and paradox to an extent that undermines their apparent rationalism and conceived his plays as "musical performances" in which the "long rhetorical speeches" were consciously written like 'operatic solos'. (147)

A.C. Ward writes that Shaw propounded the importance of granite-like will power to become better and its legacy to the posterity would bring desired change and "the nations would then be ruled in wisdom and virtue, and war and all other evils would vanish." (83)

In *Arms and the Man*, we find how Catherine Petkoff and Raina, ladies from a Major's family get caught in a delicate situation and wriggle themselves out of it through their knack. Shaw also aims at mocking the foolishness of eulogizing war through the character of Bluntschli, Chocolate cream soldier. Catherine and Raina are going agog over Sergius's exploits against Serbs and Austrians on behalf of Bulgarians. Raina regrets over how she has doubted his soldiership in a real battle. Bluntschli, the fugitive Serbian soldier enters the bedroom of Raina and seeks shelter. Raina says, "Some soldiers, I know are afraid to die", the man replies, "All of them, dear lady, all of them believe me. It is our duty to live as long as we can" (7). Here Shaw punctures the myth that soldiers are fearless creatures ready to die and court martyrdom. He admits that he was as "nervous as a mouse" (13) after two days being under fire. He refers to the mad man, that is in fact Sergius, the fiancée of Raina, who charged against them and snatched victory. Being hungry and tired, Bluntschli eats three chocolate creams and

falls asleep. When Raina's mother Catherine comes into her bedroom, she gets amazed at the man asleep and Raina's reference to him as poor darling.

Shaw mocks the idea of civilization based on gadgets. In Act Two, Major Petkoff returns from the battlefield. He criticizes modern customs such as bathing every day by the English and using electric bell to call a servant rather than shouting for them. When Catherine says, "Civilized people never shout for their servants", he retorts "Civilized people don't hang out their washing dry where visitors can see it." (27) and asks her to remove the clothes on the bushes. Catherine continues saying, "Oh, that's absurd, Paul. I don't believe really refined people notice such things" (27)

Meanwhile Sergius comes to Major Petkoff's house and is much cared for. He doesn't mind in basking in his recent glory. He also refers to a fleeing Serbian soldier hidden by two women. He says:

He was serving in the very battery I so unprofessionally charged. Being a thorough soldier, he ran away like the rest of them, with our cavalry at his heels. (31)

Shaw is taking a dig at caprice of war and professional or thorough soldiering. Despite his much-praised gallantry, Sergius goes on flirting with Louka, the rebellious maid of Raina. Louka tries to stop his advances and when he tries to kiss her, she says, "Gentlefolk are all alike; you making love to me behind Miss Raina's back and she doing the same behind yours." (35). Sergius who had been boasting of his different selves – the hero of Slivinitza, apostle of higher love etc. is now too puzzled to know which is his real self—buffoon, humbug, a bit of blackguard. Louka refuses to reveal about the person of Raina's affections in spite of arm-twisting by Sergius. She says:

You know how to hurt with your tongue as well as with your hands. But I don't care, now I've found out

that whatever clay I'm made of, you're made of the same. As for her, she's a liar; and her fine airs are a cheat; and I'm worth the six of her. (37)

Shaw has opposed the snobbery of the upper classes and false heroism praised in the context of war. Both Sergius and Raina are prepared to lie and conceal their real natures and love of convenience posing as people of manners. In the end, it is Louka, the maid of Raina who emerges as a soul above her status. Sergius says, "Oh, war! war! The dream of patriots and heroes! A fraud, Bluntschli. A hollow sham, like love." (64). At the end, the confused and fallen hero of Raina takes up the hand of Louka whereas Raina settles for Bluntschli, the Chocolate Cream soldier and an heir of vast property. Freud also writes that the modern war is:

no longer an opportunity for achieving the old ideals of heroism and that owing to the perfection of instruments of destruction a future war might involve the extermination of one or perhaps both of the antagonists. (360)

We find some parallels in understanding the unheroic nature of war between Shaw and Freud.

A.C. Ward refers to the vanishing of Raina's romantic ideas about war and marriage when she prefers Bluntschli, a man of certainty and six hotels in Switzerland to the fickle-minded Sergius. (88). Through this play, Shaw was criticizing "not simply the temporary injustices or passing follies of his own generation but certain human characteristics which last from generation to generation" (84) despite change in form and sees marriage as "a solemn contract, not a frivolous domestic excursion" (88)

Freud, referring to the destructive and transgression of international law of the First world War writes that:

it ignores the prerogatives of the wounded and the medical service, the distinction between civil and military sections of the population, the claims of private property. It tramples in blind fury on all that comes its way as though there were no future and no peace among nations after it is over. (65)

He criticizes the State for suppressing the freedom of expression of the citizens, forces them to give sanction for its plunder and lust for power in the name of patriotism.

Einstein in his letter (30th July 1932) queries regarding a way of delivering mankind from the menace of war, a small, ambitious and self-serving clique could bend the will of the majority and how tools such as school, the press and the Church are successfully used to rouse the men to war psychosis and even self-sacrifice. Freud replies that bringing in of Eros, the antagonist of destructive instinct. He refers to consequences of war such as the destruction of life, humiliation of men, murder and products of human labour.

If Civilization is the taming of bestial impulses, Freud refers to the problem regarding, "how to get rid of the greatest hindrance to civilization—namely, the constitutional inclination of human beings to be aggressive towards one another." (Freud 336). Regarding the meaning of the evolution of civilization, he points out the constant "struggle between Eros and Death, between the instinct of life and instinct of destruction" and describes civilization "as the struggle for the life of human species" (Freud 314).

Bernard Shaw can also be compared to Bertrand Russell who has opposed the first world war as a conscientious objector and went to prison. During the cold war era, Russell took up cudgels on behalf of peace and nuclear disarmament and participate in many demonstrations. Although Freud hoped that cultural attitude, the domination of

reason over instinct, fearful results of war and civilization, we have already seen how the lone super power is baring its bloody teeth and its death instinct and arrogance through continuous and devastating wars in the name of lofty ideals such as

'democracy' or 'combating terrorism.' The need of the hour is to oppose religious fanaticism as well as belligerence of the USA and its allies. It's our moral duty to call the bluff of the world policeman namely the rulers of America.

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