A Study of Social, Cultural, Economic, Religious, Moral, Political Views in the Dramas of George Bernard Shaw

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Abstract

Shaw’s view on a variety of other subject becomes explicable, if we keep his theory of Life Force in mind. He considers poverty an evil, and scorns capitalism because they defect the purpose of the life force. He has never been a socialist for the sake of socialism. For him it (socialism) is only a means for doing away with the ponderous machinery of capitalism, which is trying to stifle the activities of the Life Force.” Shaw is a socialist, because he knows that unless all have equal incomes, equal freedom and leisure, the Life Force will not be able to move upward. Socialism is desirable for it makes easy the evolutionary function of the Life Force. This Paper focuses on Social, Cultural, Economic, Religious, Moral, Political Views in the Dramas of George Bernard Shaw.

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Allardyce Nicholl regards Shaw as the father of the theatre of ideas in England, and says that his plays are so many sermons on social follies and social vices. Shaw himself said that he wrote his plays with the deliberate object of converting the nation to his point of view. He regarded current views of economics, religion, sexual relationships, etc, as entirely wrong and so sought to change them by discussing them and turning them topsy-turvy in his plays. In the course of his long dramatic career, he has expressed himself practically on every subject between heaven and earth- literature, art, medicine, religion, politics, morality, marriage and family relations, racial prejudice, poverty and social standards.

In other words, the themes of Shaw are bewildering in their variety. However, unity and coherence in provided by his theory of Life Force. Shaw himself defines Life Force as “vitality with a direction”. Like Schopenhauer’s Will and Thomas Hardy’s Immanent Will, it is the creative principal at the back of things, manifesting itself as ceaseless striving in all living things. Shaw’s Life Force differs from Hardy’s Immanent Will in one important respect. It is purposive; it is not merely “ceaseless striving”, it is striving with a purpose. The purpose of the Life Force is to evolve into higher and higher forms of life. It does not aim at creating greater Beauty, nor at greater physical prowess, but at higher forms of intelligence. “It cares as little for Beauty as for morality”. Artificial social codes have no meaning for it. Even individual happiness does not count. Everything that comes in the way of its creative function, its drive for betterment, its striving for a higher form of consciousness, is swept aside. It has worked through a process of “trial and error”, and has reached the stage of intelligence represented by Man. But it is only a stage in an apparently endless journey; soon Man himself will be superseded by the Superman. Life will evolve in the course of centuries into “pure thought”.

Shaw’s philosophy of Creative Evolution and Life Force found its first extended treatment in Man and Superman (1903). It was further developed in the five plays constituting the Back to Methuselah series.

Shaw’s view on a variety of other subject becomes explicable, if we keep his theory of Life Force in mind. He considers poverty an evil, and scorns capitalism because they defect the purpose of the life force. “His advocacy of socialism”, says Sen-Gupta “is really subsidiary to his championing of the cause of Creative Evolution. He has never been a socialist for the sake of socialism. For him it (socialism) is only a means for doing away with the ponderous machinery of capitalism, which is trying to stifle the activities of the Life Force.” Shaw is a socialist, because he knows that unless all have equal incomes, equal freedom and leisure, the Life Force will not be able to move upward. Socialism is desirable for it makes easy the evolutionary function of the Life
Force. Poverty must be abolished for it represents illness, weakness, disgrace, meanness, ugliness, corruption and degradation, all of which are serious obstacles in the way of the Life Force. Equality of income means equal opportunities for all; money is desirable for it means health. Intelligence, beauty and honour. “In our society Ann has to choose between Tanner and Tavy, but if there had been perfect equality of incomes, Tanner’s chauffeur, Straker, would have been in the running and would probably have beaten his rivals,” Such equality of income and opportunity will lead to the birth of a race of Superman, not all at once, but in the long run.

Shaw’s socialism is an offshoot of his philosophy of Creative Evolution and hence it has its own peculiarities. Like the other socialists, he does not go into the technical details of the matter. In his dramas, he only draws our attention to the basic problems, underpayment of the poor, idleness of the rich and the consequent waste of leisure and energy, without entering into any technicalities. “If there is any underpayment, there will be inequality, overwork, dirt and degradation, and the Life Force will be handicapped. The asphyxia of poverty must be removed; for the Life Force must breathe,” it is also for this reason that, unlike the other socialists, he is not in favors of sudden or violent changes in the existing social order. Life can evolve only slowly during the course of ages, and hence any overthrow of the existing social order is meaningless and wasteful. Shaw favours only mild social change. He is in favour of the waiting policy of the Fabian Socialists: he believes in the illumination of the intellect rather than in the hasty breaches of the law. Poverty is the theme of Widowers Houses, Mrs., Warren’s Professions and Major Barbara.

No problem of modern society has exercised Shaw’s imagination so powerfully as the problems of Family, Love, Marriage and Sex-relations. Shaw objects to marriage and family because these institutions are based on false economics and false biology. As a biologist, he thinks that procreations is the most sacred work of all, and as a socialist he demands that all work should be suitably paid for. The most serious of social injustice is done to women, for they are underpaid in the industrial world, and not allowed to have any independent income at all for their work in the family. Underpayment in the industrial world leads to Mrs. Warren’s profession, but exploitation of women within the family is even the worst form of prostitution. The institution of family rests on a foundation of fraud. The husband thinks that he provides security, defense, livelihood, honour and prestige to the wife. But in reality, we are shown in Candida, it is the wife of who provides comforts for the man, and keeps our vulgar cares from him. In back to Mathuselah, he gives us glimpses of an ideal society in which Family and Marriage and private property are no more, and the state is responsible for the rearing of children. In this ideal society, women, like Zoo, who specialize in the breeding of children, do not recognize their own children, not do they know about
their paternity. According to our codes of morality, this is certainly scandalous, but then Zoo belongs to a society in which there are no scandals.

Shaw is against woman’s dependence on man not only because it is socially unjust, but also because such economic dependence defeats the very purpose of the Life Force. She tries to secure a man who can provide nutrition for himself and for her children, rather than one who is “biologically attractive”, i.e. can serve better than other males the purpose of the Life Force. Thus economic consideration and compulsions deflect the woman from the pursuit of the male most attractive biologically. To secure economic independence, poor women pursue and try to win over rich men, even though they are not good. This theme finds an extended treatment in Heartbreak House.

“Marriage and family are based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the.” – (Sen. Gupta). Marriage is a social institution meant for procreation; it means the alliance of two people for prolonged relation. As marriage is intended to be a permanent institution, it is strengthened and supported by another social institution, the family. Family is even more permanent than marriage, for it runs from generation to generation and includes countless marriages. Hence institutions, like family and marriage, are futile and meaningless. Marriage means a lifelong companionship. But the real intimacy between the husband and the wife is merely a matter of moments. This is shown by the frequent flirtations in which married couples indulge, in their constant bickering, in the boredom and ennui of modern life. In order to make the life-long joint existence within the family bearable, married relationship has been invested with much that is sentimental fiction that the husband and the wife are devoted to each other, and that they work together for nobler purposes of life. Shaw calls this a mere hoax. Sexual enjoyment can confer no real intimacy, and as far as the Life Force is concerned, husband and wife are as great strangers to each other as to other people in the world. This has been clearly shown in the little drama Overruled.

Marriage is based on falsehood and sentimentality. Decency and Respectability are mere pretensions to cover up that falsehood. People, who have secured material prosperity in the world, do not want any change in the existing order and so support and justify these false institutions. This morbid sentimentality has a disastrous effort on civilization, for it comes in the way of free and frank discussion of truth. Sex is very real- and sacred as it serves the purpose of the Life Force- but its free discussion in society is taboo because it will be fatal to the institutions which respectable people hold dear. Shaw objects to marriage because by being associated with private property, respectability and sentimentality, it has become an obstacle in the way of the Life Force. By being connected with private property, it diverts attention from procreation to the acquisition of wealth.
Shaw is against romance, because it is not essential to sex, and it obscures the real creative purpose of the Life Force. In the ideal society of Shaw, pictured in back to Methuselah, both marriage and family will go, and women, like Zoo, who specialize in babies, will not be compelled to live in the company of their father or fathers, if that company is distasteful to them.

It is the maternal aspect of women, says Duffin, which Shaw emphasizes. He sees her as the prospective mother of many children. He is all in favor of social and economic justice to women, but he is against the worship and adoration of women. “Entering is lists as the woman’s champion, demanding that women should be emancipated that the vote should be given to them and that the doors of the profession should be open to them”, says C.E.M. Joad, “Shaw not only gave women the freedom to do as men did, but gave men the freedom to treat women as if they were men”. In the preface to Man and Superman, he speaks contemptuously of the romantic adoration of women. Women are not the incarnation of music, poetry and painting, but they are flesh and blood as men are. The female for him is not the weaker sex, but the stronger sex, in the sense that women’s instincts are more compelling, their wills more determined, their sense of reality more vivid, and because the fury of creation in more violent in them than in man. Their coyness, their reticence, even their sympathetic interest in the affairs of men, are so many snares to catch the male and reduce him to the status of a bread-winner for herself and her children. Woman is not the pursued, but the pursuer; it is the man who is wooed and won.

This theme has been treated at length in Man and Superman, while in Arms and the Man he has tried to show romantic love in its true colours.

Women is able to manipulate ninety-nine men out of hundred and convert them into suitable bread-winners, but the hundredth case is that of the genius, and here the woman fails. He fact is that the genius- inventors, artists, scientists, adventurers, etc.- like woman herself, is the repository of a “strong potential of life”, having been specifically created for, “the purpose of carrying life to higher levels.”-(JOAD). “In the genius, life’s purpose is to lift itself to heights of consciousness not previously achieved”, continues Joad, “in the woman to safeguard and protect the level which has already been attained”. It is by means of art, science, literature etc, that life lifts itself up to higher levels, and the great geniuses are the instruments through which this purpose is fulfilled. The genius impelled by the Life Force working within him will sacrifice even wife and children in the pursuance of his purpose, as ruthlessly as woman sacrifices the ordinary man for her purpose. He does not, therefore, make a good husband and bread-winner. Essentially self-centered and egocentric, he comes in clash with the woman, and the clash is often tragic. A woman in order to win over the artist pretends to be sympathetic to his artistic activity and succeeds in inducing the
artist to waste his talents in glorifying her. This is a perversion of art, and hence arises Shaw's condemnation of romantic art. However good, art must be for, ‘Life sake’, and not for, “art’s sake”.

Again, it was Shaw's theory of Life Force that made him a strict vegetarian. Death is the negation of life; it defeats the very purpose of the Life Force. To take animal life is not only wicked but also wasteful. He was a pacifist not out of cowardice or sentimentalism, but because of sound, practical considerations. War should be fought only when absolutely necessary, it must be regarded as a necessary evil and there should be no glorification of it. He has no admiration for the warrior-hero. In Arms and the Man, he explodes the romantic nonsense about war and soldiering. All soldiers are stupid, and cowards at heart, and food is essential on the battlefield than ammunition. It is a soldier’s duty to protect his life to the best of his ability, even though it means flying away from the battlefield cowardice is a fundamental instinct and it is patriotic. Shaw is an enemy of capitalism and imperialism because they are the cause of war.

Shaw attacks in one play after another the ponderous machinery of law and justice, for it, too, is based on false economics and false biology. Our laws are engines of vengeance designed to protect private property, and Shaw cannot tolerate vengeance, for it is destructive. “evil, argues Shaw, should be counteracted by good and not by a hostile force.”- (Sen.-Gupta). His captain Brassbound ultimately discovers that the present laws are not based on the abstract principles of justice, but are devices to wreck vengeance on those who disturb property. In Androcles and the Lion, he shows that even religious persecution is irreligious, and motivated by personal or political causes. A selected few control the legal and political machinery and corrupt it. Democracy itself has degenerated as a result of the corrupting influence of big capitalists. In Heartbreak House, he shows that in a capitalistic society, the successful politicians and lawmakers are all frauds, “who are, pledged to support the vested interests which have given them the power they misuse”

Shaw's theory of Life Force and his Socialism also explains his aversion to the science of medicine. Doctors live on disease just as charity lives on poverty. if there were no poverty, there will be no disease, and also no medicine. Disease is against nature, and so Shaw is against those who perpetuate disease (the capitalists) or those who thrive on disease (the medical profession). It is the business of the state to look after the health of the people; it must not be left in the hands of a few mercenary individuals.

“Religiously, his family background was Protestant”, says Collins, “but Shaw early rejected the Christian faith.” Throughout his long career, he has warred so much on conventional religion.
That he has often been regarded as irreligious. However, nothing can be farther from the truth. In this respect, he has not merely pulled down old idols, but he has also tried to build up a new idol of his own, and that idol is Creative Evolution. Creative Evolution is Shaw’s religion and it is oriented by his economics. As we are told in Major Barbara poverty degrades and religion is not for empty stomachs. Money is the most important thing in the world because a sound and successful morality can be built up only on the basis of money. So long as there is no real religion.

Though Shaw regards sound economics as essential for sound religion, his religion itself is more biological than economical. It is a religion of instinct rather than of reason, Shaw wants to do away both with the tyranny of reason and the tyranny of passion and so advocates that man should be guided by the unconscious Life Force rather than by convention or reason. His heroes and men of Destiny, like Caesar and Napoleon, may yield to passion momentarily, but they are not its slave for any length of time. They are not guided by love and hatred of other person, but by his own instincts. The new man, the superman, whom Shaw pictures in Black to Methuselah will be free from the tyranny of Poverty, Passion, Reason and Morality. His ideal will not be the attainment of Beauty or happiness. He will be guided by his instincts, by intuition, and such guidance would be his religion. However, Shaw fails to show that such instinctive action will be better and noble than the action guided by reason and intellect. Chesterton exposes this incompleteness of Shaw’s religion when he points out that Shaw fails to clarify the ultimate end of creative evolution, and to show, “how it can really be better than what is behind.”

Shaw’s condemnation of such sacred institutions as marriage and family has led moralists to denounce him as irreligious and obscene. And this attitude, in its turn, has led critic like Chesterton to regard Shaw as essentially a Puritan. But Sen-Gupta rightly points out, “As a matter of fact, he is neither a sensualist nor a Puritan, but a biologist.” A sensualist makes pleasure the sole aim of life while for a Puritan repression is the greatest good of life. Shaw is as much opposed to repression as to pleasure being made the sole goal of life. For Shaw, indulgence, especially sex experience, is not taboo, as it is a part, and a necessary part, of human growth, “but he regards the substitution of sensuous ecstasy for intellectual activity as the very devil”.

Instead of the Puritan Virtue’. Natural virtue means comparative immunity from temptation, from the desires which the flesh is naturally heir to, it means that a man good by nature, does habitually and instinctively what is good and right. Shaw’s great men are all good in this sense. Thus, his Caesar may yield to the charms of Cleopatra for some time, but when she stands in the way of the great task lies ahead, he leaves her with cold indifference. A naturally good man may indulge, but he is not a slave to that indulgence.
Shaw’s great men, as already hinted above, are all naturally good. They are realistic; they see things as they are. They have fixity of purpose which makes them rise above any indulgence of the moment. They have capacity for sustained work and so they are, “able to distance all competitors in the strife of political ambition.” They are hard working because they have more than an average vitality. They are original in the sense that they have overcome common human weaknesses, and so are not the slaves of common temptations. They are magnanimous, impartial and rational, for they have risen above the passions of love and hatred.

Shaw’s concept of greatness is brought out by plays like Caesar and Cleopatra, the Man of Destiny and St. Joan. The lat mentioned play also embodies Shaw’s conception of sainthood. In short, Shaw has expressed himself on a bewildering variety of subjects. However, there is no incoherence, as unity and form are provided by his philosophy.

References:

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