

# G B Shaw's *Pygmalion* : A Social Commentary

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## ABSTRACT

G B Shaw is a versatile dramatist after Shakespeare. He seems to be committed for social upliftment in his plays. He dominated English theatre nearly for sixty year through his skills and concerns towards society by making his plays on serious note with gaiety of wit and humor. His plays are loaded with inner conviction and a universal relevance. For him art for art's sake is not an acceptable pursuit, instead he seems to make a contribution in terms of betterment of the society through his plays. *Pygmalion* is a romance in five acts based on Greek and Roman Mythology of the sculptor Pygmalion. Pygmalion (Prof. Higgins) in the play is not a sculptor like that in mythology, but a phonetician. He transforms an illiterate and uncivilized flower girl into a duchess. This transformation took *Pygmalion* six months and Shaw offers a strong critique of social parameters of class division. It deals with the dynamics of relationships based on varied discourses. Shaw was not satisfied with educational system of his time and in this plays we find that he wants a system of education where students shouldn't have to be made slave, instead to empower them to raise in social and moral status. The paper will focus on the discourse of education and how Shaw deconstructs the social hierarchy. It will also undertake to highlight the role of language in transformation and how social status attained can create problems for a person too.

**Keywords :** *Pygmalion*, Education, Discourse, Wit, Civilized, Transformation, Hierarchy.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The source of G B Shaw's *Pygmalion* is Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in which the sculptor named Pygmalion disgusted with ladies of his time, ridicules them on account of their loose character. He makes a statue and prayed to Goddess Aphrodite to give it life. His prayers get rewarded and the statue turns into a beautiful lady and marry her maker. Here in this legend the patriarchal domination is evident and there are various versions of it as Geoffrey Miles states that Ovid is the inevitable starting-point for any discussions of *Pygmalion*....Ovid's is the oldest version we have, the only substantive ancient version, as the source of all subsequent versions. Indeed, the story as we have it may be essentially his invention-a literary creation rather than a genuine myth" (332).

By moulding the mythological account in his own terms G B Shaw provides a critique of society. He manipulates to deliver the familiar and ignored aspects of society in a novel manner. His plays deliberate on converting society to his own ideas and plans. He rejects the theory of art for art's sake. Art for him is a mean of liberation from

materialism. He wanted to instigate his audience to improve their social conditions.

G B Shaw in this play like other playwrights take the theme of class hierarchy to highlight British society with its social set up. The characters in the play belong to all strata of society: Eliza and Alfred Doolittle are from lower class; Prof Higgins and Col. Pickering belong to upper class. The social distinction is evident in first act of the play where people assemble to take shelter under the church portico. In *Pygmalion* the discourse of class is ordered around the privileged signs of family, clothing, and language. Right from the initial act the difference between Eliza and others is evident. She is the illegitimate child of a broken family thrown out to earn her own living by selling flowers. Her father, Alfred Doolittle, is a common dustman accustomed to drinking, extorting money, and engaged in love affairs. Her family state attaches Eliza to working-class with its culture and way of life which are defined against the upper-class culture negatively.

The strict social set up doesn't allow anybody to meddle with it. Language and class are two important strands in

the play through which Shaw seems to make his point. Higgins' extraordinary skill to identify the place of birth of a person through their accent reveals how a person remains attached to his/her place or class. That erects barriers and difficulty to climb the ladder of social hierarchy. The accent makes one prone to be recognized in context of belongingness. For instance, when Pickering asks Higgins what is he going to do with his skill? He answers that he will teach those people who have become rich but still speak their crude dialect. This statement is valid to an extent because in every society language of higher class is considered as correct and apt. Other versions are not given the same recognition like that of Eliza who speak cockney language. But G B Shaw deconstructs this distinction and other presumptions through Eliza's transformation into a noble lady.

The play is constructed on logical notions and the varied themes are blended in perfect harmony. The phonetic expertise of Higgins is the main theme as how he trains Eliza in six months. The other parallel theme that makes it a strong critique is loss of identity.

Eliza Doolittle a guttersnipe who sells flower on the streets has been shown as a rough diamond that is lustered by language training particularly by Prof. Higgins. Col. Pickering on the other hand grooms her personality through moral support. First act of the play introduces all the characters and the main theme of the play is evident from the setting and aura. Eliza's crude language makes her an experimental object for Higgins. He jot downs every word she speaks in her dialect and when cautioned by a bystander, she protests that she is a good girl and doesn't mean to harm anyone. On this she is rebuked by Prof. Higgins for her boohooing and shows her his notebook in which he has taken notes of her pronunciation: "I say, capt'n; n' baw ya flahr orf a pore gel" (12). This act makes him a centre of attention among the people present there. He answers everyone in acute proficiency because of his expertise. At the end he makes even a strong statement regarding language in relation to Eliza:

A woman who utters such disgusting and depressing noise has no right to be anywhere, no right to live. Remember that you are a human being with a soul and the divine gift of articulate speech, that your native

language is the language of Shakespeare and Milton and The Bible. Don't sit there crooning like a bilious pigeon (16).

This scene sets the play in action and Eliza seems to fathom the relevance of things and next day she arrives at Prof. Higgins laboratory. Eliza has been portrayed as a self-respected and cunning lady. She offers Higgins fee for his lessons that quite impress him and Pickering takes the responsibility of all expenses.

The play also reflects upon how identity of a person is described by clothing and cleanliness. Eliza in the first act wears bruised clothes and her hairs need washing badly. Her unclean condition make Prof. Higgins to ask her take bath first on which her father doesn't recognize her. Thus, Shaw seems to reveal through his character portrayal that in a society certain codes and conducts are important to make one's self acceptable and different from other class of people.

Shaw also depicts from Eliza's habitual utterances like 'bloody' and other expressions that environment plays an important role in language development. Eliza in Higgins house makes a rapid change in her behaviour and her first test at-home party justifies that any subject under experimentation yields to change. Eliza by retaining herself to two topics (Weather and Health) as asked by Higgins seems to perform well. But here the unconscious aspect of human personality has been touched when Eliza deviates from topic to talk about her aunt's death. Despite of her vulgar and improper behaviour she manages to attract Eyensfords by her speech. As a centre of conversation her deviation is backed by Higgins. He defends by saying her speech is a new small talk and that to 'do someone in' means to kill him. After completion of his first experiment on Eliza Higgins is warned by his mother Mrs. Higgins that he is going to ruin her life. This statement is quite similar to Eliza's question after Ambassador's party: "What I am fit for?" Jean Reynolds says:

As Eliza's command of "new speech" grows, she is both empowered alienated, admired and rejected. Despite her dazzling success at the embassy reception, Eliza remains a "disclassed" flower girl who will never be completely accepted in British society. Even Henry Higgins, her creator, is ambivalent about the transformation he has

wrought. She is both a "consort for a king" and "a common idiot (421).

The precise extent to which Eliza really changes, though, is highly ambiguous. Eliza's quick response on Higgins commands seems to deconstruct a social set up where it is believed that some characteristic features are inherent. The royal blood make you behave in certain ways but Shaw deconstructs those notions by exploring limits of conventional ideologies where uncivilized persons are considered very low and unable to change their class. An important question arises how this is possible to make someone the 'other'? Is there any kind of security for that changed self? What about the old ways of living? All these questions problematize the theme of the play and seeks to be looked at from various angles. Shaw has highlighted how the maintenance of status plays a crucial role in the society. Eliza somehow manages to live in Higgins supervision for six months but the life after experiment raises a strong question of identity. Higgins seems confident that she will "relapse" into her old ways. Which is evident at the end of the play. But her refined language and manners becomes hurdle to fit in. She came back to him and unlike the legend of Pygmalion the story finds another twist. Eliza becomes confident and threatens Higgins to make her living by exposing his skills of experiment. That makes out of a subjugated women a lively and confident woman who can stand on her own. The transformation here acts as an artificial makeover to hide the reality. The language as a mean to achieve the desired motive seems to be a problematized mean. Michael Woolf remarks in this regard:

At the centre of the play is an exploration of the relationship between language and class. Language is the means of defining social relations and of transforming self, but it is also an instrument for repression (Woolf 107).

Alfred Doolittle is shown as a typical low class who remains faithful to his social status and finds middle class morality suffocating. Shaw's play of transformation asks: however much one changes one's appearance, can anyone really ever change? Alfred Doolittle is dreading by his luck that makes him middle class gentleman. He finds himself dragged into that state which he loathes and in a protest he remarks, "I have to live for others and

not for myself: that's middle class morality" (87). This assertion from a low class dustman who finds fortune by luck is a counter discourse to feigned complex of middle class or high class superiority. Eliza like that of Caliban in Shakespeare's drama thrust herself in transformation process and at the end sounds exactly in similar tone of him.

The play shows how the belief of one's social class and manners are natural, is false. As Eliza's makeover displays, manners and nobility can be learned. One's class is formed through performance, learning to act in certain ways. And moreover, as Clara Eynsford Hill comments, there is nothing inherently better about one or another performance: "It's all a matter of habit. There's no right or wrong in it." Good and bad manners are just a matter of cultural habit. Ironically, at several moments in the play, lower-class characters are better behaved than their supposedly well-mannered, upper-class counterparts.

At the end of the play Pickering estimates Eliza's performances far better than those of real noble ladies. She seems to be more sober and polite than Higgins. He belongs to high class but is very rude. His mother all the time reminds him to behave properly in front of others, particularly with Eliza. Thus, there is no inherent trait that couldn't be imitated or attained. Shaw through Pygmalion has made an important point that everything is a construct. The language with its queerness makes Higgins expert but he lacks manners. On the other hand Eliza and her father reflects a possibility in social mobility. Shaw seems to question the social set up of class system and offers a critique of hierarchy with a desirability and possibility to achieve high social class.

The deviation from Pygmalion myth affords it the similar ending of *The Doll's House*. Eliza like Nora at the end shuts the oppressive doors and takes a leap in free world to manage her own world. She wants to come to terms with real world. Higgins makes class distinction a fiscal disparity between people and Eliza in garden party acts like a duchess but in reality she remains unacceptable to Higgins. She seems to expect proposal from Higgins. But Higgins remains adamant regarding his unflinching attitude. Eliza chooses to marry Freddy with whom she has an upper hand. That reveals how woman through her choice can make her living happy

and peaceful Higgins remarks at the end of the play resonates with G B Shaw's presumption regarding a free woman; "I like you like this".

## II. CONCLUSION

To conclude, the play reflects upon the changing paradigms and shifts in culture and social strata. The fixed ideological presumptions are shown narrow and merely constructs. The emphasis is on the system of teaching and learning, besides that Shaw makes an important assessment regarding moral values. Pickering is a good teacher in terms of behaviour in comparison with Higgins. Despite the redeeming aspects of transformation, the constraints of sexist world are obvious. Eliza's independent self wants to live free from Higgins and his father to come out of the patriarchal clutches. There is nothing conclusive and the play left the readers in lurch that what's going to happen with Eliza. Instead of a happy conventional ending with marriage or reconciliation at the end, the play offers an open ending. The ending of the play is a sort of problematic and Arthur Ganz rightly argues: "The ending of *Pygmalion* is remarkable not because it is elusive - it could hardly be otherwise - but because it holds in complex balance so much of the richness of the play" (106)..

## III. REFERENCES

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