A Marxist Analysis of the perspective of Shavian Women in the plays *Pygmalion* and *Arms and the Man*

Nishtha Mishra  
Research Scholar  
Department of English and M.E.L  
University of Allahabad  
Allahabad, India

Abstract

The Present research paper attempts to analyse the perspective, statements and understatements made by women in Shaw’s plays Pygmalion and Arms and the Man from the viewpoint of Marxism.

Often while analysing a text from a particular viewpoint, the focus is on a major character that appears to be the author’s mouthpiece in that particular regard. In such an attempt, other characters are ignored even when the viewpoint at hand underlines whatever they say.

Accordingly, to highlight the emergence of New Women in Shaw’s plays as an epitome of free will, Women’s thought on various issues is sidelined. Shaw’s women are not meek Victorian ones but they are mobile-who expand their skills outside the realms of household. They are thinking beings that not only feel but express. However, only those aspects of their thinking process are given weightage that are clearly manifested in dialogues. But those issues that lend their thought a particular rationale are taken for granted.

This paper aims to identify the underlying Marxist influence behind the expressions given vent by Shaw’s ladies- major as well as minor, in the plays Pygmalion and Arms and the Man.
Karl Marx and Friedrich Engel jointly established the Marxist school of thought. The ultimate goal of Marxism has been bringing a classless society, based on the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange. They identified to main classes- Proletariats and bourgeoisies, the struggle of power between who brings about progress in society.

Wikipedia defines Marxism as “a worldview and method of societal analysis that focuses on class relations and societal conflict that uses a materialist interpretation of historical development, and a dialectical view of social transformation.” Marxism brought to light the plight of workers who are either underpaid or who remain unpaid for the products made by them while on the other hand the Capitalist prosper through the profits gained by these commodities. This drives these workers to a state of alienation as they do not own the products they themselves made. This ultimately results in the workers becoming ‘deskilled’ which ultimately adversely affect the quality and quantity of commodity and commerce. The alienated workers undergo the process of reification, i.e. they and their relationship to the social phenomena is perceived as things and those with things.

Marxism popularised the concept of socialist realism in literature which glorified the proletariat’s struggle towards societal progress. These ideas guided both literary creation and official literary criticism in the Soviet Union, where works focused on the lives of the different classes. In the years since then, the beliefs of some Marxist schools regarding literary theory have been modified to acknowledge that literary creation is a result of both subjective inspiration and the objective influence of the writer's surroundings.

Marxist criticism makes a division between the ‘overt’ (surface) and ‘covert’ (latent) content of a literary work and then studies this covert subject matter of the literary work in relation to basic Marxist themes such as class struggle, or the progression of society etc. Another method of Marxist literary criticism studies a work within the framework of the social-class and status of its author. Sometimes literary text is interpreted in accordance with the social assumptions and political circumstances that make the consumption of a particular subject matter or genre popular.

The English literary critic and cultural theorist, Terry Eagleton, defines Marxist criticism this way: “Marxist criticism is not merely a 'sociology of literature', concerned with how novels get published and whether they mention the working class. Its aim is to explain the
literary work more fully; and this means a sensitive attention to its forms, styles and meanings. But it also means grasping those forms, styles and meanings as the product of a particular history.”

Marxism generally focuses on the clash between the dominant and repressed classes in any given age and also may encourage art to imitate what is often termed an "objective" reality. And thus it found successful inclusion in the Feminist Movement. Marxist feminism is a branch of feminism focused on investigating and explaining the ways in which women are oppressed through systems of capitalism and private property.

Engels observes in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* that the shift from feudalist enslavement to ownership of land also affected the status of women. He argues that a woman's subordination is not a result of her biological disposition but of social relations which is similar to those opined by feminists such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar who gave the idea of ‘social castration’ with regard to women’s lack of social power. Engels explains the traditional stress on sexual mores to be observed by women was to ensure the passing of inheritance to their real offspring. This was the traditional concept in ancient slave owning classes that passed on the subordinates when feudalism ended.

As such, gender oppression is closely related to class oppression and the relationship between men and women in society is similar to the relations between proletariat and bourgeoisie. On this account women's subordination is a function of class oppression, maintained (like racism) because it serves the interests of capital and the ruling class; it divides men against women, privileges working class men relatively within the capitalist system in order to secure their support; and legitimates the capitalist class's refusal to pay for the domestic labour assigned, unpaid, to women.

Women therefore have to face dual struggle for power and status—one at the level of class and the other at the level of gender, one at a broad, unfamiliar setting of society and the other within the narrower, familiar setting of their household. Women workers are more underprivileged in terms of wages than their male counterparts and women are never paid for household work.

Marxist feminists like Margaret Benston and Peggy Morton stressed that in the capitalist system, two types of labour exist-productive and reproductive. The productive labour is a remunerated one either monetarily or in kind while reproductive labour is that unpaid labour that we all perform in our private sphere for ourselves which includes the
entire realm of domesticity, the majority share of which if not whole is on the feminine
gender.

The present research paper seeks to present the perspective of Shavian women in the
light of the above mentioned issues that Marxism brought to the fore. Class consciousness,
clash of classes, social mobility, ownership clash, remuneration prospects, effects of
underpay and author’s class representation in the text are addressed here from the point of
view of women characters in the plays Pygmalion and Arms and the Man.

Shaw being an iconoclast himself scrutinizes social institutions relentlessly under the
cold searching light of his penetrating intellect and projects the evils inherent in these
institutions. He stated once:

“I write plays with the deliberate object of converting nation to my opinions in these
matters.”

Pygmalion has class distinction at the centre of its plot. As Marxism attempts to bring
a classless society through common ownership of products, Prof. Higgins in Pygmalion
attempts to remove class distinction through phonetic training. We can see the nobility of his
cause when in Act III he tells his mother, Mrs.Higgins:

“HIGGINS: But you have no idea how frightfully interesting it is to take a human being
and change her into quite a different human being by creating a new speech for her. It’s
filling up the deepest gulf that separates class from class and soul from soul.”

Similarly in Arms and the Man Marxism is voiced through Bluntschli who in ActV
remarks:

“BLUNTSCHLI: My rank is the highest known in Switzerland: I am a free citizen.”

What could have been a better exemplification of classless society and the perception of one
of its member? However this is what the heroes of these plays have opined while the present
study attempts to explore the realm of women’s perspective with regard to the Marxist issues.
Shavian women are a class apart from their contemporaries in their outlook and perception of
the world. They are not of that kind that can be subdued. Their expressions are backboned by
some rationale. Educated or not, they are women of intellect capable of accompanying a
thinking mind and feeling heart together. They are often a live manifestation of the
reformative modernization, presenting before the women of society, a new role model—
a figure capable of voicing her choices and having the courage to pursue them. And as such
they often surpass the heroes of their plays in popularity by outwitting them. They are no
longer the weaker sex but an essential pillar for the manifestation of ‘Life-force’. They embody the ‘New Woman’ in every inch and ounce of them.

However, *Pygmalion* and *Arms and the Man* are some of Shaw’s plays in which the hero has the upper hand yet their heroines ultimately are able to settle the bargain in their favour. Not only the heroines but also other ladies in these plays were able to leave their mark in the minor role they are playing. Their sole purpose is not limited to looking pretty and arranging matrimony but to opine ideas that can be analysed by the readers or the audiences. Clash of classes can be visibly seen in Eliza’s constant defiance “I’m a good girl, I am.” in *Pygmalion* Act I and Act II. She refuses to be submissive or frightened against Higgins offensive remarks. When in Act II, Higgins tries to dismiss her as useless to him as he had got the records of her accent, she reacts sharply and says:

“THE FLOWER GIRL: Don’t you be so saucy. You ain’t heard what I come for yet.”

In the same line she goes on to display and flaunt her class mobility from the newly acquired riches as she asks Mrs. Pearce:

“THE FLOWER GIRL: Did you tell him I come in a taxi.”

The class struggle issue reaches its climax after Eliza’s transformation in Act IV. She becomes an outcast for either of the two classes:

“LIZA: I sold flowers. I didn’t sell myself. Now You’ve made a lady of me I’m not fit to sell anything else. I wish you’d left me where you found me.”

And again in Act V, she regrets:

“LIZA: Oh! If I could go back to my flower basket! I should be independent of both you and father and all the world! Why did you take my independence from me? Why did I give it up? I’m a slave now, for all my fine clothes”

So rigid were the class systems that Eliza couldn’t make an entry in either of them with her recently acquired lady-like education. The problem of what would “become of her” after the experiment was over was foreseen by Mrs. Pearce as well as Mrs. Higgins. In Act III, Mrs. Higgins says;

“MRS. HIGGINS: The advantages of that poor woman who was here just now! The manners and habits that disqualify a fine lady from earning her own living without giving her a fine lady’s income!”

These Shavian women could empathize with Eliza in the matter concerning this class struggle- the issue now being that of status maintenance just as the Eynsford Hill family. Eliza’s future in laws are a hapless victim of class struggle and middle class morality
who in their attempts to maintain their social status at surface level are becoming hollow to their financial roots. They portray the class of genteel poverty who try so rigidly to prevent their downward social mobility that they are hardly able to fit in either due to their lack of proper allowance. The plight of this family can be read aloud in these words of Mrs. Eynsford Hill:

“MRS. EYNSFORD HILL: You mustn’t mind Clara. We’re so poor and she gets so few parties, poor child! She doesn’t quite know.”

Eliza’s low class vocabulary causes quite a sensation at Mrs. Higgins at home day and Mrs. Eynsford Hill’s remarks on it again depict clash of social classes:

“MRS. EYNSFORD HILL: I daresay I am very old-fashioned; but I do hope you won’t begin using that expression, Clara. I have got accustomed to hear you talking about men as rotters, and calling everything filthy and beastly; though I do think it horrible and unladylike. But this last is really too much.”

In Arms and the Man the very introduction of Louka embody clash between the classes of her masters and her own:

“...Louka, a proud girl in a pretty Bulgarian peasant’s dress with double apron, so defiant that her servility to Raina is almost insolent.”

Throughout the play, whenever Louka encounters Sergius there is no trace of submissive and servile attitude in her. She defends her own class and work with impressive argument while justifying her prospects of marrying an upper-class like Sergius:

“LOUKA: I have to get your room ready for you: to sweep and dust, to fetch and carry. How could that degrade me if it did not degrade you to have it done for you? But if I were Empress of Russia, above everyone in the world, then!! Ah then, though according to you I could shew no courage at all, you should see, you should see.....I would marry the man I loved, which no other queen in Europe has the courage to do.”

The concept of reproductive labour given by Marxist Feminists can be clearly traced in the above lines by Louka. In the same strain she tells him:

“LOUKA: then you can come to me; and I will refuse you. You are not good enough for me.”

Louka’s struggle is to get what she deserves more. Her class clash is a result of aiming at better prospects in life. And in this clash She is backed by one of her own class Nicola, who though her fiancée retreats immediately seeing that her prospects of marriage are being bettered through Sergius.
Desirability to stay as a respectable and desirous member of their class, their members often stoop to these kinds of affectations. This not only increases class consciousness but also furthers the gulfs between various classes. Mrs. Higgins first reaction to the news of Eliza’s arrival at her at home day was of shock:

“HIGGINS: Well, its like this. She’s a common flowergirl. I picked her off the kerbstone.

MRS. HIGGINS: And invited her to my at-home!”

Receiving a low class, common flower girl as her guest was quite out of question had she not been convinced of the skills of her own son. And immediately after her guests were gone she declares that Eliza is not yet presentable:

“MRS. HIGGINS: You silly boy, of course she’s not presentable. She’s a triumph of your art and her dressmaker’s; but if you suppose for a moment that she doesn’t give herself away in every sentence she utters, you must be perfectly cracked about her.”

She concludes that upper class will be able to see through Eliza’s extremely common content of conversation and her identity will be betrayed and class consciousness of Aristocrats won’t allow her to intermingle with even after her portrayal of extremely refined manners. Similarly, class consciousness prevented Eynsford Hill children from better education as their status maintenance cost them greater fortune. But Clara, in spite of her mother’s desperate attempts moved downwards on the social scale by joining as a Lady’s assistance at a shop. This might have hurt her social interests but it definitely bettered her materialistic prospects.

The plight of Eynsford Hill family in their genteel poverty is quite similar to Shaw’s own in his childhood. Mrs. Eynsford Hill struggling to prepare her children according to her class’ social manners is quite similar to that of Shaw’s mother.

It is the class consciousness that forces Petkoff couple in Arms and the Man to boast of high class indicators like library and electric bell when in reality their library merely had an arrangement of some novels in a cabinet.

“CATHERINE: You are a barbarian at heart still, Paul. I hope you behaved yourself before all those Russian officers.

PETKOFF: I did my best. I took care to let them know that we have a library.

CATHERINE: Ah; but you didn’t tell them that we have an electric bell in it? I have had one put up.”

Ownership clash, remuneration prospects and effects of underpay such as alienation and reification can be clearly found in Shaw’s Pygmalion with their effect on female psyche. The
Ownership clash regarding the success of Eliza’s training began in Act IV with the indifference of Prof. Higgins and Colonel Pickering soon after the Ambassadors Garden Party. In the whole scenario Higgins appeared to be like a heartless, exploiting Capitalist who denies Eliza her share of credit in winning his bet:

HIGGINS: You won my bet! You! Presumptuous insect!”

The issue of ownership of Eliza’s learning again arises when she proposes to be a teacher of the same in Act V:

“LIZA: I’ll go and be a teacher.
HIGGINS: Whatll you teach, in heaven’s name?
LIZA: What you taught me. I’ll teach phonetics.
Liza: I’ll offer myself as an assistant to that hairy faced Hungarian.
HIGGINS: What! That imposter! That humbug! That toadying ignoramus! Teach him my methods! My discoveries! You take one step in his direction and I’ll wring your neck.”

In Act II, When Mrs. Pearce asks the question of the terms and conditions of Eliza’s stay, Higgins was hardly considerate about the wages although afterwards Eliza took off much of the affairs of domesticity and Higgins engagements from the hands of Mrs. Pearce:

“MRS. PEARCE: But whats to become of her? Is she to be paid anything? Do be sensible, sir.
HIGGINS: Oh pay her whatever is necessary: put it down in the housekeeping book. What on earth will she want with money? She’ll have her food and her clothes. She’ll only drink if you give her money.”

A similar excuse was given by Burgess in *Candida* for underpaying his workers. However, here again the issue of non-payment of reproductive labour comes to the fore- the labour which is not remunerated being that of the private household sphere.

Again, as for remuneration Eliza wasn’t offered a word of gratitude and was treated by the two men as if she was a work of word, a thing that has been completed now and needs no further attention. On previous occasions Higgins had often attributed her with object metaphors like a baggage from gutter who can be thrown back to the place from where she was picked once his purpose was over. And now He hardly cared for her any more than that. As such she was what Marxists would have called, ‘thingified’ by him.
Her disposition after the Garden Party was one of detached alienation:

“She is tired: her pallor contrasts strongly with her dark eyes and hair; and her expression is almost tragic. She takes off her cloak; puts her fan and gloves on piano; and sits down on the bench, brooding and silent.”

And the ultimate result was Eliza becoming ‘deskilled’. Eliza who was the apostle of flawless phonetic speech at the Garden Party few hours back began to stutter and use grammatically incorrect speech of her earlier days under the dissatisfaction caused by Higgins indifference and ingratitude:

“LIZA: You don’t care. I know you don’t care. You wouldn’t care if I was dead. I’m nothing to you—not so much as them slippers.
HIGGINS: Those slippers.
LIZA: Those slippers. I don’t think it made any difference now.”

However her rebellion against Higgins’ bullying finally forces him to acknowledge her worth in Act V. Higgins appeals to Eliza are like that of an owner of a factory whose workers have gone on strike and he tries all that is in his power to make them return to work – from threats to requests, from bullying to coaxing. But ultimately the communist cause won causing the capitalist to surrender:

“HIGGINS: I can do without anybody. I have my own spark of divine fire. But I shall miss you Eliza. I have learnt something from your idiotic notions: I confess that humbly and gratefully. And I have grown accustomed to your voice and appearance. I like them, rather.”

Summing up in the light of the above discussion, it is clear that at many places the perspective of Shavian ladies is undoubtedly underlined by Marxist influences. Shaw’s women fight both the oppression by opposite gender and ruling class. The ‘New Woman’ of Shaw embodies ideals that are not of submissive but combative kind. They are well aware of the social changes conductive to uplifting their status and quite inclusive of those thoughts that will help them do so. They take the liberty of choice voicing their perspectives and claiming their rights. They play a crucial role in bridging the gap that separates the two genders across the classes by claiming identical rights for better future prospects. They actively break class barriers and are socially mobile. Thus, their thinking mind prevents them from becoming a ‘Doll-figure’ and expands their horizon from a Victorian household to the whole expanse of Man’s world.
Work Cited


