



Philosophical and Moral precepts in George Bernard Shaw's *Man and Superman*

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ABSTRACT:

The paper strives to unfold intricate ideas emanated by George Bernard Shaw in his *Man and Superman*. Shaw's play is a candid sarcasm on conventional notions about gender roles. In his play, Shaw discusses the significance of Life force and the way it strives to accomplish its goals through characters who overtly subvert the customs of the totalizing institutions or sluggish morals of the society. Shaw even portrays Don Juan in unconventional manner and identifies him with Tanner, protagonist of the play. Ann Whitefield is also shown as an iconoclast who advertently follows her impulse in not only trapping Tanner but also making him powerless in her pursuit to marry him. The Hell scene in the play offers multiple contours regarding disparate issues celebrated by Shaw.

Keywords: Don Juan, Hell scene, New woman, Life Force, Superman

Man and Superman as a Don Juan play

1. Introduction of the playwright:

George Bernard Shaw is one of only two people to have won both an Academy Award and a Nobel Prize for Literature. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1925 and the committee in admiration of his works underscored that they were "marked by both idealism and humanity, its stimulating satire often being infused with a singular poetic beauty". With typical Shavian wit, he initially declined to accept, saying "I can forgive Nobel for inventing dynamite, but only a fiend in human form could have invented the Nobel Prize". (Five things to know about George Bernard Shaw)

Shaw won his Oscar in 1939 for writing screenplay and adapting his own play *Pygmalion* for the screen. Shaw was the only winner of both awards until 2016. The play commences with an epistle dedicated to Arthur Walkley, a critic and friend of Shaw who had lately urged him to write a Don Juan play and this suggestion led Shaw to pen his magnum opus *Man and Superman*. Shaw's story of Don Juan is written in unconventional tone and does not resemble the accounts written by the Gabriel Tellez and Lord Byron. His story is a blend of irony, sarcasm, wit, meditation and of different philosophies on life force and creative evolution which are evinced splendidly in the play.

1.1 Origin of Don Juan:

The character of Don Juan was originally created by the Spanish monk and dramatist Gabriel Tellez in his play *The Trickster of Seville*. He is represented as a diabolical figure in the play, an immoral person, a rebel who is against God, religion and traditions. He lives a life of unconstrained licentiousness. Throughout the centuries many writers were captivated by the personality and the concept of the Don Juan and his character is featured in many literary and musical works. For example: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart opera *Don Giovanni*, Molière's play *Dom Juan ou le festin de Pierre* and Lord Byron's famous poem *Don Juan*. It was actually Byron who concocted the character of Don Juan as a womanizer, a ravisher and devourer of women, a libertine and a lecherous wanderer and an incorrigible vagabond.

1.2 Shaw's Don Juan:

Triggered by the Arthur Walkley's suggestion Shaw created his own version of Don Juan which is very different from the traditional one as represented in the old stories and legends. Shaw's Don Juan is not a philanderer but is a philosopher. The only similarity which Shaw has maintained between the original one and the Shavian one is that both are by impulse rebellious in nature, dissidents and iconoclasts. But the Shaw's Don Juan exhibits the dominant ideas and philosophies of the play. His Don Juan is ambitious, intelligent and a revolutionary man who follows his instincts and desires and is

against any established institution. Shaw's Don Juan forecasts the coming of the higher race of humans popularised as "Superman" in the play. His ideas are strongly put forward in the form of conversation between the different characters of the play.

1.3 Jack Tanner as Don Juan:

Apart from the hell scene where it is shown that the Don Juan Tenorio is somewhat similar to Jack Tanner in appearance as well as in ideology. But in the whole play, it is very much evident that the Jack Tanner is actual Shavian Don Juan. The poem of Lord Byron has portrayed the Don Juan as the ravisher of women, a pursuer who chases women for his own lust and runs away but Shaw's Don Juan incarnated as Jack Tanner is chased by the women but he runs away before any women could attempt to ravish him. Tanner has been represented like Don Juan of the play who persists with different outlook and principles as he is witty, intelligent, convention breaker. He is not the one who believes in violating the chastity of women. He has logical ideas regarding any topic and shatters the norms created by any existing society or an institution. For example, when it was revealed by Violet she is going to be a mother soon everyone is flabbergasted except Tanner. Everybody suspects her pregnancy out of wedlock and the child to be illegitimate but it is only Tanner who is not bothered by this news. In fact he is happy and congratulates Violet and exclaims:

But I know . . . you were right to follow your instinct that vitality and bravery are the greatest qualities a woman can have and motherhood her solemn initiation into womanhood and that the fact of your not being legally married matters not. (66)

Tanner is an absolute cynic that is why Ramsden in the Act 1 is unwilling to make him the co-guardian of Mr. Whitefield's daughters. Tanner has sharp intellect and he has also written licentious book titled as "Revolutionist Handbook" in which he discussed topics related to sex, morality, social relationships, class-distinction etc.

Unlike the Don Juan of old stories who was a libertine Shaw's Don Juan or Tanner is completely different who sometimes appears as a misogynist as he resists the temptations of Ann Whitefield and runs away from her. It is only because he believes in the ultimate job of the man as the medium of creating humans of higher faculties not as the one who makes love for his own selfish desires and pleasures. His only concern is the evolution of human race. Tanner is also the mouthpiece of Shaw's ideas and theories which advocate that the only purpose of man is to create a superhuman of new faculties and higher intelligence. Throughout the play, the concept of life force, selective breeding and creative evolution is propagated. Tanner is not associated with any lecherous activity like Don Juan. He has his own point of views and ideas and doesn't have any profligacy in his character. In the whole play, Ann is pursuing Tanner but he resists her charms and temptations, although he is very well aware of this fact that women is the stronger of the sexes. He compares a woman to a spider and a man to a fly and the way women lay traps for the men to capture them. All his efforts to deny the love of Ann and her charms make him a deliberately inverted Don Juan.

1.4 Hell Scene:

The scene is very well integrated with the whole play and is of very significant importance as most of the philosophical ideas are presented in the dialogue between Don Juan and the Devil. The hell scene gives the more vivid description of the Shaw's ideas. He has incorporated various characters from the original story of the Don Juan eg: Don Juan Tenorio represents Jack Tanner, Dona Anna represents Ann Whitefield, the statue representing Dona Anna's father. It is mentioned in the play that Mr. Whitefield had died and in the hell scene Dona Anna's father has also passed away. Earlier the traditional story runs parallel with the original story and makes it highly fantastical. The ideas expressed in the scene are highly philosophical and are put forward in the conversations between the characters. The various topics discussed are as: role of women as selective breeders, the relationship of women and men, life force, creative evolution, marriage, faith, sin, time, wickedness, virtues, death, hope, duty, civilization etc. The hell scene in itself is the whole play as it brings the Shavian ideas forward and makes it remarkable and is still considered as unsurpassed in the literature.

2. Shaw's Ann as both type and individual in *Man and Superman*:

The portrayal of Ann Whitefield, the female protagonist in *Man and Superman* is considered as one of the greatest achievements of George Bernard Shaw. Ann Whitefield is a complex character and the entire play hinges on her actions, machinations and contrivances.

2.1 Character analysis of Ann Whitefield:

Ann Whitefield is an independent, strong, resolute, intractable, and a beautiful young lady. The most astonishing attribute that she possesses is her strong will and determination. Ann Whitefield is a true representation of Shaw's theory of woman, which states that it is actually a woman who pursues a man and the one who makes the first move in a man and woman relationship or in a love affair or marriage.

According to Shaw woman is the hunter while the man is the one who is hunted, and the new woman is the woman who demands equality. Ann Whitefield is an extremely clever, mendacious and hypocritical young woman, who wants to marry Jack Tanner by hook or by crook to have a better future and a better progeny- a Superman. Her pursuit of Jack Tanner is not only a romantic interest but also a way to ensure the viability of her family's legacy. She is an iconoclast, born and nurtured in an independent family and also rejects all the old customs and orthodoxy. She has a dream of having a good, smart and well to do husband and a happy family, for which she rejects Octavius' marriage proposal and convinces Tanner to marry her, as she thinks Tanner would be an ideal husband as well as an ideal father. Supposedly, she seems to be dutiful daughter, but she plays the role of an obedient daughter only when it is beneficial for her. She does not find it necessary to discuss any matter with her mother before she makes up her mind. However, she gives the

impressions as if she is fulfilling the desires of others. She loves doing whatever she likes, but she gives the impressions as if she is fulfilling the wishes of her parents by saying, “Father wished me to” and “Mother wouldn’t like it”. She succeeds in maintaining the image of herself as a dutiful daughter in front of the others. Although, Ramsden becomes Ann Whitefield’s guardian, however he too can’t see the deceitful nature of Ann and he thinks, “She is wonderfully dutiful girl. Her father’s desire would be sacred in her” and “I don’t believe she has ever since given her own wish as a reason for doing anything”. (33)

Ann is also Octavius’ lady love, who loves her dearly and wants her as his wife. To him, “She is an enchantingly beautiful woman, in whose presence the world becomes transfigured” (41). While Octavius is sincere in his love for Ann, she on the other hand is manipulative and hypocrite. She uses Octavius for her personal interests and to make Jack Tanner jealous. Tanner has no intentions of marrying her, but she manages to compel Tanner and accomplishes her goal.

2.2 Ann Whitefield as a ‘Type’:

Since Ann Whitefield is the lead female character of *Man and Superman*, the entire play relies on her actions. G.B Shaw has conveyed his own thoughts about woman’s role in society through Ann’s character. Ann represents every woman of the society. In *Man and Superman*, Shaw has given his theory of Life Force. The ‘Life Force’ is the concept of procreation and this force is represented by characters who seek to procreate and continue the generation. Ann Whitefield is an intelligent character with a strong personality and is seen as a representation of women in general. With the help of Ann’s character, Shaw explores many ideas and themes about gender roles and relationships. He also criticizes the system of the society which restrains women’s opportunities, and restricts them to the typical and orthodox roles of wives and mothers, and curtails their freedom. Ann’s character also puts light on the problems and struggles that can occur between the love relationships of men and women. G.B Shaw represents Ann as an agent of Life Force, as woman is the breeder and the one who carries on the generations.

The role of woman according to the law of nature is that of a breeder and to produce the next generation and in order to have a good progeny she must find a suitable husband for her. This is one of the major characteristics of a woman. Ann being a typical woman always wants to have a good husband and a family, which is the dream of almost every woman. Ann by using her wit and hypocrisy successfully achieves her goal of marrying Jack Tanner. Like other women she is also manipulative as she manipulates and convinces Ramsden to be her guardian along with Jack Tanner, they both are unwilling to work together, as they share a bitter relationship with each other, but are ultimately convinced. Tanner with no other option left also gets ready to be her guardian, even though he knows very well that, “Ann will do just exactly what she likes. And what’s more she’ll force us to advise her to do it, and she’ll put the blame on us if it turns out badly”. (40)

Ann is typical of a woman who propagates Shaw’s theory of Life Force. Although men think that they are after women and woo them, but in reality women are the one who select a suitable father for their better progeny and make the men breadwinner for themselves and their children.

2.3 Ann Whitefield as an ‘Individual’:

From the above discussions it is not wrong to say that ‘Ann is every woman but every woman is not Ann’. While Ann has many characteristics in common with other women, but at the same time she also possess some unique characteristics, which makes her different from other women.

Ann being born and raised in a liberal household happens to be free from all orthodoxies. She is complex and multifaceted character who defies traditional gender roles. She is quick-witted, well-educated, clever, and a smart woman. Usually women are supposed to be emotionally weak and one who is manipulated and wooed by men. But according to Shaw’s theory of woman, women are the hunters and men are hunted. Women are the one who are stronger and the one who can make a man slave. Ann fits perfectly in this theory of Shaw. Ann like other women does not act romantically in a love relationship. She deals with every matter and situation with the help of her wit and not emotions, as she is sensible and thoughtful and not guided by emotions as other women. Ann is independent and challenges the old customs and orthodoxy and also challenges the traditional gender role, which was the central theme of “Women’s Right Movement”. She is fearless and always speaks her mind without being afraid and always pursues her goals.

For she is not guided by emotions like other women, she rejects Octavius, as he holds romantic inclinations for her. Tanner, according to Ann is an absolutely perfect mate as he satisfies every requirement which Ann is looking for her husband and for a father to the superman. Ann is an individual being who thinks for a better future and better generation. Although, she knows very well that Octavius loves her dearly and may always keep her happy, but he will not be able to become an ideal father as Tanner would.

Therefore, Ann represents herself as an individual being, as there many individual qualities she possess which are absent in other women. She is a skilled manipulator who can easily trick and manipulate people by using deception and playing games for her profit. She is self-centered and committed to her own self-interest and can even go to any extent in order to accomplish her goals. Shaw describes her as a vital genius and an enthusiastic character. She is capable of controlling any situation with the help of her wit and intelligence. She also controls and struggles with her own emotions and desires. All these make her a woman of a new kind and an individual being with her own unique qualities.

3. Shaw's concept of life force and superman in *Man And Superman*:

Man and Superman subtitled as A Comedy and A Philosophy evinces Shaw's notions in the conflict between man as spiritual creator and woman as guardian of the biological continuity of the human race. The play incorporates Shaw's concept of the "Life Force" and satirizes the relationship between the sexes. Shaw's concept of life force and superman in *Man and Superman*:

3.1 Theory of Life Force:

In *Man and Superman* George Bernard Shaw gives his theory of Life Force. It is an optimistic approach of a creative force which guides a breeder or guardian of human race, a woman to find best partner or vital man, an intellectual, unconventional and philosopher to create a Superman, which by his ideas and philosophies can create change in conventional society and will help life force to create a better hierarchical order in the world which will eventually lead to the evolution of man. Shaw's theory of life force contrasts Darwin's theory of evolution, he didn't believe in the survival of the fittest, he believed that the world relies upon the process of creative selection.

"Life is a force which has made innumerable experiments in organizing itself."

3.2 Concept of Superman in *Man and Superman*:

Shaw's title derives from Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophical novel, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In his text, Nietzsche uses the term "superman" (*Übermensch*) to refer to an ideal, superior version of humanity.

George Bernard Shaw believed that most people get married and have children for wrong reasons; he believes that they should be partnering with a mate that exhibits physical and mental qualities that are likely to produce beneficial traits or in other words a Superman.

The philosophical idea of the "Superman" is not a person with magical powers or person with super hero qualities, the Superman from Shaw's play is a man who possesses qualities like superior intellect, cunningness, intuition, power to defy obsolete moral codes and champions self defined virtues. A person of such integrity will concoct a new step in the hierarchical ladder towards new evolutionary generation.

Shaw believed that mankind had progressed in altering agriculture, livestock, microscopic organisms and this altering had been proven to be a revolutionary step towards the development of humans from hunters and gatherers into a man with lots of invention, discoveries and technologies. He had his belief that man can also be altered by mating best genes to produce a new trait with magnificent qualities by which the chain of evolution will be in continuous progress.

4. Conclusion:

The inclusion of hell scene and characters of original Don Juan, and the character of Tanner akin to Don Juan in some aspects make *Man and Superman* a perfect example of the Don Juan play. Shaw took the theme of Don Juan and converted it into something exceptional even Arthur Walkley, one who suggested Shaw to write on Don Juan could not have thought of this type of storyline and persona of Don Juan. Shavian Don Juan is witty, intelligent, philosophical and very well read in different subjects which makes him the character that Shaw wanted to become his spokesperson in conveying his philosophies.

Ann Whitefield is a representation of both type and individual in *Man and Superman*. She shares many common characteristics with most of the women such as being an agent of 'Life Force'. Ann like other women is one who is the breeder or producer of next generation. Like other women she is ambitious and wants a husband of her choice, a good progeny and a prosperous life, for which she uses every possible way to marry Jack Tanner. Ann Whitefield is a representation of women in general. Since, Ann share many common qualities with other women, but at the same time she also possess many individual qualities.

She is not guided by emotions as other women. She works with her wit, not emotions and always act unromantically in a love relationship. She is a kind of practical woman and not an emotional one. She is independent, iconoclast and not afraid of speaking the truth.

Man and Superman defines the idea how life force an evolutionary force is used by breeding woman to find a perfect partner or a perfect father to produce a Superman, it includes literal meaning that what qualities should a Superman possess. Shaw was also highly influenced by the personalities of Napoleon Bonaparte, Oliver Cromwell and Julius Caesar. The play is also viewed in abiological development of mankind by mating best genes to produce a new trait of human being known as Superman.

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