

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 12. Issue 3. 2025 (July-Sept.)

ISSN
INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

Choice Feminism in G B Shaw's *Arms and the Man*

Dr. Megha Ramteke

Department of English, Dr. Madhukarrao Wasnik PWS College of Arts,
Commerce and Science, Nagpur.

[doi: 10.33329/ijelr.12.3.134](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.12.3.134)



Article information

Article Received:26/07/2025
Article Accepted:23/08/2025
Published online:29/08/2025

Abstract

In the oeuvre of Irish writer and political activist George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), *Arms and the Man* (1894) stand as one of the most influential comedies that conveys a profound message concerning social transformation, particularly in relation to the empowerment of women. The narrative exemplifies a contemporary interpretation of feminism, namely 'Choice Feminism.' This modern concept, articulated by Linda Hirshman in 2006, underscores the autonomy of choice, enabling women to express and assert their personal decisions and lifestyles. Although George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man* was penned in 1894, it remarkably encapsulates the fundamental tenets of choice feminism. The term itself had yet to be coined during Shaw's lifetime; nonetheless, he emerged as a pioneering advocate for social change through his artistic endeavors, championing women's rights and their freedom to make choices regarding their careers, families, and personal relationships. This play offers a novel perspective on women as autonomous and responsible citizens, capable of forming individual preferences, making choices, and confronting societal prejudices against women's decisions.

Keywords: Choice Feminism, Patriarchal structure, women empowerment, liberation.

'Choice Feminism' is a modern concept of Feminism and the term "Choice Feminism" was coined by Linda Hirshman in 2006 in her book entitled, *Get to Work: A Manifesto for Women of the World*. It emphasizes the freedom to choice enabling women to articulate and vocalize her personal choices, and way of life. George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man*, though written in 1894 spectacularly reflects the core principles of choice feminism. The term choice feminism was not even coined during age of Shaw but he was the harbinger of Social Change through his art advocating women's cause and her personal freedom to make choices about their lifestyles including career, family, and personal relationships. This play imparts a new insight about women as free and responsible citizens capable of having individual preferences of making choices and challenging social prejudices against women's choices.

Choice feminism aspires to be inclusive and eschew judgment, striving to encompass a diverse array of individuals by celebrating the principle of individual autonomy. Individual choices, regardless of whether those choices conform to traditional feminist ideals, serve as instruments for attaining societal equality. It is the ultimate expression of her liberation and autonomy.

"Despite its individualistic aspect, choice feminism differs from individualist feminism in that it is not deliberately a movement. It has been associated with neoliberalism and postfeminism." (Wikipedia)

Although Choice Feminism has faced critique for neglecting the systemic and structural social determinants that can constrain or impede a woman's autonomy as Susan Faludi says, "Feminism's agenda is basic: It asks that women not be forced to 'choose' between public justice and private happiness." Raina and Louka seem to subvert these limitations through their individual choices. They openly and confidently defy the social pressures and expectations, Economic constraints, Racial and Class inequalities, and Patriarchal structure.

When Raina Petkoff first encounters Captain Bluntschil, she boldly asserts her identity and courage, defiantly challenging the societal expectation of a helpless woman. This is a deliberate choice to stand her ground and refuse to be defined by her fears. She shows her acute self-awareness and chooses a role she has deliberately chosen to inhabit. She is not merely a damsel in distress; she is actively enacting this part for her own advantage and to uphold her social standing.

It is provocative and contemplative that Raina elects to extend her assistance to a soldier hailing from the opposing nation. While her father, Major Paul Petkoff, and her fiancé, Major Sergius Saranoff, who serves in the same regiment as Raina's father, are engaged in combat against their adversaries, she boldly defies national and societal constraints, prioritizing humanity above all else. It demonstrates that women possess their own independent perspectives and insights, which can often surpass those of their male counterparts.

Raina is troubled by the man who chooses to descend the pipe from the window of her room on the grounds of humanitarianism. She tries to dissuade him and decides to save him,

RAINA.

(anxiously). But if you fall?

MAN.

I shall sleep as if the stones were a feather bed. Good-bye. *(He makes boldly for the window, and his hand is on the shutter when there is a terrible burst of firing in the street beneath.)*

RAINA.

(rushing to him). Stop! *(She catches him by the shoulder, and turns him quite round.)* They'll kill you...

RAINA.

(clinging to him). They're sure to see you: it's bright moonlight. I'll save you – oh, how can you be so indifferent? You want me to save you, don't you?...

RAINA.

Come away from the window – please. *(She coaxes him back to the middle of the room. He submits humbly. She releases him, and addresses him patronizingly.)* Now listen. You must trust to our hospitality. You do not yet know in whose house you are. I am a Petkoff. (Shaw, 17)

When she chooses her Chocolate Cream Soldier back and not fiancé, Sergius it signifies her profound decision rather than a mere childish outburst. She rejects the false bravado of Sergius and prefers to accept Chocolate Cream Soldier, Swiss Bluntschil who is genuine, simple and kind with integrity of character. She is prioritizing substance over superficiality and her own fulfillment over societal conventions.

The role of Catherine is equally pivotal in exemplifying choice feminism within the play. Upon discovering the concealment of an enemy soldier, Catherine chooses to support her daughter rather than reproach her or surrender the soldier to her own national officers. Here, Catherine also demonstrates her independent agency within the patriarchal social structure. She is unperturbed by her husband's potential reaction to her decision. She dismantles the archetype of the 'angel in the house,' who selflessly serves and fulfills the desires of men. By embracing her own perspective as a woman, she appreciates the benevolence and gentlemanly character of Bluntschli.

Raina exhibits remarkable courage in confronting Sergius, directly challenging his character as he flirts with Louka. She unveils the true nature of his character and resolutely rejects the notion of him as her prospective life partner. Raina discards her enchantment with the romanticism of relationships and love, opting instead for a pragmatic approach in her selection of a life partner. Her decision is not swayed by Bluntschli's wealth, but rather by the integrity and benevolence that he embodies, as she emphatically declares, "The lady says that he can keep his tablecloths and his omnibuses. I am not here to be sold to the highest bidder." (Shaw, 75)

Likewise, Louka's character is also very strong, bold and assertive who openly defies and challenges social system of Class, economic constraints, patriarchal norms and social expectation. She refutes the social pressures and chooses her own destiny.

When Louka confronts Sergious, "We shall see whether you possess the audacity to uphold your promise. And be forewarned, I shall bide my time" (Shaw, 61) straightaway challenges sergius and the class structure. She boldly asserts her identity and existence as an autonomous individual, characterized by her own desires and aspirations, rather than merely being an object in the grasp of a man. She possesses a profound clarity regarding her objectives and ardently pursues them with determination.

Louka refuses to be manipulated by Sergius and boldly challenges him. She interrogates his sense of morality, asserting, "(avoiding him), No, I have no desire for your affection. Gentlefolk are universally the same—you professing love to me in secrecy while Miss Raina engages in similar deceit behind your back." Pg 35. Although she doesnot yield to his physical advances, constrained by her position as a servant, she vehemently opposes his intentions. She compels him to vow to marry her, irrespective of their disparate social standings.

Louka declares "I would marry the man I loved which no other queen in Europe has courage to do" (Shaw, 60); This declaration and individual choice exemplify her empowerment and liberation. She boldly defies the societal constraints that would dictate her marriage to a man of her own class, such as Nicola. Instead, she elects to pursue Sergius, a man of a higher social standing, because he is the one she desires. This decision represents a resolute rejection of the limitations imposed upon her by society.

Louka's statement to Nicola that, "Oh, I must behave in my own way. You take all the courage out of me with your cold blooded wisdom." (Shaw, 58) is a declaration of her autonomy. She is not seeking permission or approval; she is stating her intention to choose her own path. She understands that her future is her own to determine. Louka's choices are a direct rebellion against the direct rejection of the limitations placed upon her by society.

The characters of Raina, Louka, and Catherine, with their resolute defiance and individual choices, challenge the entrenched expectations of the prevailing social and patriarchal structures, as well as the temporal and class constraints that define their existence. This dynamic interplay serves to solidify a compelling feminist dimension within the narrative of the play.

G. B. Shaw's socialist ideology and his fervent advocacy for social reform, particularly the emancipation of women, are resplendently manifest in the narrative framework of the play. The female characters are not only depicted with remarkable strength and agency, but the male characters are also

portrayed in a manner that is both supportive and conducive to this transformative change. For instance, Major Paul, Raina's father, embodies a progressive and egalitarian outlook towards the female characters, championing the cause of equality. The overarching narrative, therefore, exudes a distinctly feminist perspective.

Work Cited

Shaw, G. B. (2002). *Arms and the man: An anti-romantic comedy in three acts*. Orient Longman.

Faludi, S. (n.d.). *Feminism's agenda is basic: It asks that women not be forced to choose between public justice and private happiness. The Socratic Method*. <https://socraticmethod.net/susan-faludi-feminisms-agenda-is-basic>

Wikipedia contributors. (n.d.). *Choice feminism*. In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved August 29, 2025, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Choice_feminism