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CONFLICT BETWEEN SENSE AND SENSIBILITY IN G. B. SHAW'S PLAY
ARMS AND THE MAN

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ABSTRACT

"Life is not a song, sweetling. You may learn that one day to your sorrow." (Martin, 429)

George Bernard Shaw is certainly one of the major playwrights in the history of English literature. Shaw's *Arms and the Man*, is one of the most popular plays in English literature. *Arms and the Man* is a thought-provoking, anti-romantic and anti-war play. "*Arms and the Man* is a fitting entry-point into Shaw's career, which goes on to encompass many more plays investigating the nature of relationships between men and women."¹ The play satirizes the social issues of the day by highlighting and condemning the romantic notions present in some characters. George Bernard Shaw, by presenting a conflict between the realistic and the idealistic notions, satirizes the artificiality, sterility and hollowness of the latter. The paper aims to study *Arms and the Man* as an anti-romantic play by highlighting the conflict between the realistic and idealistic notions present in the play.

Keywords: romantic, idealistic, realistic, notions, love, war.

"A lack of Realism in the vision today costs credibility tomorrow." (J.C.Maxwell)²

"George Bernard Shaw occupies a significant position in the history of English literature as an unconventional dramatist. Being influenced by Ibsen, a Norwegian playwright, he took his pen to write dramas to satirize the rotten attitudes, conventions and manners of the society. *Arms and the Man* is the most popular and successful staged drama of Shaw. It is also an anti-romantic comedy because it exposes the folly cowardice of soldiers, shatters the romantic illusions about war and attacks severely romantic and sentimental love. Bernard Shaw himself calls *Arms and the Man* an anti-romantic comedy. Shaw himself was anti-romantic by nature. The principle objection raised by Shaw against romantic literature is that it deals with imaginary ideas and artificial emotions. So, Shaw decidedly and intentionally wrote the play *Arms and the Man* in his innovative design of anti-romantic comedy. In *Arms and the Man*, Shaw wittily, humorously and critically exposes the hollowness of romantic and emotional concept of war, love and marriage."³

The play, *Arms and the Man*, is set in Bulgaria in 1885. When the play begins, there is a war going on between Bulgarians and Serbs. G. B. Shaw, in this play satirizes the romantic notions of love and war. Romantic notions are manifested in Raina, the heroine of the play, Catherine, her mother, Sergius, her fiancé; while as Captain Bluntschli, a Swiss fighting against Bulgarians, and Louka, the maid-servant represent realistic conception. When the play begins, Raina, "whose imagination is full of fairy princes" is seen on the balcony:

"On the balcony a young lady, intensively conscious of the romantic beauty of the night and of the fact that her own youth and beauty are part of it, is gazing at the snowy Balkans. She is in her nightgown, well covered by a long mantle of furs, worth, on a moderate estimate, about three times the furniture of her room." (Shaw, 2)

G. B. Shaw artistically portrays her mother, Catherine – an embodiment of romantic ideas: "*Catherine Petkoff, a woman over forty...with magnificent black hair and eyes, who might be a very splendid specimen of the wife of a mountain farmer, but is determined to be a Vinnese lady, and to that end wears a fashionable tea-gown on all occasions.*" (Shaw, 2)

The play begins with a conversation between these two apostles of romanticism. Catherine informs Raina that they have been victorious in the battle against Serbs. Their romantic conception of war can be seen through their conversation:

Catherine: "There has been a battle."

Raina (*her eyes dilating*): "Ah!" (*She comes eagerly to Catherine*).

Catherine: "A great battle at Slivinitza! A victory! And it was won by Sergius...Sergius is the hero of the hour, the idol of regiment."

Raina: "Tell me, tell me, How was it?" (*ecstatically*) "Oh, mother! mother! mother!" (Shaw, 2)

At the very outset, Shaw exposes the romantic notions of Sergius:

Catherine: (*with surging enthusiasm*) "You can't guess how splendid it is. A cavalry charge! Think of that! He defied our Russian commanders – acted without orders – led a charge on his own responsibility – headed it himself – was the first man to sweep through their guns...you will worship him when he comes back."

Raina: "I am so happy! So proud!" (*She rises and walks about excitedly*). "It proves that all our ideas were real after all...our ideas of what Sergius would do. Our patriotism. Our heroic ideals." (Shaw, 3)

Raina's romantic notions are also manifested when she says: "Sergius is just as splendid and noble as he looks! That the world is really a glorious world for women who can see its glory and men who can act its romance! What happiness! What unspeakable fulfillment!" (Shaw, 4) Her idealistic notions are also manifested when "*she goes to the chest of drawers, and adores the portrait there with feelings that are beyond all expression.*" (Shaw, 5) When she learns about Sergius' heroics in the battle, she calls him "her soul's hero," "My hero! My hero!" However, when Captain Bluntschli, running for life, takes refuge in her room, her romantic notions about war, to some extent, get shattered. In this scene Shaw presents an encounter between realism and idealism:

Raina: "Some soldiers, I know, are afraid to die."

The man (Bluntschli): "All of them, dear lady, all of them, believe me. It is our duty to live as long as we can." (Shaw, 7)

Moreover, Raina is stunned to know that Bluntschli's pistol is not loaded and that he does not carry cartridge but carries chocolate instead. When she asks Bluntschli about it he says: "No use, dear young lady: there's nothing in it. It's not loaded...I've no ammunition. What use are cartridges in battle? I always carry chocolate instead." (Shaw, 12) Raina, being an idealist, believes that soldiers are brave, heroic. She forms a poor opinion about Bluntschli when he says: "I'm as nervous as a mouse." (Shaw, 13)

Raina: "Our soldiers are not like that."

The Man: "Oh yes they are. There are only two sorts of soldiers: old ones and young ones...how is it that you've just beaten us? Sheer ignorance of the art of war, nothing else." (*Indignantly*) "I never saw anything so unprofessional."

Raina (*ironically*): "Oh! Was it professional to beat you?"

Bluntschli here presents a realistic picture of war and satirizes Sergius's and Raina's romantic notion: "Well, come! Is it professional to throw a regiment of cavalry on a battery of machine guns, with the dead certainty that if the guns go off not a horse or man will ever get within fifty yards of the fire?"

When Raina inquires about the in-charge of the cavalry, Bluntschli satirizes her idealistic notion about war and also exposes the supposed-heroics of Sergius:

Raina: "First One! The bravest of the brave!"

The man (*prosaically*): "Hm! You should see the poor devil pulling at his horse."

Raina: "Why should he pull at his horse?"

The Man: "Do you suppose the fellow wants to get there before the others and be killed?"

Raina: "Ugh! But I don't believe the first man is a coward. I know he is a hero!..." (Shaw, 14)

Since they had been supplied wrong ammunition, they couldn't fire a round for ten minutes. Sergius led the cavalry charge and attacked them. Had they not been supplied wrong ammunition, Sergius and his regiment would have been butchered:

The Man: "And there was Don Quixote flourishing like a drum major, thinking he'd done the cleverest thing ever known whereas he ought to be court-martialed for it. Of all the fools ever let loose on a field of battle, that man must be the very maddest. He and his regiment simply committed suicide; only the pistol missed fire: that's all."

Raina (*deeply wounded but steadfastly loyal to her ideals*): "Indeed! Would you know him again if you saw him?"

The Man: "Shall I ever forget him." (Shaw 14-15)

Her romantic ideals about war and the heroics of soldiers gets shattered when Bluntschli, initially, refuses to climb down into the street: "Down that waterpipe! Stop! Wait! I can't! I daren't! the very thought of it makes me giddy." (Shaw, 16)

Sergius who is Raina's "hero" experiences the brutal realities of war in the battle. His idealistic notion of war has been replaced by realistic. His disillusionment can be seen when he says: "I won the battle the wrong way when our worthy Russian generals were losing it the right way..." (Shaw, 29)

His disillusionment with his romantic notions of war has been artistically portrayed by Shaw. It gets manifested in his following statement:

"Soldiering, my dear madam, is the coward's art of attacking mercilessly when you are strong, and keeping out of harm's way when you are weak. That is the whole secret of successful fighting. Get your enemy at a disadvantage; and never, on any account, fight him on equal terms." (Shaw, 30)

Disillusioned with the idealistic notions, Sergius comments on and appreciates the realistic approach of Bluntschli in the battle: "Ah, he was a soldier: every inch a soldier!! If only I had bought the horses for my regiment instead of foolishly lead it into danger, I should have been a field-marshal now!" (Shaw, 30) Thus Sergius not only appreciates the realistic posture of Bluntschli but also feels that it was foolish on his part to lead a cavalry charge against the battery of machine guns. Shaw here highlights and condemns the romantic follies of the society. Shaw also satirizes the romantic notion of higher love. Raina who finds it very difficult to forsake her idealistic concepts says: "Sergius: I think we two have found the higher love. When I think of you, I feel that I could never do a base deed, or think an ignoble thought." (Shaw, 33). Sergius, an apostle of romantic ideals, replies: "My lady my saint!...Let me be the worshiper." (Shaw, 33). However, Shaw satirizes his romantic ideals when he flirts with Louka. Sergius himself satirizes the romantic "higher love": "Louka: do you know what the higher love is?...Very fatiguing thing to keep up for any length of time...One feels the need of some relief after it." (Shaw, 34). Moreover, Sergius calls himself "a buffoon," "a humbug," "a coward." (Shaw, 35). Shaw subtly and artistically criticizes artificiality and hollowness of the romantic notions in the scene in which Sergius flirts with Louka:

Sergius: "I am surprised at myself, Louka, What would Sergius, the hero of Slivnitza, say if he saw me now? What would the half dozen Sergiuses who keep popping in and out of this handsome figure of mine say if they caught us her." (Shaw, 34)

When Bluntschli comes back to return the coat that the ladies had given him to disguise himself, Raina still obsessed with her imaginary world, asks him whether his officers were angry with him for running away from the battle-field. He answers in a quintessential realistic manner: "No: they were glad: because theyd all just run away themselves." (Shaw, 50). Shaw here exposes the romantic ideals about war: Raina believes war to be an act of amusement. Shaw brings home the fact that war like life is a practical field. One has to be sensible rather than romantic about it.

Louka, the proud maid-servant, has been portrayed as a sensible lady who does not believe in romantic ideals. She in a typical realistic tone mocks Sergius: "How easy it is to talk! Men never seem to me to

grow up: they all have schoolboy's ideas. You don't know what true courage is...He (Bluntschli) has beaten you in love. He may beat you in war..." (Shaw, 59-60)

Shaw presents a realistic picture of war by highlighting and condemning the callousness of the Bulgarians in the battle. Bluntschli's account of his friend who was burnt alive by the Bulgarians throws a remarkable light on the brutal nature and reality of war: "Shot in the hip in a woodyard, couldn't drag himself out. Your fellows' shells set the timber on fire and burnt him, with half a dozen other poor devils in the same predicament." (Shaw, 63). Sergius, who finally gets disillusioned, also exposes the sterility and hollowness of the idealistic notions of love and war by saying; "Oh, war! War! The dream of patriots and heroes! A fraud...A hollow sham, like love...Raina: our romance is shattered. Life's a farce." (Shaw, 63-64) At this moment, Bluntschli states that by forsaking the life-long, cherished idealistic notions, Sergius has finally found himself: "He's found himself...You've found that life isn't a farce, but something quite sensible and serious." (Shaw, 64-65). Bluntschli goes on to give a realistic account of war: "I'm a professional soldier: I fight when I have to, and am very glad to get out of it when I haven't to. You (Sergius) are only an amateur: you think fighting's an amusement." (Shaw, 64) However, when Sergius eventually abandons his idealistic notions by accepting Louka as his fiancée, Bluntschli appreciates him: "My congratulations: These heroics of yours have their practical side after all." (Shaw, 72) Bluntschli also satirizes the artificiality of Victorian society: "Look at the young lady and look at me. She, rich, young, beautiful, with her imagination full of fairy princes and noble natures and cavalry charges and goodness knows what!" (Shaw, 71) However, the play ends with Raina's disillusionment with romantic love and she finally comes out of her imaginary world full of fairy princes and heroics. Raina, who worshipped Sergius like a god, exclaims: "Oh, what sort of god is this I have been worshipping!" (Shaw, 64). All characters who represent idealistic notions in the play are eventually disillusioned. Raina, has now become mature enough to say: "The lady says that he (Bluntschli) can keep his tableclothes and his omnibuses. I am not here to be sold to the highest bidder." (Shaw, 75) She does not want to marry the "Emperor of Switzerland" but to her "chocolate cream soldier."

To wrap up the discussion, many things need to be brought together. In this play, Shaw has interwoven two themes: theme of love and marriage. He presents two opposite ideologies: realistic and romantic. The characters who uphold the romantic conception are living in an imaginary world. They think fighting to be an act of amusement which leads to disastrous wars; and their idealistic notions about love results in unhappy marriages. The play presents a conflict between sense and sensibility and upholds the former. Thus, the play is an anti-romantic and anti-war play in which Shaw artistically satirizes the rotten attitudes of the society. He also exposes the artificiality, sterility and hollowness of romantic ideals.

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