

G. B. Shaw's *Pygmalion*: Woman in Struggle between the Hammer of Poverty and the Anvil of Illiteracy

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Abstract

The main interrogation involved in the modern century is 'the woman question'. George Bernard Shaw and Henrik Ibsen are the writers for woman's rights in the early modern century. Woman is the victim of the man's ego and the desire for property. However, the woman has broken wraps and obstacles and exceeded to behave unwomanly. Eliza, by all means, was the victim of a bet made by Professor Higgins. She has been changed from a street flower seller to an independent and educated woman, although she was unsatisfied with the case and sought to be treated as human being. Shaw rejected the traditional romantic ending, as the mythical Pygmalion, and made Eliza a strong independent woman who was able to survive by using her own skills and talents. Pygmalion brought the statue into life but Higgins, as Eliza admitted, brought her into hell since she could not undergo such life. The bad effect of poverty is the main causative of the woman's sufferings and being so far struggling for liberty.

Shaw's 'New' and 'Emancipated' woman is illustrated highly in this play. Though, the happy end of the mythical Pygmalion, Professor Higgins refrains, in spite of himself, from falling in love with Eliza. As Higgins confessed that he made of Eliza a woman it was Shaw's confession of the cruelty of poverty and the necessity of education in the past and the new era as well.

George Bernard Shaw, the great reformer and social satirist, is best known for his plays of mockery. His *Pygmalion* of 1912 criticized the effects of poverty and lack of education on a person. Social conditions make a person Machiavellian and/or narcissistic. Shaw incorporated historical, mythical and social problems into his plays.

Nevertheless, the main theme of this play is the relationship between poverty and education. Hence, the play is a revolt against poverty and lack of education that are not supported by the governments and the plutocracy. Shaw insisted, in most of his plays, on the necessity of taking care and paying great attention to the working-class women. He was optimistic about the poor people and comforted them with the vision of a happier future rather than the riches. "Poor people, when they are not suffering from a cute hunger and severe cold, are not more unhappy than the rich people: they are often much happier" (Shaw, *Intelligent*, 1949: 41).

Thus, the paper examines the effect of poverty and lack of education on the woman. It looks at Shaw's ideas from a feminist perspective. It is very important to woman to get financial support for her education. Woman suffers from neglect during the early period of her life. Just when she becomes old enough, she is thrown in the streets to live her own life. In fact, parents must feel the responsibility on the shoulders of their daughters who do not have the chance to get their education. Eliza needs to be a lady or at least to behave a ladylike to get a good job. She is expected to sell flowers, regardless of her level of education. Hence, when she is educated, she sells respectably in a shop otherwise she is thrown in the street as flowers girl. Eliza reveals her case to Higgins after visiting him in his house to ask for tuitions. Eliza did not have money and suffered from poverty, however, when she got some, she immediately decided to get her education.

Higgins, however, is Shaw's example of a Machiavellian person who uses knowledge as a bet to achieve his aim and prove his abilities. Doolittle is the narcissist who seeks achieving his egos. Eliza is the victim of both characters. As Doolittle is Eliza's father and Higgins is her teacher, both of them use her as an instrument to achieve their goals. After that, she is left by them alone and shattered. Higgins, anyhow, did his best to achieve his aim as an expert of phonetics by applying an experiment of six month on Eliza to make a woman of her. Whereas, Doolittle was paternally poor and left his daughter suffer in the streets as an uneducated flower girl. Let me say, it is poverty that makes of Doolittle as a narcissist and pride of education makes of Higgins a Machiavellian. Doolittle is the victim of poverty while Higgins of middle class society. Eliza seeks education and intends to get rid of poverty. In this play, the central factor of narcissism is poverty while education of Machiavellianism. The importance of this study is to prove the necessity of education and money to get rid of illiteracy and poverty respectively.

The play is a six months bet by a professor of phonetics to test his abilities to transfer a flower and cockney girl into a lady and convincing duchess. Higgins himself reveals it in the beginning of the play "I shall make a duchess of this draggletailed guttersnipe" (Shaw Plays: 723). The center of this bet is Eliza. Doolittle does not care for his daughter. When he heard of her existence in the middle class family, he could not have controlled himself and went directly to Higgins to ask for some money. Higgins guessed that Doolittle had come to blackmail him in some way. He considered giving Doolittle money as an immoral thing. Shaw's criticism of morality of the middle class and the neglect of the poor people is potential in Doolittle reply to Higgins; "What is middle class morality? Just an excuse for never giving me anything" (Shaw Plays: 730).

As the love triangle refers to the three corners in a triangle where the woman is in the top corner and the base corners are for her lover and her husband. The Egoism triangle also refers to the same concept where woman is in the top corner and her father and teacher in the base corners. The corners of this triangle are the references to the three struggling parts; poverty, education and woman as the victim of both.

Shaw derives his character Higgins as a Machiavellian person from the myth of Pygmalion who also creates Galatea for his own desires. Both of mythical Pygmalion and Shaw's Higgins suffer from mental disease, living alone, old bachelors and in search of their partners.

Admittedly, all of the previous studies of Shaw's *Pygmalion* were involved in the different phases of his interests in language and teaching phonetics. Shaw's title of his preface to *Pygmalion* 'The Professor of Phonetics' and the main theme of teaching phonetics in the play misled some of the critics like Cellia Marshik (2000) who stated that "*Pygmalion* has received considerable scholarly attention because it demonstrates Shaw's interest in the role of language in the English class system" (321). She added "It has also drawn the attention of psychoanalytic critics, who see Higgins as a figure for Shaw" (321). Moreover, in her study, she looked at the woman from the sexual and seducing viewpoints. Marshik is seemingly confused that once she referred to 'Higgins as a figure for Shaw' then she turned to accuse him to seduce Eliza:

... Higgins is implicated as reformer and seducer of Eliza Doolittle as *Pygmalion* reveals the fine line between philanthropy and predation. When he talks about burning Eliza's clothes and buying her new ones, Higgins is ostensibly initiating the flower girl's transformation. Eliza, however, reads his actions as those of a sexual predator: "You're no gentleman, you're not . . . I know what the like of you are, I do" (Marshik 2000: 327).

If a teacher asked for burning the clothes of his student, it does not necessarily mean he has a bad intention towards her. And if she replies as Eliza does, it does not also necessarily mean that she "reads his actions as those of sexual predator." Shaw might be an old bachelor, interested in phonetics and having the desire of challenge, but has never been a seducer or a Machiavellian person.

Salman Akhtar (2002) reports in his review of *Impact of Narcissism: The Errant Therapist in a Chaotic Quest* by Peter Giovacchini that:

The last part of Giovacchini's book is devoted to the relationship between narcissism and creativity. Using three plays by Shaw (*Pygmalion*, *Major Barbara* and *Caesar and Cleopatra*), Giovacchini elucidates situations in which one's narcissism forcibly or submissively enlists others to sustain itself (1224).

Regarding Akhtar's review, Higgins is considered the narcissist and Eliza is submissively enlisted. However, Machiavellianism "refers to interpersonal strategies that advocate self-interest, deception and manipulation" (Jakobwitz & Egan 2006: 332). The difference between Machiavellianism and narcissism is consistent with previous evidence that Machiavellians are more grounded, or reality based, in their sense of self, whereas narcissists have a strong self-deceptive (i.e., low insight) component to their personality (Paulhus and Williams 2002: 561). By applying these definitions, Higgins can be proved as a Machiavellian instead of narcissist.

The play consists of three pivots; poverty, education and woman. In other words, it is fixed on three characters of our daily life; Higgins, Doolittle and Eliza as the Machiavellian, narcissist and the victim of both respectively. Asoka Bandarage (1984) mentions that "Lacking property, skills, capital or education, women are forced to accept whatever jobs they can find as field hands, street vendors, maids or prostitutes" (498). Bandarage as if she feels of what Eliza suffers. Eliza looks for everything that may help her finding a good job opportunity. She is requested to speak in a good way so that she may be appointed in a shop for selling flowers. Otherwise she would permanently sell flowers in the corner of Tottenham Court Road.

Woman in *Pygmalion* is forced to choose between humiliation and lack of education. Eliza could suffer unendurable humility to educate herself. But Eliza could achieve her aims in spite of all her sufferings. In the end, she conquered and punished her torturers. Shaw's poetic justice is justified in his play. For instance, when Eliza was shattered, after having been neglected by Higgins, she walked in the streets all the night. Then, she decided to visit Mrs. Higgins's house where Higgins and Pickering came to inquire about her. She met them sitting on the ottoman downstairs waiting for her. Higgins is also shown walking the streets of London in search of his lost Liza, and returning home to find her waiting before his fire (Crane 1951: 883). There are many things that Eliza compelled accepts in the beginning and she returns them back in the end. She accepts to be humiliated but in return she humiliates her rivals after her independence. J. L. Wisenthal (1974) Reported that: "In the final act Eliza wishes to humiliate Higgins, and therefore she dismisses his role in her education as trivial and says that it was Pickering who really taught her to be a lady" (121). She was thrown by Higgins with many silly and bad words that she hurled them at him back along with his slippers. She was treated in an outrageous and abject way that in the end she could have treated him in the same. The very fact, in *Pygmalion* that Eliza suffered of humiliation to get her education. She undergoes all that till she gets her education and then starts insulting those who insult her. Poverty and education are damning each other. Eliza possessed one and lost the other. When she has to choose between her dignities and education, she is compelled chooses education. After getting her education, she chooses to recover the perfection of her dignity. She tolerated humiliation to conquer and when she really achieved her targets, she was eager to insult in return her torturer.

Eliza starts rejecting Higgins orders since he is a man of order by nature. When she feels that she has her personality and independence, she starts behaving in a very strong and unwomanly way. She disobeys Higgins to prove her identity. The first disobedience, when she refused to put out the light just because he ordered her. She rejected his order to tell Mrs. Pearce of his desire to have tea instead of coffee. Instead, she pertly would him better leave a note for Mrs. Pearce about the coffee; for she won't be told by her (Shaw Plays: 742). The second disobedience, "when Eliza, after asserting her independence, announces that she will not see Higgins again, he carelessly tells her to order a ham and Stilton cheese for the household and to buy him ties and gloves. Eliza's reply is intriguing, for she does not reject these tasks: she has already tended to some of them and evades, without refusing, the others" (Ganz 1983: 178).

As far as Doolittle is concerned about Eliza, he is more concerned about achieving his egos. It is very clear that Doolittle visits Higgins in his house for the first time to take money, not to save Eliza from Higgins claws. After taking the money, Doolittle left Eliza in the laps of Higgins and his friend Pickering.

Doolittle is indifferent to his daughter and much interested in money. There is an exchange of hatred between Eliza and her father which is revealed through their speech. As an example, when Higgins asks Eliza not to say that she is a good girl for her father may take her home, she astonishes about the case. She knew well that all her father's coming for was to touch Higgins for some money to get drunk on (Shaw Plays: 731). In fact, when her father left Higgins's house after taking his money, Higgins asked Eliza about her opinion if he would come back again. It seemingly looks that she dislikes him for he does not care for her. Eliza

says: “I don’t want never to see him again, I don’t. He’s a disgrace to me, he is, collecting dust, instead of working at his trade” (Shaw Plays: 731). On the contrary, when Doolittle visits Mrs. Higgins after becoming a rich man, Mrs. Higgins asks him to step out on the balcony for a moment since she does not want Eliza to have the shock of his news until she has made it up with Higgins and Pickering. He happily expresses that he is ready for anything to help Higgins to keep Eliza off his hands. (Shaw Plays: 745). Doolittle had Eliza whom he sold out to Higgins for a very little sum of money. Higgins had education in his briefcase that indifferently bargained to give it. Doolittle wants to get rid of his daughter in any way that he compares both values of money and Eliza to both of himself and Higgins. Higgins has money who spends foolishly but Doolittle has Eliza who sells out foolishly. Doolittle calmly says “what’s a five pound note to you? And what’s Eliza to me” (Shaw Plays: 729)? Doolittle admittedly confessed that he was not coming to pick Eliza up, whether good or bad he wanted to get rid of her while his coming was only for money.

There is a bargaining scene in the play. Both of Higgins and Doolittle are bargaining about Eliza. The bargaining scene occurs twice in the play. It first takes place when Doolittle comes to Higgins’s house to sell Eliza with 5 pounds and go. The second takes place at Mrs. Higgins house when the two again bargain to leave Eliza alone. When Mrs. Higgins asks Doolittle to solve the problem of Eliza’s future, by providing for her with the money that he got by Higgins’s a silly joke, Higgins jumps up and cries: Nonsense! he can’t provide for her. He shan’t provide for her. She doesn’t belong to him. I paid him five pounds for her. Then he asks Doolittle whether he is an honest man or a rogue. Doolittle on behalf of Shaw tolerantly replies ‘a little of both and like the rest of us’ (Shaw Plays: 744). Now, from Higgins’s opinion, Eliza is his property since Doolittle takes the money for the girl and he has no right to take her back. Higgins is regretful for losing the bird and spending time of teaching her. He regrettably says “Let us put on our best Sunday manners for this creature that we picked out of the mud” (Shaw Plays: 745).

It should not be denied that by the help of money Higgins could start his bet in which step by step successfully transferred a ragamuffin human into a parrot doll then to a real woman. Let us ask frankly how many women in our societies like Eliza have been sold out unless the bugaboo of the social conventions? Eliza claims that she won’t be accepted to sell flower in a shop unless she can talk more genteel. She is deceived by Higgins’ speech at the time when they meet first since Eliza herself said that “he [Higgins] said he could teach me. Well, here I am ready to pay him—not asking any favor—and he treats me as if I was dirt” (Shaw Plays: 722). As Higgins feels that others are in need of him, he indeed has some dirt inside himself to exploit them. He reminds Eliza that to become a lady is very expensive and she has to pay tears and wallops. Higgins himself tells her “To wipe your eyes. To wipe any part of your face that feels moist. Remember: that’s your handkerchief; and that’s your sleeve. Don’t mistake the one for the other if you wish to become a lady in a shop”. (Shaw Plays: 723).

Unfortunately, after being independent, the woman is shattered. It is expressed through Mrs. Higgins to Higgins and Pickering when she wanted to tell them about destroying the girl, she said:

Eliza came to me this morning. She passed the night partly walking about in a rage, partly trying to throw herself into the river and being afraid to, and partly in the Carlton Hotel. She told me of the brutal way you two treated her. (Shaw Plays: 745).

The two misunderstood what ‘the brutal way’ meant. As a woman, Mrs. Higgins feels what Eliza needs and she confirms that Eliza does not mean physical brute. Thus they understand it as a kind of conceals. On the contrary, she meant to make them aware of the disrespect they used against her. They do not treat her as a lady. That provokes her anger and leads to rebel against them. It is true that Eliza is a cockney flower girl and indeed she is transferred into a lady. The difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she’s treated. She regrettably says: “I shall always be a flower girl to Professor Higgins, because he always treats me as a flower girl” (Shaw Plays: 746-7).

Eliza is unhappy and shocked by her new case. She laments and blames Higgins for being so wicked. She expects herself of being used as a doll that after the game is over they may use another doll for their new game. She inquires about the property of her clothes that might the owner want them for the next picked girl to use for his new experiment. She is shattered and does not know what to do. She pulls herself together in desperation “What am I fit for? What have you left me fit for? Where am I to go? What am I to do? What’s to become of me” (Shaw Plays: 741)? Then she laments the Machiavellian for his savage and indifferent behaviour “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” (Shaw Plays: 741).

Shaw technically uses, in his plays, a head or effective sentence as well as a character as an operator. By operator character, I mean the character who is used as a fuel of keeping the events of the play enthusiastically flow. Pickering plays the role of the operator in the play. In his speech, he intends to provoke or defend the participators of the play. A head or effective sentence leads to all the coming events and consequently to the end of the play. Pickering says the head and effective sentence that leads to all the events those follow. “...you’ve won your bet, Higgins. Eliza did the trick, and something to spare, eh” (Shaw Plays: 739)? The final “eh” is deliberately added by Shaw to give a chance to Higgins to take his turn. Higgins fervently thanks God for the bet to be over! Eliza feels offended. Eliza crimps her fingers, frantically: “Why didn’t you leave me where you picked me out of—in the gutter? You thank God it’s all over, and that now you can throw me back again there, do you (Shaw Plays: 740)?

After Higgins’s speech Eliza is also provoked and step by step she cannot control herself. When Higgins started to speak in a very selfish and Machiavellian way, Eliza started to show her anger and disagreement. The next series of conversations make Eliza “snatching up the slippers, and hurling them at him one after the other with all her force” (Shaw Plays: 740).

Finally, Higgins is poetically justified. He regretted to all what he has done. He is heard damning everything even his efforts to make a woman of Eliza:

Damn Mrs. Pearce; and damn the coffee; and damn you; and damn my own folly in having lavished MY hard-earned knowledge and the treasure of my regard and intimacy on a heartless guttersnipe. [*He goes out with impressive decorum, and spoils it by slamming the door savagely*] (Shaw Plays: 742).

To conclude, the bad and fraud treatments lead finally to the same reaction. Eliza, as a victim, rebels against Higgins and behaves revengefully in contrary. Poverty is the master key of calamities and the main causative of the woman's sufferings that brings about the lack of education. Poverty is also brings about the narcissist who selfishly gets rid of his responsibilities. A narcissist, in fact, is a character who searches self ego while a Machiavellian is a person who enlists others for sustaining itself. Doolittle searches his ego by neglecting his family whereas Higgins uses Eliza as a tool to achieve his aim. Both of them leave Eliza shattered and seeking help in the street. However, poverty and lack of education force Eliza to seek help of Higgins to transfer her to a woman where Higgins makes advantage of the chance to exploit her to fulfill his aims.

In fact, good and ambitious people are always successful. Higgins got his aim but still regretted to leave his victim. Doolittle got the money he needed but still unsatisfied with the case he lived. Finally, Eliza got both of the education and money as well as achieving all of her aims. She could speak ladylike, start a flower shop and get married from the person she loves.

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