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The Concept of 'New Woman' in the Plays of G.B. Shaw & Vijay Tendulkar

Ms. Deepali Agravat

*Marwadi Education Foundation of Group of Institutions***Abstract**

“No woman is the property of a man.
A woman belongs to herself and to nobody else.”

Under the influence of *the Naturalistic Movement*, that broke out into the nineties and the twenties, the real life mirrored in literature. However Theatre, closer to the real life, is much influenced by *the naturalistic movement*. The playwrights like Ibsen, Shaw, Sean O'Casey, Eliot, Miller, etc. discuss the problems of the day-to-day life of people.

My paper is focused on *the concept of emerging a 'New Woman'*, as one of the offshoots of *naturalism*, in the plays of G.B. Shaw and Vijay Tendulkar. G.B. Shaw is the playwright of *the Problem Plays* of the late nineties whereas Tendulkar is belonged to the theatre after 1956 which has challenged the popularity of *the Problem Plays*, but the *Ibsenite cult of independent unwomanly woman* stimulated both the playwrights. After the projection of Nora in *A Doll's House*, Ibsenism has a profound impact on Shaw and Tendulkar. Though both have worked into the different contexts, they sincerely concerned to *the concept of "New Woman"*.

The concept of “*New Woman*” was popularized with the advent of George Bernard Shaw who subverted the conventional views of the Victorian woman. Shaw's memorable and conspicuously strong, energetic female figures championed the creation of the “*New woman*” to exhibit that she is “*a man in petticoats*”. However Tendulkar's women are educated and sophisticated and hence, refuse to accept the outdated and conventional moral values and to be cowed down by men. Both the playwrights' unorthodox frame of mind and distrust of formulary attitudes and institutions as far as the status of women was concerned, both in the society as well as in the sanctuary of home, needs to be studied and re-evaluated today, even in the 21st century where women are still humiliated and oppressed in the so-called cultured society, inside the walls of their houses and outside, by their fathers, brothers, husbands, and masters. Persecutors go on changing, but victims remain the same.

In my paper I have discussed how the both playwrights go far from the traditional image of women and depict them from femme fatale to *New woman*, from childlike waif to mature housewife, from hysteric to feminist, from barmaid to grande dame, from flapper to clotheshorse. If the Shavian women like, Candida, Barbara, Eliza, Vivie etc. have damaged the traditional image of the Victorian womanly woman, Tendulkar's Benare, Princess Vijaya, Mitra, Sarita, Jyoti etc. declared their self-assertion and intelligence that truly I captured into the words of Jyoti, one of the characters in the play, *Kanyadan*;

“I march with utter faith in the goal; I grow with rising hopes,
Cowards stay ashore, every wave opens a path for me”.

I

“Life on the stage should be as it really is, and the people, too, should be as they are and not on stilts”. -Chekhov.

The *naturalistic movement* is come in 1859 with the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of the Species*, Which has its impact on history, art, culture, criticism and theatre. The contemporary life of people and their problems become the subject-matter of art and literature. Actual, real life situations that are mirrored in the plays make the theatre *naturalistic*. The playwrights as Ibsen, Shaw, Sean O’Casey, T.S. Eliot, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller etc. enrich the tradition of realistic plays with their innovative ideas and devices. The playwrights depict and discuss the problems of the day-to-day life of people thoroughly but do not suggest any solution to the problems. So, the audience becomes the active participant in the appreciation of the plays.

All these Euro-American playwrights use theatre not as a means of mere entertainment but as a means of bringing reformation in the thinking modes of people. They seek to make their audience introspective and encourage them to think of their day-to-day life problems allowing them to find out their own solutions.

The French novelist, *Emile Zola* is convinced that only naturalistic movement can give vigour and life to the theatre, which will make it modern and new. The interest of Henrik Ibsen lies in using drama to ask questions rather than supply answers, that reflects in Shaw’s words:

“as contribution to a forward struggle to give people new images

of truth, images which at first they would inevitably be unable to accept”.²

Ibsen’s characters such as Nora, Barkman, etc. make the audience aware of the fact that freedom can be achieved or realized only by those Who have the strength to see the world as it is. Nora’s revolt against her husband takes her and all the audience away from the notion of home, *sweet home*. The womanly woman tries to face the bitter realities of actual world that is full of hardships and challenges. Her protest has a profound impact on the British playwrights as well as on the Indian playwrights, since she slams the door not only of her own home but of all homes that look sweet. The Natyamanwantar Theatre of the Marathi playwrights follows in the footsteps of Ibsen.

However, the theatre after 1956 marks a complete break with the popularity of the problem plays. Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* challenges the problem plays of Ibsen, Shaw, Galsworthy, etc. The Indian playwrights such as Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad, Mohan Rakesh, and Badal Sircar deal with the problems of the contemporary life. They represent life as it is, without trying to moralize or philosophize it in any way.

II

But certainly, this second *New Theatre*, under the influence of Ibsen and Shaw, well exercised the two concepts established by the earlier theatre of the problem plays - *naturalism* and *the concept of New woman*. Tendulkar does not believe in the dictum

Art for Art's sake. Instead, he believes, unlike the advocates of aestheticism, in art as propaganda. Nevertheless, he cannot be called a sheer propagandist. That is why, in his plays, life is presented as it is with all its vices, drawbacks, and weaknesses. His plays refuse to offer strained coherence or show a path of revelation. He strictly follows what Emile Zola states about *naturalism*:

“It is necessary to accept nature as she is, without modifying her. The work becomes an official record, nothing more; its only merit is that of exact observation of life as it is.”³

For Ibsen and Shaw, the success and the worthiness of a play depend upon the fact to what extent it effects the transformation of man. Their main objective is to bring about a revolutionary change in an individual's mind. They are convinced that it could not be carried out in the existing theatre but in “a new house of drama”, supported by “the pillars of truth and freedom”.⁴

Similarly, theatre is Tendulkar's chosen medium, through which he tries to destroy the outdated pieties and stereotyped beliefs. He is an iconoclast who intends to bring about a change not only in the subject-matter, form, and structure of his plays but also in the mind-set of his audience. Leela Benare, like Nora, is one of the *New women* who enable us to face the bitter realities of actual life. However, freedom is achieved at last by sacrificing pleasure.

III

Women as a subject of literary writings have inspired numerous creative writers for a long time. This is especially the case in the twentieth century writings;

as a result the turn-of-the-century literature showed a great interest in the female personality and psychology. Women characters found in the drama of the first half of the twentieth century are varied and complex. The playwrights go far from the traditional image of women and depict them from *femme fatale* to *New woman*, from childlike waif to mature house wife, from hysteric to feminist, from barmaid to *grande dame*, from flapper to clotheshorse-women portrayals of diversified types have been depicted in different colours. The concept of “*New woman*” was popularized with advent of George Bernard Shaw, who upset and undermined traditional and customary mindset of the society. Shaw's unorthodox frame of mind and distrust of formulary attitudes and institutions as far as the status of women was concerned, both in the society as well as in the sanctuary of home, needs to be studied and re-evaluated today. Shaw's ideas were iconoclastic related to women. In his plays, at the centre of each problem was a woman: fragile but determined, beautiful but powerful and consistently businesslike. She invariably emerged as a complex and central figure in the whole play. Shaw's women epitomize the manifestation of his unorthodox frame of mind which discredited the prevalent conventions and institutions regarding the status of women either in the society or at home. Candida in *Candida*, Louka in *Arms and the Man*, Barbara in *Major Barbara*, Ann Whitfield in *Man and Superman*, Vivie in *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, Joan in *Saint Joan*, Hypatia in *Misalliance* are some of the remarkable portrayals.

We find in Tendulkar's plays the influence of the *New woman's concept* because in his early days, it seemed as he has been greatly influenced by Western

films and playwrights. The concept of a *New woman* is well put in the characters of miss Benare in *Silence! The court is in Session*, Princess Vijaya in *Encounter in Umbugland*, Sarita in *Kamala*, Mitra in *A Friend's Story*, Jyoti in *Kanyadan*, Laxmi in *Sakharam Binder*. A woman plays a central role in Tendulkar's plays. The action in Tendulkar's plays revolves around the women characters. Benare, Sarita, Jyoti, Vijaya, Mitra, etc. are the characters who occupy the focus of the plays. All of them are educated and sophisticated and, hence, refuse to accept the outdated and conventional moral values and to be cowed down by men. In their revolt against the established values, one can easily see the playwright's social attitude as anti-romantic, anti-sophistication and anti-establishment. The women characters are treated with compassion and understanding, though Tendulkar is not a *self-knowledged feminist* without indulging himself in feministic slogan – mongering.

IV

Since centuries women have been looked upon as “object” and men have been the “subject” selecting women for marriage and love without any conscious approach of knowing women's wish and will. They have no right to select and express their feelings of love. But Shaw has turned the table by giving his women characters an open platform to put forward their own choice of their mates. Unlike other Victorian female characters, they never meet bad ends. The Shavian woman makes her own assessment and choice without any illusion. All the women of Shaw *rise in love*. They march from ignorance to knowledge. *The Philanderer* was written in the eighteen- nineties when

Ibsenism was influencing the whole society as well as literature. The play offers a Grace Tranfield, a “New woman” who has challenged the Victorian “Womanly woman”. She possesses almost all the qualities of a “New woman” which clearly illustrates in her words:

“No woman is the property of a man.

A woman belongs to herself and to nobody else”.⁵ [ACT I].

Again she asserts,

“...I will never marry a man I love too much.

It would give him a terrible advantage over me:

I should be utterly in his power. That's what the New woman is like”.⁶ [ACT II]

Grace exercises her wit and wisdom to retain not only her freedom and independence but also of every woman. Grace's self – sufficiency and self- respect as a woman highlights the Ibsenite cult of independent unwomanly (not emotional) woman. She says, “.....I will not give myself to any man who has learnt how to treat women from you and your like. I can do without his love, but not without his respect;...”⁷. (Act II)

Pygmalion is an odyssey of identity and freedom for its central character, Eliza Doolittle a “flower girl”. She travels successfully and turns into a mature woman from an immature. Her journey from a “flower girl” into a “duchess” and finally a “Princess”, suggests a trait of *New woman*.

Vivie in *Mrs. Warren's Profession* is no one else but Mitra in Tendulkar's *A Friend's Story*. Mitra, a male-stuff exerciser, takes out cigarette and lights it in the assertive style. She has full-throated

and masculine laughter, and is carefree in life. She likes male-companies more than the ladies. Similarly, Vivie is the best model of educated, professionally- trained, self -assertive woman. She is the first unwomanly woman who emerges in Shavian drama. Vivie is physically able-bodied, athletic and enthusiastic girl. All the characteristics are unwomanly making her an unwomanly woman. At the age of twenty-two, she exhibits immense courage in all the things she does. She is explosive, outspoken, candid, matter- of fact even in the most sentimental situations.

Benare in “*Silence! The court is in Session*” is the Tendulkar’s projection of a “*New Woman*” in the Indian context. She is a modern, educated, economically independent woman, capable of carrying out her responsibility, but her co-actors fail to appreciate anything good about her. She becomes a victim of the hollowness of the middle class morality and dual standards of society. The questions raised by Benare exist in all ages and societies. She is projected as a rebel against the established values of the basically orthodox society. Benare’s final decision to give birth her child in this ruthless society is similar almost to Major Barbara’s decision in the play *Major Barbara* in which she is turning back to life with a new religion of saving everybody’s soul whether poor or rich, full-fed or ill-fed. This proves that this *New woman* is not only a *revolutionary rebel* but *spiritually strong* too. It also suggests the dramatist’s faith in the ultimate goodness of women with which they can save the world. Like Benare, Barbara accepts the evils of society yet maintains her purity of conscience.

The trait of a *New woman* is her “*mother-like caring attitude*”. In *Candida*, Candida mothers everyone like a resourceful lady. She treats Morell and Marchbanks alike as her baby. Candida shows herself thoroughly practical and so when the time comes to her for making a choice between Morell and Marchbanks, she choose Morell, ‘*a strong in the society but weak before her*’, rather the poetic man Marchbanks. Candida knows that Morell is weak and so he needs her more. The same happens into the case with Sarita into the Tendulkar’s play, *Kamala*. Though both Sarita and Kamala symbolize exploitation of women, Sarita resembles to Candida, as a source of inspiration in her husband’s career. Sarita feels sympathy for Jaisingh and provides him emotional support when he loses his job. She is a Tendulkar’s *New woman* who shows no hitch or hesitation in sharing her husband’s concern for the tribal woman as a gesture towards her rehabilitation, i.e. restoring social justice. Like Candida, Sarita provides an emotional support to Jaisingh and saves him from a total mental collapse. But it is not her submissiveness. She asserts her as a *New woman*, when she says:

“I’ll go on feeling it. But at present I’m going to lock all that up in a corner of my mind and forget about itBut a day will come.... I’ll do what I wish, and no one will rule over me. That day has to come. And I’ll pay whatever price I have to pay for it.”⁸ [52]

But perhaps Tendulkar has sincerely practiced the concept of a *New woman* in the character of Princess Vijaya in the play *Encounter in Umbugland*. The play is steeped in political intrigues, designed to attain the position of authority. But more

significant is the evolution of Princess Vijaya's character from a self-willed, whimsical, mischievous and playful girl into an intelligent and ambitious dictator. The character of Princess Vijay symbolizes the image of a *New woman*. She is one of those rebellious and assertive women who are capable of controlling not only her individual fate but the nation's destiny also. The playwright very minutely depicts the changes in her character from a self-willed and politically inexperienced princess into an intelligent, victorious ruler.

Even in the play *Kanyadan*, Jyoti's transformation showed the cult of a New woman. The development of Jyoti's character from a soft-spoken and highly cultured Brahmin girl into a hardened spouse of her dalit husband shows her courage to challenge the society. The best illustration of her courage is revealed when her father Nath goes to deliver a speech on Arun's autobiography, thinking that his refusal to speak on it will invite more troubles for Jyoti, she stops him daringly to making an insincere, dishonest speech. Her final decision to abandon her father's house with a firm decision never to return shows her readiness to accept real life of full of challenges.

V

Though both playwrights G.B. Shaw and Vijay Tendulkar have worked into the different contexts and on different themes, both are seemed similar into the projection of a *New woman*. Shaw was forever keen to shock the society into thinking that women were not less intelligent than men. Shaw's women have provoked the critics down the years to pass judgment either in their favour or against them. Shaw's women characters give us a glimpse of the

women who were just like men as they would prove to be in the next century. Thus, while Shaw's contemporaries were creating heroines more and more womanly, Shaw was engrossed in creating women who were just like men, though they may be termed as "unsexed women". Shaw was interested for getting a political equality because he thought that a "*man is a woman without petticoats.*"

Just like Shaw, Vijay Tendulkar heralds a new school of drama who handles new themes, new subjects and new techniques. He uses the stage not to entertain the audience but to disturb them by shocking their sensibility, by making them aware of questions pertaining to human relationship and the reality of human existence. While projecting the problems of women in his plays, Tendulkar attacks the feudal values that are responsible to persist with the male-dominated society even in the 21st century. Women are always humiliated and oppressed in the so-called cultured society. But Tendulkar has made his women 'a rebel, 'a New woman' like Shaw's. In his own words he incites them:

"Women themselves ought to be determined to liberate themselves. There're several modes of liberation. Even though you are a divorcee, you go elsewhere – to a certain town or a country- the involvement continues and never comes to an end. There remains a vacuum and it is very painful for a woman. The difference that one is a man and the other is a woman is superfluous. I think that man and woman are just two elements..."⁹.

Again I found the *Ibsenite cult of independent woman* in the words of Jyoti

in the play *Kanyadan*, when she determinedly recites, at the end,

“I march with utter faith in the goal;
I grow with rising hopes, cowards
stay ashore every wave opens a path
for me.”¹⁰[565]

Thus, both playwrights, G.B. Shaw and Tendulkar with *the concept of New*

woman, worked for sexual equality and did whatever they could for women through the medium of drama. The final remark of Jyoti echoes the optimistic vision of the playwright for a woman which is well matched with G.B. Shaw’s creation of the “*New woman*” that exhibits her “*a man in petticoats.*”

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