Leadership, Education, Personality: An Interdisciplinary Journal ISSN: 2524-6178
www.sibe.rpress.co.in, Vol. 18, Issue 10 October 2023, UGC CARE 1

From Paradox to Parody: The Rhetorical Strategies in G.B. Shaw's *Arms and the Man*

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Abstract

George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), an Irish playwright, critic, and Nobel Prize winner of 1925, was one of the most celebrated authors of his age. His works are known to be influenced by Ibsenism and naturalism. He revolutionised the use of comedy in theatre by combining sharp social critique with humour. *Arms and the Man* (1894), one of his most well-known plays, represents an early and commercially successful instance of Shaw's "pleasant plays." His plays are divided into two categories– the initial ones as 'Plays Unpleasant' and the later ones as 'Plays Pleasant.' The play *Arms and the Man* is subtitled as, "An Anti-Romantic Comedy," which perfectly signals Shaw's intention to overthrow the romantic notions of war and heroism that dominated the literary and theatrical landscape of his time. This paper analyses how Shaw employs various rhetorical devices such as paradox and parody to critique nationalism, romantic idealism, and class hierarchy, making *Arms and the Man* an anti-war comedy that remains relevant even today.

Keywords: George Bernard Shaw, *Arms and the Man*, parody, paradox, rhetorical strategies, comedy, social critique, anti-war literature

Arms and the Man is set against the backdrop of the Serbo - Bulgarian War which had its impact on both society and literature. The Victorian era was characterised by dominant romantic notions surrounding war, heroism, and love. The image of the soldier was often idealised as that of a brave and noble hero, a perception heavily fuelled by patriotism and romantic literature surrounding it. Wars were depicted in a glorified manner, often concealing the brutal and dehumanising reality. This romanticised perception was adopted by popular narratives that focused on tales of heroic acts and national victories. Simultaneously, popular culture and literature presented sentimental and unrealistic pictures of love and marriage, emphasising idealised romance and adherence to strict social conventions. The concept of "higher love," as initially embraced by Raina Petkoff in the play, reflects these idealistic notions, which Shaw thereafter challenges through the strategic use of paradox and parody.

The late 19th century also witnessed significant literary and theatrical trends. Melodrama was a dominant trend, characterised by exaggerated emotions, simplistic moral distinctions between good and evil, and sensational plots. Within this dynamic literary and social landscape, Shaw's *Arms and the Man* occupies a significant position. The play engages with the prevailing trends while simultaneously subverting them. It incorporates comic elements that echo the style of melodrama but strategically employs them to satirise romantic ideals, thereby aligning itself with the burgeoning realist movement.

Shaw's *Arms and the Man* can be interpreted as a reaction against the artificiality inherent in melodrama. This approach aligns with the rise of realism in the late 19th century, a movement pioneered by playwrights like Henrik Ibsen who sought to portray life with greater accuracy. Shaw's work resonates with the realist movement by grounding his critique in relatable human experiences and specific social contexts. He deliberately strips away the romantic veneer that often obscured the unpleasant truths about war and love, presenting a more unvarnished perspective. Shaw's concept of the "theatre of ideas" aimed to stimulate intellectual engagement among his audience, encouraging

critical reflection on the ideals presented in his plays, rather than simply providing emotional catharsis as was typical of traditional melodrama.

The play's very title, an allusion to Virgil's *Aeneid* ("Arma virumque cano" – "Of arms and the man I sing"), signals Shaw's parodic intent: he invokes the epic and heroic mode only to turn it upside down (History of Western Theatre).

Paradox, defined as 'a statement that seems on its face to be logically contradictory or absurd, yet turns out to be interpretable in a way that makes sense' (Abrams), is central to Shaw's critique. Shaw's paradoxical rhetoric is first evident in the characterisation of Captain Bluntschli. Initially perceived as a cowardly antihero, Bluntschli paradoxically emerges as the most sensible and courageous character. His practicality starkly contrasts Sergius's superficially gallant yet impractical bravery. Sergius's paradoxical statement perfectly reflects Shaw's critique: "I won the battle the wrong way when our worthy Russian generals were losing it the right way" (Shaw 21).

Although Sergius is introduced as a war hero, but Shaw reveals that his heroic charge was a reckless blunder that succeeded purely by accident: "Oh, he did it like an operatic tenor; a regular handsome fellow, with flashing eyes and lovely mustache, shouting his war-cry and charging like Don Quixote at the windmills." (Shaw 28)

Even Raina initially idealises Sergius as a perfect hero and tries to justify his bravery in front of Captain Bluntschli but later discovers the reality of his superficiality and says: "What a man! What a man! Is he a man!" (Shaw 85). Thus, Raina's admiration for Sergius is revealed to be based on illusions rather than reality. This paradoxical portrayal of Sergius as both a hero and a ridiculous figure refutes the romantic ideal of bravery.

The most enduring paradox introduced is the concept of the "chocolate cream soldier". Bluntschli, in his preference for chocolates over ammunition, becomes a comic parody of heroic soldiers from romantic literature. His statement, "What use are cartridges in battle? I always carry chocolate instead" (Shaw 12), satirises exaggeratedly noble depictions of heroism and positions practical wisdom over flashy display of bravery.

Early in the play, the Swiss officer Captain Bluntschli paradoxically asserts, "nine soldiers out of ten are born fools" (Shaw 22). This paradoxical statement disrupts the romantic image of soldiers as noble and courageous figures. Instead, Shaw underscores the vulnerability, fear, and pragmatism of soldiers confronted with the brutal realities of war.

Shaw's paradoxes extend beyond the battlefield into broader societal contexts. Sergius, portrayed initially as a traditional hero, later declares that soldiering is "the coward's art of attacking mercilessly when you are strong, and keeping out of harm's way when you are weak" (Shaw 42). This statement exposes the paradoxical nature of military heroism, wherein perceived bravery masks calculated cowardice, challenging readers to reconsider their glorified perceptions of war.

Similarly, Raina's initial idealization of romantic love paradoxically transforms into disillusionment, highlighting the artificiality inherent in conventional romantic ideals. Her initial exclamation, "Oh, I shall never be unworthy of you any more, my hero!" (Shaw 9), evolves into a realization of the superficiality of Sergius's so-called heroism, marking her paradoxical transition from romantic idealism to realism.

"A parody imitates the serious manner and characteristic features of a particular literary work, the distinctive style of a particular author, or the typical stylistic and other features of a serious literary genre, and deflates the original by applying the imitation to a lowly or comically inappropriate subject" (Abrams). Parody in *Arms and the Man* is effectively utilised by Shaw to ridicule romantic and conventional norms. Shaw employs parody in his depiction of Sergius's cavalry charge, described by Bluntschli as resembling "slinging a handful of peas against a window pane" (Shaw 27). This humorous, mocking analogy sharply contrasts with traditional heroic portrayals of warfare, serving to deflate grandiose and romantic military ideals.

Shaw expertly employs parody to mock romanticised and idealised depictions of love and war. The play's opening scene itself parodies conventional heroic narratives, contrasting exaggerated romantic notions with the grim reality of military incompetence. Shaw mocks traditional romantic expressions through Sergius and Raina's exaggeratedly sentimental dialogues. Sergius's lament, "higher love… is a very fatiguing thing to keep up for any length of time" (Shaw 33), humorously undercuts lofty romantic pretensions, effectively parodying literary traditions of courtly love.

Shaw's characters themselves often serve as parodies. Raina initially embodies romantic idealism, influenced heavily by opera and poetry, but her high-flown romanticism quickly becomes a source of comic parody. Her dramatic exaltation of Sergius's photograph, elevated "like a priestess" (Shaw 19), caricatures romantic heroine behaviour, emphasizing Shaw's satirical stance on such theatricality in life.

Raina initially upholds a highly romanticised view of herself and her family, presenting an image of nobility and honour. However, she readily lies to protect Bluntschli, an enemy soldier. Her justification, "I lied; I know it. But I did it to save your life" (Shaw 62), while understandable, parodies the idea of unwavering moral rectitude often associated with noble characters in literature.

The introduction of Raina's father, Major Petkoff, further contributes to the parodic tone. His bumbling nature and his clear reliance on the pragmatic Bluntschli for any practical military advice serve as a parody of military leadership based on genuine competence. His immense pride in trivial possessions like a library and an electric bell satirizes the superficial pretentions of the bourgeois class, highlighting the societal value placed on such superficial markers of status rather than actual merit.

Towards the end of the play, the anticipated duel between Sergius and Bluntschli is parodied through Bluntschli's pragmatic and anti-romantic approach. Instead of embracing the heroic ideal of a duel on horseback, Bluntschli suggests a machine gun, stating, "If I go, I shall take a machine gun. And there shall be no mistake about the cartridges this time" (Shaw 72). This response comically deflates the dramatic tension and mocks the traditional, often senseless, nature of duels as a matter of honour.

The ease with which Bluntschli, despite his initial "bourgeois" label, is accepted into the Petkoff family once his wealth is revealed serves as a biting parody of the rigid social hierarchy and the importance placed on financial status. Catherine's swift change of opinion towards Bluntschli highlights the superficiality of their social pretensions.

Critics and scholars have long observed that Shaw's drama is propelled by paradox, inversion, and satire. G.K. Chesterton famously defined Shaw's paradoxes as "truth inherent in a contradiction, a collision between what is seemingly and what is really true" (Ajtony).

Critic Eric Bentley emphasises Shaw's strategic use of rhetorical devices, stating, "Shaw's paradoxes and ironies systematically dismantle romantic ideals to pave the way for pragmatic realism" (Bentley 215). Shaw's rhetorical approach, therefore, is not merely comic but pedagogical, guiding audiences towards deeper social awareness and critical thinking.

This strategic use of various rhetorical devices throughout the play underpins both the initial paradoxes and the subsequent parodic critique. Irony, in its various forms, plays a crucial role. Verbal irony is evident in the characters' initial romantic pronouncements that are later revealed to be hollow, as well as in their cynical observations about war and love. For instance, Raina's early idealization of Sergius sharply contrasts with her eventual attraction to the pragmatic Bluntschli. Situational irony is prevalent in the outcomes of key events, such as Sergius, the supposed hero, achieving victory due to the enemy's error. Dramatic irony is employed to humorous and satirical effect, as the audience is often privy to information that the characters themselves are not, such as Sergius's affair with Louka while Raina remains convinced of their "higher love". The entire play functions as a satire on the romantic idealization of war and love. Shaw employs both Horatian satire, through the gentle and humorous mockery of societal follies like the Petkoffs' social climbing, and Juvenalian satire, through a more biting condemnation of hypocrisy and societal flaws, such as the mercenary aspects of war and marriage. Wit and wordplay are abundant in the dialogue, particularly in Bluntschli's sharp and often cynical remarks, serving to expose the absurdity of romantic ideals and societal conventions. Finally, allusions, most notably the play's title itself, which ironically references Virgil's epic glorification of war, and Raina's references to romantic poets like Byron and Pushkin, amplify the play's parodic intent by contrasting idealized portrayals with the play's more realistic and critical perspective.

Shaw's approach is deliberately provocative, intending not only to entertain but also to challenge and unsettle audiences' comfortable perceptions of heroism, love, and social decorum. As Gibbs aptly observes, "Shaw's paradox and parody conjoin to create a powerful critique that provokes serious reconsideration of entrenched social myths" (Gibbs 245).

Shaw's lasting contribution to dramatic literature lies in his ability to blend humour with serious social critique, prompting audiences to critically examine their own values and the societal norms they often take for granted. The enduring effectiveness of his chosen rhetorical strategies ensures that *Arms and the Man* continues to resonate with contemporary audiences, prompting ongoing critical engagement with fundamental aspects of human experience and societal structures.

Conclusion:

George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man* employs paradox and parody to critique romanticized ideals of war, heroism, and love. By contrasting the theatrical bravado of Sergius with the pragmatism of Bluntschli, Shaw dismantles the illusion of heroism, emphasizing the dissonance between appearance and reality. The motif of the 'chocolate cream soldier' encapsulates this paradox, reducing the noble image of a soldier to something comically mundane. Shaw's use of parody similarly exposes the artificiality of conventional romance, as seen in the exaggerated posturing of Sergius and Raina's courtship. Ultimately, the play serves as both a comedy and a social critique, urging audiences to question their cultural assumptions and the societal narratives that perpetuate them.

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