ANTI-ROMANTIC VIEWS ON WAR: SHAW’S ARMS AND THE MAN

PARUL YADAV
Lecturer, Amity University, Manesar, Haryana, India

ABSTRACT
The nineteenth century dramatists presented an unrealistic view of life. They introduced heroes performing incredible deeds; Shaw rejected the old methods and recommended the domination of reason over emotion. He presented a realistic view of life in his plays. Shaw had the aim to reform the society. He commenced a movement to disillusion humanity of its cherished ideals through his plays. He freed his plays from romanticism and this distinguishes his plays from the plays of Shakespeare and Ibsen. His “drama of ideas” started a new trend in English theatrical history. The elements, which project the values of life as it is, are Shaw’s conceptual weapons. Arms and the Man, like other comedies, do not deal with the big issues of life. In it there is a general onslaught on romantic idealism! In this play Shaw condemns acknowledged ideas about a stereo type heroic stage soldier, exists just in fiction.

KEYWORDS: Illusion, War, Anti-Romance, Shaw, Battle, Heroism, Cowardice

INTRODUCTION
In the epic poem The Aeneid Virgil sings of the glory of war by highlighting the heroic adventures of a Greek hero, Aeneas. But in Arms and the Man Bernard Shaw exposes the hollowness and devastating influence of war. Aeneas comes out as a victorious and glorious hero after taking part in various battles whereas Shaw’s romantic hero, Sergius, proves to be a fool in the end of the play.

Arms and the Man is both amusing and thought provoking play. It is elementary and foremost, an anti-romance. A. C. Ward’s following words throw light on the themes and purpose of the play:

The play has two themes: one is war the other is marriage. These themes are interwoven, for Shaw believed that while war is evil and stupid, and marriage desirable and good, both had become wrapped in romantic illusions, which led to disastrous wars and also to unhappy marriages. (Ward, Arms 85)

Thus the purpose of a dramatist is to warn the people against such romantic illusions, which lead to disastrous wars and unhappy marriages. In this play he deals with war and love deprived of all their romantic glamour. According to him, romantic war is only full of bloodshed and romantic love is often limited to physical attraction. While criticizing war Shaw actually criticizes its glorification. In a letter to William Archer on 23 April, 1894, Shaw writes:

I do not accept the conventional ideals, to them I oppose in the play the practical life and morals of the efficient, realist man, unaffectedly ready to face what risks must be faced, considerate but not chivalrous, patient and practical. (Laurence, Bernard Shaw Collected 427).

Shaw remarks that the play is essentially a drama of real life. In his words “I declare that I am tired to utter disgust of imaginary life, imaginary law, imaginary ethics, science, peace, war, love, virtue, villainy and imaginary everything else, both on the stage and off it. I demand respect, interest, and affection for human nature as it is.” (Carpenter, Bernard Shaw Art of 87)
Though we see difference in the definitions of romanticism but there is like-mindedness about one thing, that romanticism is marked by emotional outburst. Shaw has tried to find his drama on what he regards as ‘genuinely scientific natural history’ and since nothing can be more alien to scientific history than romance. Shaw’s dramas are completely bereft of sentiment. The alternative to illusion is of course reality, and Shaw is championing reality as the basis for social institutions.

Shaw’s main aim was to expose the society deliberately and powerfully. Shaw in his dramas like Caesar and Cleopatra, Arms and the Man, & Man of Destiny create heroes who are naturally great, who can see things out of reach of ordinary man. He describes his heroes by putting them in amazing situations in which they act with self control and with total freedom from convention. His realism is that of a critic of society, he creates characters who are his mouthpieces expressing his views.

War is traditionally associated with glory and love is often coloured with a tinge of romanticism. It is considered that war provides an opportunity for soldiers to show their heroism. War is considered as a tale of heroes who are desperate in fighting and reckless in courage. Shaw rejects the idea to such heroes and succeeds in removing the illusion that surrounds love and marriage in popular imagination. In the play Arms and the Man the hero Captain Bluntschli is a soldier with an ‘incurably romantic disposition’, but he never forgets that discretion is the better part of valour. His commonsense is a refreshing contrast to the reckless heroism of Sergius. Shaw believes that a soldier loves and should love nothing more than life and he fights most heroically when he has the greatest reason to be afraid of his enemy. He is courageous only because he is “coward on instinct’. The instinct of cowardice is a fundamental instinct because it tends to preserve life rather than destroy it.

The attitude of Sergius and Raina to war is also idealistic; Sergius joins the army as a missionary, not as a mercenary like Captain Bluntschli. Sergius led a cavalry charge in battle at Slivnitza and heroically carried the day. Receiving this news Raina and Catherine go ecstatic and embrace rapturously. Because war to them is an act of heroism, a deed of glory and patriotism in which the bravest of the brave risk their lives for the sake of their country, but more perhaps to win public applause. Raina considers Sergius as god and she is all set to worship him like a” priestess”

Raina’s love is bred on Byron and Pushkin’s poetry. This statement clears the illusion of love and war in her mind. Raina’s thinking and attitude are colored by attending operas and reading Byron’s Childe Harold and Pushkin. That’s why the ideas, which she gathered, are all romantic. Now she has a faith that the man she marries will be heroic, patriotic, beyond worldly common places, and wrapped in self-esteem.

Sergius is reported as:

“The hero of the hour, the idol of the regiment” (Shaw, Plays Pleasant Second Volume 4)

Bernard Shaw, however, very soon shattered the romantic notion about war. At this point in the play realism enters in the shape of runaway Serb officer, Captain Bluntschli. Unlike the “tall romantically handsome “Sergius, he is a man “of middling stature and undistinguished appearance” with a “hopelessly prosaic nose.” Shaw purposely contrasts between simple and sharp, between Sergius and Bluntschli, in this comic drama, and it makes for what is called “good theatre.” Bluntschli was being chased by Bulgarian soldiers so to save his life he climbs into Raina’s room. Bluntschli represents the anti-romantic view of everything. He tells Raina that it is one’s duty to live as long as he can. Bluntschli presents himself as hungry, frightened and unwilling to die. Raina resumes to her illusions of war and disdainfully tells him:
Raina: some soldiers, I know are afraid to die. (Shaw, Plays Pleasant Second Volume 8)

Bluntschli make his answer very plainly,

All of them dear lady, all of them, believe me. It is our duty to live as long as we can. (Shaw, Plays Pleasant Second Volume 8)

These lines show Bluntschli’s thinking about life. Bluntschli will fight whenever it is necessary or to save his life. War for him is a necessity and should be fought when imposed. Man should not fight to gain glory and honour. Shaw does not accept any illusion about war, man should not fight to live; soldier should try to save their lives. Bluntschli’s this thinking prepares the audience for further manifestation of romantic ideals, now he discloses his identity to Raina. He tells Raina that he fights for living, not because of patriotic motives:

Don’t hate me, dear young lady, I’m a Swiss, fighting merely as a professional soldier, I joined the Serbs because they came first on the road from Switzerland. (Shaw, Plays Pleasant Second Volume 12)

Bluntschli is a professional soldier besides this he appears to be a man of extra ordinary practical wisdom. Shaw introduced the character of Bluntschli in the play with a special purpose, to disillusion the romantic notions of love and war. He knows the reality and futility of war. Being a professional soldier he will fight for any country if he gets payment. Like Sergius he has no patriotic sentiments and no ambition to acquire glory on battlefield. He would not use the arms to risk his life, in fact he will use the arms as a means to earn livelihood. He considers it wise to flee from the field if it is not possible to face the enemy there. What surprises us is that Bluntschli is not ashamed of his views; he follows the policy of “save – your – skin.” Since he has to earn his livelihood at his own he is always conscious of his physical health. Even in battlefield he carries food with him to keep himself fit and active. He tells Raina

Bless you, dear lady! You can always tell an old soldier by the inside of his holsters and cartridges boxes. The young ones carry pistols and cartridges: “the old ones grub”. (Shaw, Plays Pleasant Second Volume 13)

He shows his presence of mind at many places in the play. He fully understands the delicacy of every situation and acts accordingly; when he was being chased by Bulgarians he takes all kinds of unfair steps to take shelter in Raina’s house. He snatches the Raina’s cloak so that she may not leave the place to tell others or she may not allow others to enter the room. However, this deed of Bluntschli is unromantic but thoroughly practical. He never loses his patience, presence of mind, and sense of humoring in adverse circumstances.

Not only Bluntschli himself is unromantic and unheroic, he openly ridicules the romantic heroism of Sergius. The charge was folly not bravery; it succeeded only because through a logistical blunder the other side had been supplied with wrong ammunition. C.B. Purdom says:

He goes on to describe the magnificent cavalry charge and how the officer at the head of it was carried away by his horse. Thus Bluntschli attacks, unconsciously but devastatingly, the heroine’s cherished ideals’. (Purdom, Guide to plays 159)

Bluntschli is not a coward, though he likes to save his life as far as possible. When it becomes the question of his life, and he feels himself helpless he determines to face it bravely. When he hears the sound of footsteps of Bulgarians, Instead of being nervous his response to Raina is:
The first man in will find out keep out of the way and don’t look. It won’t last long, but it will not be nice…. I promise you a fight: a devil of a fight. (Shaw, Plays Pleasant Second Volume 10)

Now Bluntschli impresses Raina, by his realistic views on war and she determines to save his life. Bluntschli in the first act had done enough to shatter Raina’s illusions about war. Now in the second act Sergius himself comes out fully disillusioned with war and the glory of the war.

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. This is the whole secret of successful fighting. Get your enemy at a disadvantage and never on any account fight him on equal terms. (Shaw, Plays Pleasant Second Volume 47)

He makes these statements because he has a personal complaint that military authorities do not promote him. He concludes that he has attained victory in a wrong way and he could not have been able to achieve it in right. For him, since victory is victory whatever way it may come, he should be promoted. Sergius is wrong as Petkoff says; he should not be promoted to put in danger the whole brigade. In short, Sergius is now fully disillusioned. Sergius realizes that soldiering is a mere trade, so he makes a decision to resign from the post of it. He tells Catherine that he has “no ambition to shine as a tradesman”. (Shaw, Plays Pleasant Second Volume 48)

In a word, Shaw in Arms and the Man has successfully ridiculed the romantic notions of war and love. Those who participate in wars for the sake of romantic heroism are fools. Wars are not won by valour or weapons, but by will power and presence of mind. According to Shaw hero should be guided by an original morality, which is independent of conventions and moral generalization.

REFERENCES