IDENTITY AND ALTERITY IN GEORGE BERNARD SHAW'S WORKS

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Abstract: *George Bernard Shaw is well known for his social implication and the desire to express his personal opinions in his works. The attention he offered topics such as education, class status, marriage, the role of women in society and government was meant to encourage the socialist movement he was supporting by being a member of the Fabian Society. His intention of showing the "proper" way of how society should be organized, by altering the existing order made him appreciated around the world. The paper attempts to touch upon the way in which Shaw builds his characters and how he alters their initial identity in order to makes them more suitable for the society they belong to, trying to offer them an opportunity to develop into better human beings.*

Keywords: *Society, identity, change.*

George Bernard Shaw was born into a family, where his mother was a singer and his father was a drunkard, and so he grew up believing that organized education was not suited for his needs making a schedule for himself and creating the type of information education he considered fitted for his personality. As time passed he moved to London and so his interest in the economic field was raised by Henry George and the socialist Karl Marx and slowly but surely he started to express his beliefs that the best solution for society would be to share both land and natural resources in an equal manner. He was convinced a reform was absolutely necessary, but something which did not seem abrupt to the members of society. His ideas that taking from the rich and giving to the poor would help the world he was living in did not actually materialize and he understood that the good laws that people needed would never be given to fully develop communities around the world the way they should. What was most surprising for his contemporaries was the fact that he was a reformer and both a Marxist and an anti-Marxist. By becoming a Fabian, and shortly after his joining the society its spokesperson he had the opportunity of expressing his mind and of making his name well known.

Most of Shaw's plays did not receive such good reviews as people were puzzled by his wit and use of both paradox and irony. This confusion of the people made them wonder about his intentions regarding his creations. As the Modern period in British literature meant a break with tradition and the playwright took advantage of this position and found it interesting to turn the tables and give women the power to choose. He was not only fighting for their rights, but also for their personality to grow and freely be expressed. "Shaw's concept of women is that they are men's driving force, that which gives birth, which makes men overcome their natural inertia and become creators as women naturally are." (Jain, 2006: 50)

As the Modern era could not completely separate itself from previous events in history in Britain the unstable situation of the society seemed to trouble the intellectuals of the time, as there was not a balance between the members of the British society and there was more than a necessity for evolution. "Shaw's assumption discloses two

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important points: firstly, Shaw's earlier interest in the idea of breeding a species superior to the contemporary, and secondly, his search for political reform not only in Britain but also in all Europe" (Suleiman, 2010: 15). The author's search for the superman as he had previously been debated by Nietzsche was not received only with positive attitude, but sometimes criticised that he turned to this idea because he had been disappointed by the governing system and the failing political strategies.

Shaw considered it important to make a classification of his plays into pleasant and unpleasant ones regarding the topics they dealt with and the problems they raise in the audience's mind as critics opinions were not completely on his side or against him. In 1898, he decided to publish seven of his plays under the very suggestive title *Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant*. The first three were the unpleasant ones: *Widower's Houses*, dealing with the landlords of the slums, *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, analysing the Victorian attitude towards the oldest profession in the world and towards women in general, as we see a woman continuing her *career* as a prostitute just because it brought much money and her greed could not be satisfied; while the last one was *the Philanderer*, which touched the topic of women and marriage. The following four are *Arms and the Man* dealing with love and war, *Candida* exposing the life of a domestic woman and the social ideas related to family life and responsibilities of women – she was attracted to two men who valued her for different things and she felt distinct connections to them, being forced to make a choice, *The Man of Destiny* presenting Napoleon shows the first traits that the author believes to be important for the *superman* of his ideas, and the final play from his pleasant ones is *You Never Can Tell*, which is considered a comedy of error by presenting the confusing identity of characters, who create all types of mix ups and complicate the plot.

The playwright shaped his characters in relation to the behaviour they presented while interacting with other members of society and also through their language. What the spoke about and the way the said it made the audience feel the subtle taste of what the playwright intended to reveal in his work – criticising many social aspects and believing people could actually improve their behaviour and, so, their living conditions. In *Major Barbara* he best expresses the trust that if equality would be a higher goal for many of us then we could all change for the better and society would be a more civilized environment:

> Barbara: There are neither good men nor scoundrels ;there are just children of father; and the sooner they stop calling one another names the better they didn't talk me: I know them. I have score of them through my hands scoundrels criminals, infi-dels, Philanthropists, missionaries, county councilor, all sorts. They're all just the same sort of sinner; and there's the same salva-tion ready for them all. (Shaw, 1966: 25)

Shaw relates his character's identity with the speech and social class. *Pygmalion*, for example, is amusing because Eliza truly speaks like an uneducated person and this creates repetition of ordinary words pronounced in a humorous manner, which makes the audience burst into laughter and enjoy the comedy the author created. Shaw's interest in language is easily observed in other plays as well. He focuses in the way characters behave and speak in order to provide them authenticity and to convince his audience about the topics he considered worthy of being presented on stage.

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> *Pygmalion*, hardly by design, is Shaw's farewell to the age of Ruskin, to an era when that precursor prophet, Elijah to his Elisha, cried out in the wilderness to the most class-ridden of societies. Since Great Britain now is now more than ever two nations, Shaw's loving fable of class distinctions and of a working girl's apotheosis, her rise into hard-won self-esteem, has a particular poignance that seems in no immediate danger of vanishing. (Bloom, 2011: 18)

Remodelling Eliza's personality is Shaw's way of showing the audience that determination is the key to many of human actions. "In *Pygmalion*, Shaw explores the intersection of male artistic creation and female self-creation." (Peters, 2004:7) Higgins is proud of his moulding of Eliza's speech and transforming her from the simple, poor girl, who could not utter words in the proper manner into a well educated young lady who was able to pass for someone in the upper class. He has invaded her personality altering what she represented in the beginning and changed her for his own amusement. Again, there is the idea of colonizer, of the invader; Shaw by being an Irishman was always in close connection with his feeling of never actually fitting in London, showing his changing mood with any occasion he got.

> Shaw again depicts female dependence as the central theme, tying it metaphorically to the classic dyads of male and female, master and slave, colonizer and colonized. Henry Higgins, the Pygmalion who understands all about *how* people talk but grasps nothing of what they *mean*, thinks he can dispose of the new improved Eliza into the marriage market, but explicitly disavows this as an economic relationship. (Davis, 2004: 225)

Higgings seems to have only one goal in mind and for him it is better to treat Eliza like an object, to destroy the former self and make her reimagine herself than pay attention to her real personality. Eliza does not fundamentally change as her character is that of a simple, honest girl, but her looks are altered and the way people view her is completely changed for the better one might say. While Higgins does not overtly admit her qualities he has one goal in mind – that of winning the bet against Colonel Pickering.

Shaw always preferred to twist the plays to his own desires, and although he debated topics, which had been approached by others several times he decided in the case of *Pygmalion* to make of it an anti-romantic play and not give it the ending the audience expected it to have. When Eliza does not marry Higgins, but chooses the young Freddy to make a life together and even start a business she declares her independence. She still knows who she is, in spite of Higgins' modelling of her personality, and she shows him that even though she can make changes in her life and include him, he would never be able to do so. His attitude is that of a person who insists on maintaining his high standards and when she confronts him about her place in his life his response comes as a habitual one making her state that even slippers matter more to him than she does. He does not seem to believe Eliza could ever leave him and take control of her life, with a renewed personality, and improved attitude towards life, not that she has achieved such a level of education:

> Such a reversal of happy ending of the Cinderella story on the level of dramatic techniques is accompanied, on the level of thought, by a reversal

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> of the social conventions, beliefs, values and ideals. This is best shown in *Pygmalion* through the continuous contrast between the established order and the ideal order: Between the capitalist system imposed on society with all its hypercritical, exploiting and class nature, and the Shavian order in which society, people, morality, social manners are unified and seen as indivisible entities/realities. (Suleiman, 2010: 34)

The critics have often debated Shaw's own ambiguous identity issues as he left Ireland to go and live in London, but never actually fitted there. His somewhat chosen loneliness gave him strength to batter analyse the world and have a more profound insight regarding the differences between Ireland and England. He is not a part of his native home anymore and cannot actually adapt to the English life style, so the estrangement he experiences is reflected in his play *John Bull's Other Island*. The playwright gives voice to some stereotypes regarding the two nations and the way ethnicity and nationality are important in creating characters, but also the fact that human beings are not one-sided and other elements as well are needed when describing one's character.

Shaw's protagonists, Thomas Broadbent, an Englishman, and his business partner, Larry Doyle, of Irish descent live in London, but pay a visit to Ireland going to the native Rosscullen, the place where Larry was born. Their plan was to get some land and transform the village into an amusement park. Thomas is a charming character, who fascinates all the Irishmen by offering them loans. His description is a very convincing one:

> He is a robust, full-blooded, energetic man in the prime of life, sometimes eager and credulous, sometimes shrewd and roguish, sometimes portentously solemn, sometimes jolly and impetuous, always buoyant and irresistible, mostly likeable and enormously absurd in his most earnest moments. (Shaw, 1977: 67)

Thomas Broadbent considers himself a true Englishman, even stating it in his speech and freely telling others about it. He is proud of being a true patriot sharing the values of his country and believing in the Protestant descend, considering himself highly moral and obviously superior to the colonized areas. Broadbent's partner, Larry Doyle, is presented in contrast with the British stereotype:

> Mr. Laurence Doyle is a man of 36, with cold grey eyes, strained nose, fine fastidious lips, critical brows, clever head, rather refined and good-looking on the whole, but with a suggestion of thinskinnedness and dissatisfaction that contrasts strongly with Broadbent's eupeptic jollity. (Shaw, 1977: 73)

Doyle identifies himself with the Irish community and states it throughout the play. He identifies with the Irish beliefs and lifestyle by defending his people and hoping for more than the stereotype of being farmers. His behaviour is that of a gentleman and even though he does not boast about it like his partner does he presents all the specific stereotypes related to the Irish and their distrust of the government,

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fighting for freedom and understanding the situation of other countries where the land had been taken from them. Although Doyle is the type of individual, who does not show much emotion as his years abroad have made him more distant to such emotions, when he speaks about his country he cannot maintain such an attitude, loving and hating it at the same time.

Broadbent, on the other hand, does not express real emotions and his intentions, hidden from the Irish are those of a colonizer who focuses his mind on the *prey*. He only pretends to want to be a member of their Parliament and to tell the Irishmen his feelings are similar to theirs understanding their desires and situation, making them expect a change. Speaking like a true politician, he makes many promises and speaks emphatically:

> You shall never regret it Mr. Keegan: I give you my word for that. I shall bring money here: I shall raise wages; I shall found public institutions, a library, a Polytechnic, a gymnasium, a cricket club, perhaps an art school. I shall make a Garden City of Rosscullen: the Round Tower shall be thoroughly repaired and restored. (Shaw, 1977: 156)

Broadbent considers himself very convincing because he believes that he has approached the Irish by imitating their style, adapting to their identity and altering his own only as a façade for what he really desires. But, not all the people of the village are fooled by his attitude. Father Keegan, who does not have a shifting personality such as the business collaborates who arrived from London, as he calls them "Anglicized Irishman and Gladstonized Englishman":

> For me there are but two countries: heaven and hell; but two conditions of men: salvation and damnation. Standing here between you the Englishman, so clever in your foolishness and this Irish so foolish in his cleverness, I cannot in my ignorance be sure which of you is the more deeply damned. (Shaw, 1977: 160)

Father Keegan does not express his overt patriotism; but he rather infers that the heaven he mentions already exists in Ireland, and people should not be torn by opinions regarding different topics of life, instead they should embrace their homeland and hope for a perfect world where the people and the state are one and the same with no boundaries between themselves.

G. B. Shaw's desire to sustain his opinion that people are shaped by the community they life in, but also that hybridity could be a trait of many of them, especially if we take into account his approach of the Irish and British situation of colonizer and colonized. His penetrating personality made it easier to create characters meant to leave behind their old self or at least part of it and create a new being, superior to the previous one, in the desire of uniting people for a better community and keeping a constant intellectual provocation for his public, as he "preferred to create questions and to dramatize situations to highlight the basic political matters, which are part of the social problems." (Majeed, 2010: 449)

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