

## Shaw as an Evolutionist in *Arms and the Man*

Muhammad Iqbal\* & Amjad Ali\*\*

### Abstract

*Shaw's plays have been evaluated from different perspectives. Critics have traced the influences of different thinkers and philosophers like Mozart, Nietzsche, Marx and Ibsen in his works. But the influences of Darwin's and Lamarck's theory of evolution have not been thoroughly and systematically discussed in his plays. There are critics like Maurice Colbourne who just casually touches upon it without making it the subject of serious discussion.<sup>1</sup> This paper looks at the Shavian plays in general and *Arms and the Man* in particular within the frameworks of Darwin's and Lamarck's theories of evolution. It also aims at proving Shaw's preference for Lamarck over Darwin. The treatment of two theories of evolution would not be scientific but rather the focus would be on their literary values. The researchers don't claim originality in deriving aesthetic and literary notions from the theories of evolution, but it is claimed with qualified assertion that the plays of GB Shaw in particular *Arms and the Man* bear the marks of Darwinism and Lamarckism which substantiate the originality of the study.*

**Keywords:** George Bernard Shaw, Evolution, Darwinism, Lamarckism

### Introduction

George Bernard Shaw (G.B. Shaw), who is undisputedly the second most celebrated playwright in English language, and 'England's second Shakespeare'<sup>2</sup> is a literary figure who has been diversely interpreted, criticized and appreciated. Perhaps Nehru of India was quite right to say that Shaw was not only the greatest figures of the age but one who influenced the thought of vast number of human beings during two generations.<sup>3</sup> Shaw's own popular critical comment like, "we get from his plays only what we bring to them"<sup>4</sup>, have always encouraged literary critics to stretch their imagination and give innovative meanings to his plays. His plays are predominantly evaluated as the plays of ideas due to the fact that ideas reign supreme in them. He himself candidly acknowledged that "for art's sake alone I would not face the toil of

---

\* Dr. Muhammad Iqbal, Lecturer, Department of English, Islamia College University Peshawar. Email: iqbalkhan@icp.edu.pk

\*\* Amjad Ali, Lecturer, Department of English, Islamia College University Peshawar

writing a single sentence.”<sup>5</sup> Shaw believed that art makes us sensitive to the ugliness of the world that we believe to be beautiful. Art has a social and moral purpose not just a means to entertain people. It refines the senses of the readers and elevates their souls. Therefore he categorically rejected the aesthetic sensibility as the sole aim of art. But it is important to understand that Shaw does not use morality in the traditional denotation. Morality for him is not the prescribed syllabus designed by the society that formally categorizes deeds into good and bad. Taken in this sense, he always called himself an immoralist, and proudly declared himself a playwright who excelled in “immoral and heretical plays”<sup>6</sup> as his art violets the tight bound boundaries of morality. Shaw believed that the existing laws and customs are always out of date and artists and thinkers should define and refine them. Therefore, his heroes disregard conventional morality and stipulate their own moral laws which in most cases contravene the traditional Christian concepts of goodness and hence are considered devil’s advocates. These protagonists exemplify unconventionality which, on the one hand make them different from their social milieu, and on the other hand make them intellectually aliens. This deviation from the societal frame of conduct is at the heart of Shaw’s plays and is the subject of the current study. This study tries to highlight the moral and intellectual alienation experienced by the Shavian heroes from evolutionary spectrum with a special focus on *Arms and the Man*. The study also aims at discussing anti Darwinism in the play and attempts to show that Shaw was on the side of Lamarck. But it does not make any attempt to probe the scientific peculiarities of the theories. The focus is rather on their aesthetic and literary values. The researchers are not original in interpreting the theories from the literary perspective. The study owes these concepts to K. M. Newton who has very brilliantly derived the concepts in his enlightening essay “Shaw and Tragedy.”<sup>7</sup>

### Literature Review

Shaw’s dramatic genius has been subjected to diverse interpretational frameworks. The influences of different sociological, economic and religious theories, thinkers and philosophers have been traced in his plays. Edward Wagenknecht considers Mozart as the biggest influence on the structure of his plays besides Shakespeare. Shaw condemned Shakespeare’s vulgar hedonism and his lack of purpose in his art saying that Ibsen is superior to Shakespeare for Ibsen has a purpose and Shakespeare does not have any in his art.<sup>8</sup>

Margery M. Morgan on the other hand examines Nietzschean imagery in his plays and discusses the impacts of both the forms of nineteenth-century theatre and the patterns of Greek drama in his plays. Shaw, according to Morgan, experimented with drama and moulded the

forms of drama already in fashion to his own purpose which led to an extravagantly individual achievement. But his art is more deeply related to human experience than is usually understood, however stylistically distorted the presentation may be.<sup>9</sup>

S C Sen Gupta traces the roots of Shaw's economic theory to Marxism and considers Karl Marx's *Das Capital* as the main motivating force behind his economic theory.<sup>10</sup> Shaw says that it is not the love of money which is the root of evil, but the lack of it. The keystone of his economic theory is that every individual who consumes and does not produce is a thief no matter how full his pockets may be of money made by other people. Hence, consumption without equivalent production is theft.

Azher Suleiman focuses on Ibsenian shades on the Shavian art. Shaw was a great disciple of Ibsen and, like him, used the stage as a platform to preach his propaganda against capitalism and the social evils generated by the society. Shaw, following the footsteps of Ibsen, emerged as a leading satirist of the upper class hypocrisies.<sup>11</sup>

### **Lamarckian and Darwinian Traits in Shaw**

Evolution and economic equality through Socialism are the two leading concerns of Bernard Shaw. The economic aspect has been thoroughly explored in his art, but his evolutionary dimension has not received serious attention from the critics. Among the theories of evolution, we would focus on Lamarck and Darwin. The two theories especially of Lamarck's have not been systematically discussed in his plays though they might have been traced in his art in general.

When Darwin's theory of evolution triggered great interest and upheavals in the literary circle in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and influenced a great number of literary figures, Shaw, as Harold Owen points out that unconventionality is the trademark of Shvianism,<sup>12</sup> was an exception. He rejected Darwinism as it encouraged a cut-throat competition among the species, and thereupon its soulless doctrine of survival of the fittest extenuated the unnecessary calamities and sufferings of humankind. But it is important to recognize that Shaw's rejection of Darwinism and his support for Lamarckism was purely on philosophical grounds, not on scientific ones.

Before proceeding further, it is advisable to have some insight into the scientific principles of the two theories and their correspondent aesthetic and literary interpretations.

### **Darwinian Evolution within Literary Framework**

The basic mechanisms of Darwinian evolution are the need for species to adapt to changing circumstances to survive and the fact that changes

within the species that allow them to adapt are the product of chance mutations. Darwin called it the principle of Natural Selection. He contends:

*“Individuals having any advantage, however slight, over others, would have the best chance of surviving and of procreating their kind? On the other hand, we may feel sure that any variation in the least degree injurious would be rigidly destroyed. This preservation of favourable variations and the rejection of injurious variations, I call Natural Selection...under nature, the slightest difference of structure or constitution may well turn the nicely-balanced scale in the struggle for life, and so be preserved.”*<sup>13</sup>

Thus the world is the master over the species and adaptation is essentially passive. There is no role in Darwinism for volition— an active will to change in order to survive. The important existential ethic of Darwinian evolution is passive adaptation and if no such adaptation is possible, then the species opt for another extreme i.e. extinction by making a tragic choice. So passive adaptation and tragic choice are the two important implications one can derive from Darwin’s theory of evolution without disturbing the basic premises of the theory.

#### **Lamarckism within Literary Framework**

Lamarckism, on the other hand, sees evolution as an active rather than a passive process. According to Lamarck’s theory of evolution, species change not because they passively adapt to their world but they seek to master it by willing changes within themselves. Carl Jay Bajema sums up Lamarckism as a process whereby evolution is brought about through the so-called inheritance of acquired characters—the direct effects of use or disuse of organs<sup>14</sup>. In Lamarck’s evolution the crucial element is the concept of change proceeding from a ‘sense of needs’, an active desire on the part of the organism, rather than from blind chance. Lamarck contends:

*we “should have seen that sense of needs – originally hardly perceptible, but gradually increasing in intensity and variety – has led to the attempt to gratify them; that actions thus induced, having become habitual and energetic, have occasioned the development of organs adapted for their performance; that the force which excites organic movement...was...introduced into the animals themselves, and fixed within them; and lastly that it gave rise to sensibility and, in the end, to intelligence.”*<sup>15</sup>

So Lamarckian evolution is a continuous struggle impelled by a force within the organism. It means that Lamarckism offers a third choice that Darwinian thinking denies: an active choice that seeks to master the

world. Mastery of the world, not passive adaptation or tragic resistance to it, is the governing principle of Lamarckian thinking. A typical Darwinian character would either adjust himself/herself to the events in order to survive by sacrificing the self or they compromise their survival by showing commitment to the values or principles they represent when they can not be reconciled with the world.

A Lamarckian character on the other hand rejects the fixity of self-world relationship. The self is seen as infinitely malleable transformable by means of the will and the relationship between the self and the world is perceived as alterable. This concept of self corresponds to Shaw's concept of self which is, "only the raw material which society manufactures into the finished rascal or the finished fellowman."<sup>16</sup> It means that Shavian self is simply the sum of cultural codes, programmed like a computer to follow instructions, incapable of change until reprogramming occurs. It is extremely amenable to change and enjoys chameleon-like receptivity.

### **Shaw on Darwinism**

Shaw, as David Daiches says, "was a Lamarckian evolutionist influenced by Samuel Butler"<sup>17</sup> He borrowed his anti-Darwinism tendency from Samuel Butler who said that Darwin's view of the mechanism of evolution was erroneous and that a more correct view is advocated by his grandfather Erasmus Darwin and French naturalist Lamarck.<sup>18</sup> Shaw in a letter 26<sup>th</sup> January 1902 addressed to HG Wells acknowledged his debt to Samuel Butler regarding his anti-Darwinian outlook: "Samuel Butler was here on Friday. He declared with great energy that Darwin had banished mind from the universe. Reid has an article in *the Monthly Review* which certainly proves that Darwin has banished mind from him"<sup>19</sup> Shaw like his mentor, Samuel Butler, was not convinced that Darwin has proved his case, and perceived it as reductionism; that is to say, Darwin downgraded human beings from higher forms to lower forms.

Shaw's chief objection to Darwinism was at the ideological level. He had serious reservations regarding the principle of survival of the fittest for it indulged the species in existential war, and made improvement of human race a mere wishful thinking. Weintraub resonates exactly the same point when he says that Shaw was a creative evolutionist rather than a blind Darwinist.<sup>20</sup> As an evolutionist, he could not shut his eyes to a scheme of life which set up a purposeless and amoral world through the principle of natural selection by the survival of the fittest. Hence, Darwin prepared the way for might is right competition of imperial powers culminating in the war as Nicholas Grene contends that Shaw identified Darwinism as the root cause of the First World War.<sup>21</sup>

Shaw, being an optimist philosopher, believed in the essential goodness of human nature. A vital instinct in Shaw insisted that life is not tragic by nature. The tragedy in Shakespeare's plays spring out of 'fatal flaws' in his heroes. Shaw decided to create heroes who possess self control and a sense of purpose. According to Wilson, "Shaw faced the task of solving evolutionary problem by presenting individuals who are not ignorant and who are self-motivated to avoid taking tragic choices".<sup>22</sup> Intelligence is the stock-in-trade of Shavian heroes.

But Lamarckism, by and large, in Shavian plays has unduly been ignored by the majority of the critics. As explained in the preceding paragraphs, Shavian world is a disguised Lamarckism. Hence, the traditional notion of heroism finds no space in Shavianism. A hero is one who can achieve maximum happiness with the minimum amount of pain. Life is an invaluable gift which cannot be sacrificed at the altar of mundane principles. It is, therefore, the principles that should be given secondary consideration vis-à-vis human life. The sublime ideals of practicality and avoiding tragic choice make Shavian heroes pragmatists.

#### **Shaw's Pro-Lamarckism and Anti-Darwinism in *Arms and the Man***

Shaw intends to project this Lamarckian perceptive in *Arms and the Man*. Although critical assumptions on *Arms and the Man* are so vast that one almost assumes that no fresh critical analysis is possible, but the room for new insights into his works is encouraged by Eric Bentley's comments in *The Cult of the Superman*, "I asked myself: if Shaw is simple author, why did so many people feel obliged to give their opinion of him, and why did their opinions differ so widely from each other, and why were so many of them complacently shallow?"<sup>23</sup> It is thus still possible to absorb and confront previous interpretations while putting forward an alternative, and one hopes, stronger perspective. *Arms and the Man* for Arthur Ganz denigrates the romantic dream of military glory. Bluntschli represents reality while Sergius stands for illusion. The play, in Louis Crompton's view, ridicules medieval chivalry through Sergius and appreciates the practicality of Bluntschli. But the play – it can be argued with qualified assertion – can accurately be understood when the two major characters are seen within Darwinian and Lamarckian frameworks. And this interpretation does not have any unShavian flavour. It finds support in Wilson who says that any consistent writer can be 'formularized'<sup>24</sup> and Shaw falls in the same category though the job would be quite a complex one.

Sergius sees the world in terms of a conflict between self and the world and would willingly accept death rather than compromise the ideals with which he identifies: "Oh, (fervently) give me the man who will defy to the death any power on earth or in heaven that sets itself up

against his own will and conscience: he alone is the brave man".<sup>25</sup> In the course of the play, however, he becomes disillusioned with his ideals. The realities of soldering reveal that his heroic charge in which he is prepared to sacrifice his life for the ideal of patriotism is merely ridiculous. The modern warfare operates with a utilitarian philosophy which he regards with contempt: "Soldering... is the coward's art of attacking mercilessly when you are strong, and keeping out of harm's way when you are weak".<sup>26</sup> The other sphere that he regards as worthy of commitment, love, also disappoints him, for human inconstancy like the nature of war renders any heroic sacrifice ridiculous. His dilemma is that he has failed to discover the idea of autonomous and inviolable self as mere delusion. The self cannot withstand the coercions of culture. The existence of self as an entity independent of the social environment in which it acquires awareness is a myth. Therefore, besides the hollowness of ideals, there is the lack of unity within the self. There is no single Sergius but a "half dozen Sergiuses who keep popping in and out this handsome figure of mine... Which of the six is the real man? That's the question that torments me. One of them is a hero, another a buffoon, another a humbug, another perhaps a bit of a blackguard... And, one, at least, is a coward: jealous, like all cowards".<sup>27</sup> A Darwinian character rejects the separation between self and principles; he/she is defined by the principles and when the two can not be reconciled, he/she either takes a tragic choice or passively adopts. Sergius perceives that his self and the principles of patriotism, love and chivalry that he was prepared to die for stand at opposite poles. So he slides to disillusionment, accept the banality of the world and starts taking life as a tale told by an idiot.

Bluntschli, of course, is the character opposed to Sergius in the play. Whereas Sergius aspires towards a heroic death, Bluntschli's interest in living as long as possible: "It is our duty to live as long as we can".<sup>28</sup> and to preserve his life he is prepared to perform acts which a Darwinian like Sergius would reject out of hand, such as obtaining the protection of a woman by threatening to shame her. Bluntschli is thus prepared to adapt to the world in order to survive. But he is prepared to adapt only to a point and this fact must qualify the view that he is realist or a pragmatist. He is thus a thoroughgoing Lamarckian who employs his energies to transform the world so that it may correspond more closely to his ideals. His impulse is to change his self so that he can master the world, not allowing the world to master him. He, unlike Sergius, does not deal tragically with modern warfare by doing heroic deeds but recognizes the mundane nature of the war by bring chocolates instead of ammunition to the field. This interpretation of Lamarckian character comes close to Shaw's concept of realist whom he defines as a man who is prepared to face life objectively without the narcotics of the ideal.<sup>29</sup> He

is romantically attracted to Raina from the first, but makes no declaration of how he feels as long as he is not sure about success. In contrast, Sergius's admiration for fixed principles traps him into marriage with Louka.

### **Conclusion**

*Arms and the Man* records the vulgarization of Darwinist view prevalent in Shaw's time, the view that man is passive before the environmental factors of his existence. Shaw's leading concern here is to be a Lamarckian new exegete to promote the true, original, humanist champion against the blind and dark fatalism of Darwinism that saw man's life as just another part of natural history. He is not above rebuking crude Darwinism as a sophomore fallacy. And it is pertinent here to refer to the fact that Shaw during his personal life never pretended to physical courage. He used to explain that when shooting or other violence started, he would be found under the bed, only to come out when all the violence was over and genuine constructive business started. He knew his own strengths and weaknesses. The world might be given but not determined; circumstances might make man but man can also make circumstances and Shavian men make themselves; they are not shaped as mechanical products of blind determinism.



## Notes and References

---

- <sup>1</sup> Maurice Colbourne, *The Real Bernard Shaw* (London: J.M.Dent and Sons LTD., 1949)
- <sup>2</sup> Colin Wilson, *Bernard Shaw: A Reassessment* (London: Hutchinson & CO., 1969), 265
- <sup>3</sup> Azher Suleiman, *George Bernard Shaw* (Baghdad: Mena, 2010), 4
- <sup>4</sup> Quoted in Maurice Colbourne, *The Real Bernard Shaw*, op.cit., 77
- <sup>5</sup> Elsie. B. Adams, *Bernard Shaw and the Aesthetes* (Ohio State University Press, 1971), 43
- <sup>6</sup> George Bernard Shaw, Preface, *Blanco Posnet* (London: Max Reinhardt, 1973), 374-75.
- <sup>7</sup> K. M Newton, "Shaw and Tragedy", in *Defence of Literary Interpretation* (Houndmills: Macmillan Press, 1986)
- <sup>8</sup> Edward Wagenknecht, *A Guide to Bernard Shaw* (New York: Atheneum Publisher, 1971)
- <sup>9</sup> Margery, M. Morgan, *The Shavian Playground*, (London: Methuen, 1972)
- <sup>10</sup> S. C. Sen Gupta, *The Art of Bernard Shaw* (Calcutta: Mukherjee & CO., 1974)
- <sup>11</sup> Azher Suleiman, *George Bernard Shaw*, op.cit.
- <sup>12</sup> Harold Owen, *Commonsense about the Shaw* (London: George Allen & Unwin LTD., 1915), 9
- <sup>13</sup> Charles Darwin, *Origin of the Species* (Forgotton Books, 2007), 61
- <sup>14</sup> Carl. Jay. Bajema, *Natural Selection Theory* (New York: Hutchinson Ross Pub., 1983)
- <sup>15</sup> Jean. de Baptiste. Lamarck, *Philosophie Zoologique* (Forgotton Books, 2007), 45.
- <sup>16</sup> *The Road to Equality: Ten Unpublished Lectures and Essays*, ed. Louis Crompton (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 96. Quoted in Cambridge companion by Christopher Innes, 24
- <sup>17</sup> David Daiches, *A Critical History of English Literature*. Second Edition, (1960), 1105.
- <sup>18</sup> Quoted in Edward Wagenknecht, *A Guide to Bernard Shaw*, op.cit., 79
- <sup>19</sup> Selected Correspondence of Bernard Shaw, *Bernard Shaw and H.G. Well*, ed., J.Percy Smith, 8
- <sup>20</sup> Stanley Weintraub, *The Unexpected Shaw* (New York: Fredrick Ungar Publishing CO., 1982)
- <sup>21</sup> Nicholas Grene, *Bernard Shaw: A Critical Heritage* (Houndmills: Macmillan Press, 1984)
- <sup>22</sup> Colin Wilson, *Bernard Shaw: A Reassessment*, op.cit., 142
- <sup>23</sup> "Foreword" to Eric Bentley's *Bernard Shaw: Revised Edition (1957)*, xi
- <sup>24</sup> Colin Wilson, *Bernard Shaw: A Reassessment*, op.cit., xi
- <sup>25</sup> George Bernard Shaw, *Arms and The Man*, (London: Max Reinhardt, 1973), 116
- <sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, 104
- <sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, 106
- <sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, 95
- <sup>29</sup> George Bernard Shaw, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, (Michigan: Brentano's, 1913), 50