

# Satire Of Militarism In George Bernard Shaw's *Arms And The Man*

Asst. Prof. Dr. May Mohammed Baqer Twayej  
College of Education (Ibn Rushd), University of Baghdad, Iraq

<sup>1</sup>Received: 02 August 2024; Accepted: 02 September 2024; Published: 06 September 2024

---

## ABSTRACT

This article exposes how George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) launches severe attacks against all the vices and the social maladies that were widely spread in his time especially the romantic notions about war and soldiering. This study is a qualitative study. Through satire, George Bernard Shaw mocks on and ridicules all the follies and the misconceptions of the characters in war and militarism in his well-known play *Arms and the Man* (1894). Here the dramatist satirizes the romantic notions of war that glorify such a terrible event. Shaw's message is that there can be peaceful alternatives to perpetual fighting. He was dedicated throughout his life to curbing violence, especially that of wars, and *Arms and the Man* was one of the vehicles he used to plead his case.

**Keywords:** *satire; militarism; ridicule; launches; misconception; glorify*

## INTRODUCTION

According to George Bernard Shaw the supreme aim behind the stage is not to arouse people's laughter but to make them think deeply about their life or as Abdul Sattar Awad Ibrahim (2008) said "to make a change in life on various levels which should be [Shaw's] absolute target." (p.1001) The writer eloquently expressed this matter when he stated that "when a comedy is performed, it is nothing to me that the spectators laugh: any fool can make an audience laugh. I want to see how many of them, laughing or grave, are in the melting mood" (Shaw, 1973., p.10). To make people ponder over their social life, the dramatist uses satire and comedy as his powerful medium. Through satiric and comic medium, Shaw wants the audience to watch themselves vividly in order to recognize their faults and shortcomings. That is why all Shaw's readers believe that most of the attacks that the dramatist launches in his works are directed against the audience themselves not against his stage figures (Shaw, 1981, p.27). In this regard, Shaw has used the stage to reform his audience because he believes that this artistic institution "is both [a] school and [a] church" (Shaw, 1973, p. 7). According to the point of using satire, Fesanghari remarks that to "reform the thoughts, beliefs, individual and social behavior" of society. (p.77). Also Fatima Abdul Sattar Azeez and Rana H. Al-Bahrani (2019) asserted that through the manipulation of satire the dramatist tries "to address [the deficiencies] of social beliefs and attitudes" (p. 205). The stage of Shaw is to thus, from what is said earlier it becomes clear that in almost all his plays, Shaw is satiric, and his weapon is comedy, a weapon which is of a constant interest, and whose popularity continues undimmed through the ages. It is worthy to mention that Shaw's masterpiece *Arms and the Man*, which is the core of this paper, is a typical example of using satire and laughter as a weapon or as a medium through which G. B. Shaw transmits his direct messages.

## SHAW'S MANIPULATION OF ELEMENT OF SATIRE

*Arms and the Man* is one of Shaw's most famous plays that belongs to *Plays Pleasant*. This work is a comedy of three acts. It was first produced in 1894 and published in 1898. Utilizing the element of satire, Shaw in this drama attacks all the false and faulty Victorian idealism concerning the romantic illusions of war, soldiering, fake heroism, and sham patriotism. And at the same time, the dramatist implicitly shows a strong inclination towards loving peace and detesting war. This repulsion towards war, and peace-loving tendency, in fact, springs from the nature of the dramatist who himself loves peace and detests war. George Bernard Shaw has clearly voiced this issue when he asserted that: "As a humane person I detested violence and slaughter, whether in war, sport or the butcher's yard. I was a Socialist detesting our anarchical scramble for money, and believing in equality as the only possible permanent basis of social

---

<sup>1</sup> How to cite the article: Twayej M.M.B.; Satire Of Militarism In George Bernard Shaw's *Arms And The Man*; *International Journal of Advancement of Social Science and Humanity*; Jul-Dec 2024, Vol 18, 38-41

organization" (1981, p. 27). In a letter to William Archer on 23<sup>rd</sup> April, 1894, George Bernard Shaw writes: "I don't 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).

As a powerful element at hand, Shaw frequently employs satire in *Arms and the Man*. This vital element can even be found in the very title of the play itself which is taken from the first line of Virgil's epic poem *Aenied*. In this particular poem, Virgil praises his hero and glorifies war. Satirically, Shaw reverses this idea in his play. Instead of glorifying war and celebrating heroism, the dramatist shows its hollowness and uselessness; and instead of presenting soldiers as heroes and conquerors, Shaw presents them as fugitives and cowards. As if by this satirical treatment of the theme of Virgil's poem, the playwright wants the people to wake up from their romantic dream and see the bitter reality of wars. Thus, the title of the play itself indicates a comic-ironic treatment of the theme of Virgil's *Aenied*.

Shaw's intention behind writing *Arms and the Man* is to open people's eyes to the dark and destructive side of wars. He seriously wants people to remove the romantic halo that they surround wars with. And he urges that people should not draw in their imagination romantic pictures out of brutal and bloody wars. On the contrary, they should know the grim and ugly truth behind these bloody experiences. The playwright vehemently asserts that war with all its bloodshed and destructibility is not an occasion to display valour or any other heroic qualities. Shaw sees war as something dreadful and brutal. But this does not mean war is not necessary. He just wants to say that there is no need to glorify it or celebrate its memory. In other words, there is no heroism in bloodshed. What Shaw precisely wants to do in this play as Kian Pishkar (2000) has affirmed to "discredit war by de-glamorizing it, stripping it of its romantic trappings. [And] dissociating it from glory and heroism" (p.694). In his book *A Guide to the Plays of Bernard Shaw*, C. B. Purdom has remarked that the major goal behind writing this play is to "destroy illusions, and to compel his audience to face realities" (p.158). It is worthy to say that although the war in the play is restricted to the Balkans, Shaw satirizes war in general (Twajj, 1996, p 5).

In the play under consideration, Shaw focuses on the war between the Bulgarians and the Serbs. This war lasted for six months, from November 1885 up to March 1886. The writer explicitly mocks the two conflicting forces in this war because they showed themselves as puppets or as playthings in the hands of the Russians and the Austrians respectively. And this matter is confirmed by a Major in the Bulgarian army (Petkoff) when he emphasized that: "We shouldn't have been able to begin fighting if these foreigners hadn't shewn us how to do it: we know nothing about it; and neither did the Serbs" (Shaw, 1964, *Arms and the Man* p.43). And on another occasion Petkoff re-confirmed this fact when he asserted that those who were leading the Serbs were "all Austrians, just as our officers were all Russians" (Shaw,1964, *Arms and the Man* p.43). Undoubtedly this speech and the one before clearly reveal that both the Bulgarians and the Serbians are mere puppets or powerless toys in the hands of foreign forces. What is more satiric and comic at the same time is that the main character in the play is neither a Bulgarian nor a Serbian but a Swiss soldier whose name is Bluntschli. This professional soldier is fighting with the Serbs against the Bulgarians and the only reason why he joined the Serbs is "because they came first on the road from Switzerland" (Shaw,1964, *Arms and the Man* p.24). This trite logic, in fact, shows that the long cherished ideals of heroism and patriotism in their pure sense are deformed and shattered in this play and the war itself has lost its cause.

It is worthwhile to say that by presenting the character of Bluntschli and his realistic attitudes, Shaw creates a sort of balance between the views of the idealistic people who see in war a romantic source of heroism and that of the realistic ones who see war as a terrifying experience that people should escape from. As a matter of fact, these contrastive perspectives towards war form the basis or the pivot that everything in the play is revolving around. These views also categorize the characters into two groups according to the ideals that they cherish, for example, Raina --the heroine--, Catherine --Raina's mother--, and Sergius-- the anti-hero-- all stand for the romantic or the idealistic views while Bluntschli represents the realistic ones.

Amusingly in this play there is no hero. Sergius, the idealistic soldier who sees war as a glorious thing, is striped from heroism. All his deeds and actions are unheroic. Shaw explicitly mocks him by presenting him as nurturing invalid views and attitudes. The writer even satirizes Sergius' victory with his cavalry regiments by making it happening by chance because the Serbs "got the wrong ammunition" (Shaw,1964, *Arms and the Man*, p.27). It is this unheroic victory that made this officer the hero of the hour. But around this unheroic victory a very big halo of heroism and romantic illusion is formed. This can be seen in the following fully charged romantic speech in which Catherine describes to Raina Sergius' peerless victory and the speech starts like this:

a cavalry charge! Think of that! He defied our Russian commanders—acted without orders—led a charge on his own responsibility—headed it himself—was the first man to sweep through their guns. Can't you see it, Raina: our gallant splendid Bulgarians with their swords and eyes flashing, thundering down like an avalanche and scattering the wretched Serbs and their dandified Austrians officers like chaff. (Shaw, 1964, *Arms and the Man* 16-17)

Militarily speaking there is no heroism whatsoever in what Sergius has done. But it is the romantic illusion of war that Raina constantly nurtures and keeps feeding that makes her see heroism in all Sergius' actions even the trivial ones. But paradoxically, deep in her heart she suspects his illusory heroism and sham chivalry and this is how she expressed her doubt: "I doubted him: I wondered whether all his heroic qualities and his soldiership might not prove mere imagination when he went into a real battle" (Shaw, 1964, *Arms and the Man* 17). Raina even doubts the commonly accepted ideals regarding heroism and patriotism and this is how she puts it: "Our patriotism. Our heroic ideals. I sometimes used to doubt whether they were anything but dreams." (Shaw, 1964, *Arms and the Man* 17) But in spite of all this doubt, Raina likes and prefers to live in her romantic and dreamy world by convincing herself that her lover has become the hero of the hour who acted wisely and heroically in the war. These dreamy notions cheer her up to the extent that she starts shouting: "My hero! My hero" (Shaw, 1964 *Arms and the Man* 19)! According to Mohammed Baqir Twajj (1996) this incident has clearly shown that "heroism . . . at that time was decided either by the beloved's joy or her despair"(P.6).

### **BLUNTSCHLI IS THE MOUTHPIECE OF GEORGE BERNARD SHAW**

But this romantic and sentimental picture that Raina draws in her imagination of a victorious and unbeatable hero is ruthlessly shattered when she met Bluntschli. This Swiss fugitive runs away from the battle and hides himself in her bed-room. And it is from him that she discovers the truth about soldiering and war. As a matter of fact, Shaw deliberately has made the character of Bluntschli as a destroyer of the illusion and the representative of truth because most of the writer's views on war are expressed in the play through the mouth of this character (Tilak, 2005).

Bluntschli tells Raina that her hero--Sergius--is fool and unwise for he has led his cavalry regiment to attack the Serbs who have guns. And in his opinion this act is very foolish and suicidal. For Bluntschli it is not "professional to throw a regiment of cavalry on a battery of machine guns, with the dead certainty that if the guns go off not a horse or man will ever get within fifty yards of the fire" (Shaw, 1964, *Arms and the Man* p.26)? Bluntschli adds that Sergius' attack is very funny; it is "like slinging a handful of peas against a window pane" (Shaw, 1964, *Arms and the Man* p.27). This fugitive mocks and satirizes Sergius and assures Raina that this Bulgarian officer does not have any intention to terminate his life for the others and his attack is a good clue for that. All these facts show that Raina's hero is only an illusion and the mantle of knighthood that she surrounds him with is only an empty halo. These bare and bitter facts were very shocking to Raina. They have opened her eyes and woke her up from her dreams and illusions. But the most shocking thing for this aristocratic girl is not what Bluntschli has said but her discovery that instead of carrying cartridges, this fugitive carries chocolate because he believes that there is no use of carrying cartridges in battle, and this is how he explained it to her: "I've no ammunition. What use are cartridges in battle? I always carry chocolate instead; and I finished the last cake of that hours ago" (Shaw, 1964, *Arms and the Man* p. 25). Bluntschli strongly believes that food is more important than ammunition in battles for it is an essential thing to keep the soldiers alive. It is worthwhile to mention that the truth of this view has been amply proved by the experiences of the two World Wars. These two global wars have "prove[d] beyond doubt that chocolate (symbolizing all kinds of food) is as necessary to the army as cartridges" (A. C. Ward 1964 in his "Introduction" to Shaw *Arms and the Man* pp.97-98). According to Raghukul Tilak who agrees with Ward concerning "a soldier's staple fare is not arms of heroism, but food, and his chief concern is not military glory, but the preservation of his life. It is for this reason that Bluntschli runs away from the battlefield, and instead of cartridges he carries chocolates to the front"(2005, p.278).

The last shocking thing that Bluntschli tells Raina is that the main duty of the soldier is not to show courage or heroic qualities in the battle, but to keep himself alive as much as possible or as he puts it "our duty [is] to live as long as we can" (Shaw, 1964, *Arms and the Man*, p. 21).

Now it becomes obvious that through the character of Bluntschli, Shaw has presented a realistic picture of an ordinary soldier who is glad to escape from the battlefields wherever and whenever it is possible. The direct message that the author wants to send to the reader through the character of Bluntschli is that: "Man is not at all heroic, but a pathetic creature of flesh and blood who is soon exhausted under the strain of war, . . . and is nervous and frightened like a mouse. It is danger alone which can rouse him to action." (Tilak, 2005, p.278)

Through Bluntschli's speech, the picture becomes quite clear in Raina's mind. This realistic character has shattered all her romantic illusions concerning war and heroism and destroyed the great halo that she is weaving around her lover. This practical soldier has laid the truth bare in front of her to the extent that she starts putting all her ideals in question. After meeting this fugitive, Raina starts thinking deeply and practically about her life and her relationship with Sergius. The remarks of this Swiss soldier have awakened her from all her romantic dreams and she starts looking realistically to life. Regarding Bluntschli's influential character and how far he has re-shaped the character of Raina, Tarik Habieb Bresam's speech was worth quoting:

Bluntschli . . . teaches the romantic, aristocratic girl, Raina, many important things. He teaches her how she should live and face facts and make her decisions. He leads her to know how she can be a realistic not a romantic woman. He changes all her imaginative and romantic values and dreams. He helps her, indirectly, to build a solid character by which she can face her fate and future. She learns how she can tell the truth no matter how bitter it may be (1981, pp.57-58).

## CONCLUSION

Finally, it becomes obvious that George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man* is based on satire. The dramatist uses this specific element to ridicule those who see in war a romantic source of heroism and see soldiers as romantic heroes. The author explicitly wants to tell them that there is neither glory nor heroism in wars and that soldiers are not heroes, they are only powerless puppets in the hands of their commanders. In addition to that, Shaw believes that killing innocent people in wars cannot be considered heroism for real heroism as Bresam (1981) has affirmed "must serve humanity and supply mankind with peace and happiness" (p.54).

## REFERENCES

1. Azeez, F. A. and R. H. Al-Bahrani (2019). A Cognitive Linguistic Study of the Satirical Language in Al-Hajjar's Caricatures. [Electronic Version]. *Journal of College of Education for Women*, 30 (1). 203-217. <https://www.iasj.net/iasj/article/161658>.
2. Ibrahim, A. A.(2008). Nefarious Elements in a Selection of George Bernard Shaw's Plays. *AL-Ustath Journal for Human and Social Sciences*, 68, 991-1015.
3. Bresam, T.H.(1981). *The Concept of Heroism As Reflected in Shaw's Ceasar and Cleopatra and Arms and the Man and Shawqi's The Death of Cleopatra and Qambeez*. Master's Thesis, University of Baghdad, College of Arts.
4. Fesanghari, H. (2015). Humorous in Poem of Al Baha Zohair. *AL-Ustath Journal for Human and Social Sciences* 223, 77-96. <https://www.iasj.net/iasj/article/134013>.
5. Pishkar, K.(2000). Bernard Shaw: *Arms and the Man*. In Kian Pishkar. *A Reader's Guide to English Literature*. Tehran: ETRAT/ GOM,
6. Purdom, C. B. (1963). *A Guide to the Plays of Bernard Shaw*. London: Methuen & CO LTD.
7. Shaw, G. B. (1964). *Arms and the Man*. London: Longmans.
8. \_\_\_\_\_. (1981). "Preface: Mainly about Myself." In George Bernard Shaw. *Plays Pleasant*. Reading, G. B.: Cox & Wyman, Ltd., 7-27.
9. \_\_\_\_\_. (1973). "Preface to *Plays Pleasant*" in George Bernard Shaw, *Arms and the Man*. London: Longman Group Ltd., 1-13.
10. Tilak, R. (2005). *Bernard Shaw: Arms and the Man*. New Delhi: Rama Brothers India PVT. LTD.
11. Twaij, M. B. (1996). The Drama of Ideas and G. B. Shaw's *Arms and the Man*. *AL-Ustath Journal for Human and Social Sciences* 7, 1-25.
12. Ward, A. C. (1973). Introduction to *Arms and the Man*. In George Bernard Shaw, *Arms and the Man*. London: Longman Group Ltd., 95-100.