

A Political Apostasy: George Bernard Shaw's *The Apple Cart* as a Play of Ideas

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Abstract:

This study is an attempt to discuss Shavian drama (Mental Theatre) as a method to convey ideas. The Drama of Ideas uses themes to challenge ingrained social norms. It forces the audience to think and reconsider issues. So, it has an inescapable place in contemporary drama. It is not just about rendering laughter, but it is about inspiring thought as well. Discussion is a fundamental feature of the Shavian drama since George Bernard Shaw aspires to change and he tries to reform society. He exposes reality and makes people recognise the actuality of issues that they face. In light of this, Shaw's comedy is known as the Comedy of Purpose as it repurposes the theatre of ideas into a new domain. He is concerned with what makes a good government. Shaw's political views are concentrating on economic aspects. Thus, through *The Apple Cart* (1930), he hopes to establish a system of a government whereby the people choose their governors and are able to remove them when necessary. He highlights the point that both democracy and hereditary monarchies fall short in that concern. Bernard Shaw does not oppose democracy or monarchy but capitalism, which deactivates the process of social and economic advancement. Consequently, Shaw hints through *The Apple Cart*, that the government, within a democratic framework is basically a cart that the prime minister employs for personal purposes.

Keywords: Shavian, Discussion, Purpose, Drama, Demagogues, Democracy, Capitalism.

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ارتداد سياسي:

"عربة التفاح" لجورج برنارد شو بوصفها دراما افكار

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مديرة تربية البصرة

الملخص:

تحاول هذه الدراسة تسليط الضوء على "المسرح الذهني" او "دراما شافيان" (افكار شو ووسيلته في التعبير) كوسيلة لنقل الأفكار. تستخدم "دراما الأفكار" الثيمات لتحدي الأعراف والافكار الاجتماعية الراسخة، إنها تلزم الجمهور بالتفكير في قضية ما وإعادة النظر فيها. لذلك ، فان لهذا النوع المسرحي مكانة حتمية في الدراما المعاصرة. حيث لا يتعلق الأمر بإثارة الضحك فقط، لكن بإلهام الفكر ايضا. المناقشة هي سمة أساسية من سمات "دراما شافيان". يطمح برنارد شو للتغيير، ويحاول إصلاح المجتمع. إنه يعكس الحقائق ويجعل الناس يدركون حقيقة بعض القضايا. في ضوء ذلك، تُعرف الكوميديا الخاصة به باسم "كوميديا الغاية" ، والتي تعيد صياغة "دراما الأفكار" في رؤية جديدة. يسعى برنارد شو خلال كتاباته الى نظام حكومي جيد، حيث تتركز وجهات نظره السياسية على القضايا الاقتصادية. وبالتالي، فانه يأمل من خلال مسرحيته "عربة التفاح" في إنشاء نظام حكم يختار الناس بموجبه حكاهم ويكونون قادرين على تحييتهم عند الضرورة، ويسلط الضوء على النقطة التي مفادها أن كلا من الديمقراطية والأنظمة الملكية الوراثية قاصرة في هذا الشأن. لا يعادي برنارد شو الديمقراطية أو الملكية بل الرأسمالية، التي تعطل عملية التقدم الاجتماعي والاقتصادي. ووفقا لذلك، يلمح الكاتب من خلال عمله المسرحي هذا "عربة التفاح" الى ان النظام الحكومي في الاساس ما هو الا عربة يستخدمها رئيس الوزراء تلبية لأغراض شخصية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: شافيان ، أفكار ، نقاش ، غاية ، دراما، ديماغوجيون ، ديمقراطية ، رأسمالية .

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Introduction

Drama has always held a prominent position in English Literature throughout history. Drama has a more immediate influence than a fiction or poetry. Since "All art according to Aristotle, imitates human life.... All the poetic arts imitate action but drama evidently reproduces it most completely ...Drama is the most satisfying of arts" (Schmitt,1987, p.5). Plot, thought, character, diction, music, and spectacle were the standards of theatre for many years before a new drama has emerged, namely, the drama of ideas and Aristotle indicates that they are essential aspects of drama. Up to the beginning of the Renaissance, English theater was influenced by a particular subgenre of religious play with themes predominating in Christian doctrine. The drama of the Renaissance brought about some significant developments and later achieved great success thanks to William Shakespeare. A new type of comedy, known as the comedy of manners, was developed in the 18th century at the hands of by great authors including, R.B. Sheridan, Oliver Goldsmith and William Congreve. In the nineteenth century, the English Drama went through a severe descent, undergoing various changes and till it was revived by T.W. Robertson and Henrik Ibsen who lay the basis of realistic drama.

Theatre almost lacked remarkable works in the first half of the 19th century. In the words of E. Albert "From the dramatic point of view, the first half of the nineteenth century was almost completely barren" (NeoEnglish,2010,para.1). Poets of that time like Wordsworth and Shelly tried to write drama, but most of their work wasn't staged. Melodrama, farce and romantic comedies which lacked literary standard, reality and features, were preferable and domineering.

It was T. W. Robertson, and then Herrick Ibsen, who established the realistic theatre at the midpoint of the 19th century. They both made significant contributions in converting romantic and historical settings to more pragmatic themes in English drama. Henrik Ibsen established a form of natural dialogue and contributed greatly to the realistic trend with more profound perception of character and plot. In 1885, Shaw made his debut as a dramatist, publishing, however, his first play, *Widowers' Houses* in 1893. Shaw was influenced by Ibsen, even though he disagreed with several viewpoints, ideologies and norms of his time. Hence, his plays are not just an imitation of certain kinds of drama as some critics point out. In this regard, Nicoll (1971) indicates, "He regarded most of the existing views of economics, religion, sexual relationships, etc., as entirely wrong and therefore, he sought to change them by tearing them topsy turvy in his plays."(as cited in Tripathi,2020, p.50).

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At the beginning of the 20th century, people endured the anguish of conflicts that erupted among many nations. After the First World War and the Second World War, literary figures established and concluded that chaos and disorder were tools behind all unreasonable acts. Consequently, "Absurd Theatre" appeared. In which futility, hopelessness, and the absence of rational plot lines dominate the stages. Life is depicted as chaotic, disorderly, and absurd. Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, and Harold Pinter are the famous dramatists of the Absurd Theatre. However, plays in the English theatre learnt to deal with issues of the contemporary society and realistic themes began to dominate. As the new drama evolved, new dramatists adopted new procedures that provide liveliness to the plot, characters, and ideas. Accordingly, conflicting ideologies are embodied in the conflict among the characters. Thus, the basis of the "Drama of Ideas" is laid by the theatre of Absurd and Bernard Shaw's theatre.

G.B Shaw's of Drama of Ideas

Drama of Ideas, originated by Shaw, is a confrontational play that displays the serious issues of social morality through the conflict of ideas and antagonistic directions. This kind of comedy is dissimilar to the conventional comedy. Exchanging views is the main feature of the Drama of Ideas and characters are merely the means to convey ideas. The conflict is essential in drama and it is achieved through the contrasting ideas of characters. The goal of theatre of Ideas is to enlighten individuals through amusement.

In the play of ideas, the enjoyment and benefit are basically intellectual and feelings are not much impacted as in tragedy and comedy. The exhilaration of a play of ideas comes from thinking about events and centralizing upon its results in a future life in an entirely spiritual, rational and philosophical perspective. The drama of Ideas makes people talk as it presents different ideas and many playwrights were interested in casting their ideas through discussions. Drama of Ideas doesn't pose problems that can be resolved in routine situations. The issues which are posed in the drama of ideas and the most effective reason behind the conflicts are social and political perversions.

Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* and Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* are remarkable examples of the drama of ideas. Dramatists like Oscar Wilde, August Strindberg, Jean-Paul Sartre, and philosophers like Nietzsche are eminent names in the domain of the Drama of Ideas. Shaw has been largely praised as the prototype of the New Drama in England. Shaw highly values ideas; therefore, he uses ideas to create dramatic conflicts. G.B.Shaw exceedingly utilises ideas to create a dramatic struggle. His plays are mainly clashes of ideas and words, marked by energetic dialogues and exchanging views. Shaw is opposed to art for art's sake, and

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accentuates on the social role of drama. He sustains that drama should be a means of productivity and the alert of the conscience. Shaw's *Man and Superman*, *Back to Methuselah*, and *The Apple Cart* are the best instances of the drama of ideas. For him, drama is eminently a way of expressing his perspectives and philosophy. Shaw expressed his life philosophy and endeavoured to convey it through his plays. Consequently, Shavian drama is a method to convey ideas. In drama of ideas, playwrights seek to confront the long-founded customs of society and in so doing, they force the audience to think and reconsider issues.

1-1 Shavian Comedy of Purpose

Archibald Henderson states that Shaw's comedy of manner felicitously, "makes the spectator laugh with one side of his mouth and cry with the other." (Henderson, 1918, as cited in Dukore, 2016, p. 292). Drama has traditionally been divided into three forms based on its content: idealistic, realistic and satiric. Nicoll says:

Looking at English Drama as a whole, it seems that we may trace four main forms within this comic sphere. The first is Shakespeare's comedy of romance, distinguished by its all-pervading humour. The second is that of Ben Jonson. Here the aim is directly satirical, not of social manners, but of individual follies. In the comedy of Congreve there is another and distinct aim. Here the dramatist is no longer concerned with individual follies. Finally, we reach what, for want of a better term, we may style the sentimental comedy. (Nicoll, 1975, p. 198).

Hence, it is important to state that Shaw's theatre relates specifically to none of these types, but contains aspects of all. His drama is distinguishable, exceptional, and unparalleled. As Shaw's main goal is to disseminate particular views, he utilizes comedy of manners as a technique to exhibit and convey his ideology. Shaw employs drama as a tool to convey his beliefs. He endeavors to support particular viewpoints in his plays. Through journalism, public speaking, and theatre as well, he tries to convey his ideas of social and political interests.

Shaw's comedies including, *Saint Joan Heartbreak House*, and *Major Barbara* scrutinize morals, politics, and social reforms. *Pygmalion* is an instance of a comedy of manners, containing a confection of satire, and witty language. Likewise, *Man and Superman* is a comedy of purpose.

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Shaw's comedies seek change; he tries to reform society, reflects facts and makes people realize the bare truth of some issues. Therefore, his comedy is known as the Comedy of Purpose which relocates his drama of ideas into a new domain. In 1909, G.B. Shaw states: "I am not an ordinary playwright in the general practice. I am a specialist in immoral and heretical plays. My reputation has been gained by my persistent struggle to force the public to consider its moral (cited in Purdom,1963, p. 98).

2-1 Satirical Comedy of Political Philosophies

In *Candida* (1966), Shaw considers that rather than a direct revolution, change should be brought about gradually and by peaceful means. As a socialist, Shaw's early thought was that laws advocating equality and lessening in different ways the property of the wealthy so as to alleviate poverty could promote civilized societies. Over time, he began to doubt the ability of the parliament to improve human welfare. He considers that in order to have a decent society, there must be good rules constructed by good people.

In the *Apple Cart*, Shaw turns from social plays to political satire. The play sets in a Royal office. It demonstrates the power struggle between King Magnus and his Ministers. They exchange view on democracy and hereditary monarchy. The writer describes the play:

I had written a comedy in which a King defeats an attempt by his popularly elected Prime Minister to deprive him of the right to influence public opinion through the press and the platform: in short, to reduce him to a cipher. The King's reply is that rather than be a cipher he will abandon his throne and take his obviously very rosy chance of becoming a popularly elected Prime Minister himself... The comedic paradox of the situation is that the King wins, not by exercising his royal authority, but by threatening to resign it and go to the democratic poll. (Shaw,1931,p. V)

As the play opens, Pamphilius and Sempronius, the King's secretaries give an overall preface to the play. After that, King Magnus and Mr. Boanerges have a protracted interview. Shaw's ideas on hereditary monarchy and democracy are indicated throughout the dialogue. Compared to other characters in the play who express Shaw's viewpoints, King Magnus is shown as wiser and deserves respect. Magnus found himself king, after the death of his two older brothers and due to the

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fact that he was the late king's nephew. He does not get his position because of his qualifications or for being the right person. Magnus states, "If I had been the stupidest man in the country I should still be its king" (Shaw,1931, p.15). In contrast, prime ministers elected by those who wish to be protected from the wealthy by powerful people. Maguns states further that he is "...very secure, I escape the dreadful and demoralizing drudgery of electioneering, I have no voters to please". (p.17). However, Mr. Boanerges who is a labor union leader who could direct the union to do what he states argues that:

No king on earth is as safe in his job as a Trade Union Official. There is only one thing that can get him sacked and that drink. Not even that, as long as he doesn't actually fall down. I talk democracy to these men and women. I tell them that they have the vote, and that theirs is the kingdom and the power and the glory. I say to them "You are supreme: exercise your power"... That's democracy; and a splendid thing it is too for putting the right men in the right place. (p.18).

In *Shavian Playground* (1972), Morgan states the complacency of Magnus's kingdom is drawing its tribute from the most impoverished parts of the world. It is an empire, which is scornfully portrayed by the global establishment, "Breakages Limited". The elected representatives of the public make speeches in parliament, whereas the nation is controlled by those who prioritize their own interests.

Shaw's *The Apple Cart* addresses the issue of monarchy in a democratic nation such as England. He attempts to argue that, the endeavor to dispose of the monarchical institution, which is embodied by King Magnus, will lead to a social collapse because having a king is essential to check and censor the actions of democratic heads. Magnus contends that the king is used as a scapegoat. He alone has the commitments whereas the democratic politicians dissemble that what they fulfill the people's will, "democracy is humbug, and that instead of establishing responsible government it has abolished it..." (Shaw,1931, p. 50). Some readers misperceive Shaw's viewpoint. So, when he was questioned if he believed that the benevolent monarchy is better than democracy in an interview by G. W. Bishop (1930), Shaw responded that benevolent monarchies and democracies are perfections which are not been fulfilled. In terms of protection, a hereditary ruler's veto is worthless and powerless, while a capable leader's veto has value because of his capacity, regardless of whether he is a hereditary king, a dictator, a president, or a prime minister. Shaw hoped for a form of government in which the people choose their governors and have the power to remove them as well, considering that changing a government is only possible for strong men. Both democracy and hereditary monarchies fall short in that regard, though hereditary monarchies could provide a competent governor by coincidence.

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In *The Art of Shavian Political Drama*, Nickson (1971), comes to the conclusion that democracy is not fallacious. Shaw does not criticize a perfect democracy but the regime for consistently backing up opportunistic people like the Prime Ministers. Nickson uses Shaw's observation to reinforce his view, that "The financier and the soldier are cocks of the walk, and democracy means that their parasites and worshippers carry all before them" (as cited in Finch 2010). Shaw does not reject democracy or monarchy but capitalism, which obstructs the process of social and economic advancement. In Shaw's opinion, society offers political alternatives and the social and political perspectives of Shaw are connected. However, he chooses to provoke questions and dramatize issues in order to draw attention to the fundamental political points, which are a component of social problems.

2-2 Shaw's quest for good government

Shaw engages in the Platonic debate about what forms good government. It is obvious that the issue is recurrently on his mind though all of his plays until recent years have just skirted around it. Shaw evolves some constant premises for debating about religion and economics. Smith in his book *The Search for Good Government* (1978) argues that "The equal distribution of the world's wealth and the process of creative evolution are bases of belief that serve at least to point in the direction of his economic and religious goals".(p.20). Shaw persists in looking for similar method regarding the purpose of good government. Ultimately, economic issues mainly dominate Shaw's politics. In Shaw's view, despite the government's main goal may primarily be the advancement of economic well-being, it does not decide a procedure for government: it only makes the regime more responsible. With *The Apple Cart*, he eventually pressurizes himself to confront the issue in a dramatic expression. In the foreword to *the Apple Cart* (1930), Shaw states: "We have to solve two inseparable main problems: the economic problem and the political problem".(para.10).

In *The Apple Cart*, Shaw depicts a future that would look almost like the present for us, Shaw's prediction in 1929 sees western governments as being stuck between the forces of big business and big labor. Breakages Limited, a transnational corporation, has an entire control over the England of the play, and there does not seem to be much chance that it will dispose of that control.

The trade unions represented by Boanerges, contend its political dominance as well. The problem between King Magnus and the Prime Minister, Proteus, is mainly an issue of who has the best ability to intercede among the various forces that already exist. Smith (1978) opines" There is no indication that Bitakages Limited can really be contained: it can only be handled diplomatically".(p.20).

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In the last act, the crisis is convoluted by the American ambassador's declaration that the United States has resolved to rejoin the British Empire. "The Declaration of Independence is cancelled. The treaties which endorsed it are torn up"(Shaw,1931,p.93). Vanhattan's pronouncement leads King Magnus to recognize that England would just be another star on the flag of America at that juncture, and Breakage Limited would remain the actual government. Anyhow, the American action is not the core of the play. The actual trouble in *The Apple Cart* is King Magnus's threat to relinquish and to stand for a seat in the House of Commons. Thus, it is immediately evident to Prime Minister Proteus, that in such a step his own power would end shortly because King Magnus is both more popular and competent than anyone in his cabinet. Therefore, Proteus has been forced to call off his crisis and permit the play to conclude with the victory of ability represents by the most capable character in the play. Throughout the play, the point of how to uphold the illusion of self-government, when big businesses hold the actual power remains unresolved. Shaw's hope for a good government within a democratic regime is dim at the close of *The Apple Cart*.

2-2 Demagogues Cart

The government's state under a particular leader, or rather a strong man, is reflected by play's title, *The Apple Cart*. It comprises a driver pulling a large cart filled with apples and the cabinet's job is comparable to that of the cart. In this play, there is a struggle between the monarch and the prime minister and other ministers. It is about who will move the Apple Cart. In their rank, Monarch or the prime minister are both strong but compared to the Prime minister, King Magnus is more discerning and more intelligent. It is accurate that only one man is permitted to ride in the front seat when two men are riding the same horse. However, the question is who will occupy the front seat? However, Proteus plans and jeopardizes conceding the provision.

In *The Apple Cart* this equality is assumed. It is masked by a strong contrast of character and methods which has led my less considerate critics to complain that I have packed the cards by making the King a wise man and the minister a fool. But that is not at all the relation between the two. Both play with equal skill; and the King wins, not by greater astuteness, but because he has the ace of trumps in his hand and knows when to play it (Shaw,1930,para.4).

However, they both realize that they must keep driving the cart. In the preface, Shaw states that one of his friends, who was an engineer, suggested transporting all the breakages at a low cost if the government approved.

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But instead of being received with open arms as a social benefactor he found himself up against Breakages, Limited. the exploiters of the great industry saw in Gattie an enemy of the human race, a wrecker of homes and a starver of innocent babes. He fought them undauntedly; but they were too strong for him; and in due time his patents expired and he died almost unrecognized, whilst Unknown Soldiers were being canonized throughout the world. So far, *The Apple Cart* is his only shrine; and as it does not even bear his name, I have written it here pending its tardy appearance in the roll of fame. Shaw, 1930, para.35).

Conclusion

For Shaw, drama is predominantly a method of conveying his standpoints and philosophy. He represents his philosophy of life and pursues to express it through his plays.

Shaw expresses that benevolent monarchies and democracies are ideals which are not been conducted. When it comes to protection, a hereditary monarch's veto is powerless; a capable leader's veto has value because of his capability, regardless of whether he is a hereditary king, a dictator, the president, or a prime minister. Through *The Apple Cart*, Shaw conveys also that hereditary monarchy could provide a competent governor by coincidence. He does not reject democracy or monarchy but capitalism, which obstructs the process of social and economic advancement.

Throughout the play, the point of how to uphold the illusion of self-government, when big businesses hold the actual power remains unresolved. Shaw's hope for good government within a democratic regime is dim at the close of *The Apple Cart*. Consequently, the writer implies through *The Apple Cart* that the government, within a democratic framework, is essentially a cart that the prime minister utilizes for personal purposes. It is no regard for conducting the cart wisely for the best of a nation. The cart is full of demagogues (politicians) who deceive people and they constantly endeavour to overturn the cart.

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