

Class Struggle and Feminist Character Transformation of Eliza Doolittle in Shaw's Pygmalion

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ABSTRACT

George Bernard Shaw depicts, the life of the British middle-class society of the Victorian era. He received the Noble Prize in Literature (1952) and the Oscar Award for his best writing and illustration of *Pygmalion*. In *Pygmalion* Shaw addresses class struggle, pronunciation trends, thematic interpretation feminist character transformation and stylistic patterns. Eliza's inaccurate English spelling is due to a poor economic and social position in society. Shaw's *Pygmalion* attracts the reader's attention to the social class and female viewpoints. The characters of *Doolittle's* highlights the idea of class conflict in British society during the Victorian era. Eliza is the ideal character example for the lost modern girl and that these lost females will take lessons from play and make a great transition to obtain dignity, confidence and equality. The character Higgins, who sees that passion for the perfect use of language as a prerequisite for one's success, uses social influence to enforce his point of view to make the character Eliza embrace and live in compliance with his orders. Thus, Shaw's *Pygmalion* shows the hard work of Eliza Doolittle, a flower girl, suffered from the male dominant society and becomes stronger independent women.

KEYWORDS: Class Struggle, Transformation, Feminist, Compliance, Dominant.

George Bernard Shaw, the greatest playwright, attract the literary readers for his conversation and dialogues with his characters in his literary works. *Pygmalion* is a realistic play and the discussion of language as marking one's status is an important point put forward by the playwright. His problem plays are prevalent in the society and the women characters more impressive than the men. In *Pygmalion*, Eliza Doolittle is a poor girl who earns her livelihood by selling the flowers. Eliza as a marginalised character in the play and her tongue is made fun of by Higgins, a scientist in phonetics. She is used by Higgins for an experiment in language acquisition. Eliza suffers the aftermath of such an experiment and later hesitates to go back to her lowly life. Shaw started as an exponent of realism and a determined inculcator of the plays of ideas. Shaw believed in the progress of mankind to higher and higher levels. His plays are a standing reminder that women were held in high esteem. The women characters in his plays are emancipated women. They are all strong, although, not necessarily charming. His portrayal of women is very realistic. *Pygmalion*, subtitled as *A Romance in Five Acts* has different strata of society seeking shelter in rain under the portico of a church in London because of rain. A flower girl is trying to sell flowers to the people gathered under the church. A note taker is taken to be a cop and the people under the portico tell the flower girl that her activities are being followed by this cop. The flower girl

pleads before the note taker that she is a good girl. A mother, a daughter and a son are also introduced in this act. The note taker is Mr. Higgins, an expert in phonetics and Colonel Pickering, an expert in Indian dialects.

Pickering is here referring to the mixing up of upper classes with those of lower ones instead of the old convention of only the upper class inhabiting the popular gatherings.

Higgins is the one in power with his complete hold on the language and Eliza falls under the category of the excluded people. It is the use of the excluded language, which fails to provide a good work to Eliza. The flower girl owing to her tongue is rendered powerless in the social set up in which she has to survive. Eliza Doolittle tries to break this shell and come out of it. She says, I 've done nothing wrong by speaking to the gentleman. (Shaw, 11)

She defends her action of speaking to the man; thereby trying to assert that all humans are equal and the presumed privileges of the upper classes are baseless and deprivation of the lower classes in so many respects are baseless. In the same place almost, she defends her right to live anywhere, though she is considered to have no right to be present among people of the upper class. When Higgins asks her to leave the place and take shelter somewhere else, she replies, I've a right to be here if I like, same as you. (Shaw, 15)

Higgins says to her, A woman who utters such depressing and disgusting sounds has no right to be anywhere no right to live. The people from the upper class consider all the manners of the people from the lower class as unbearable and even disgusting and depressing. Higgins declares the same for Eliza's words. But Eliza is not depressed by his reply. She believes that appearances like language, dressing etc. do not make your character or class; neither do they deprive you, she asserts, to speak to someone or to live somewhere.

Pygmalion presents a language experiment by Higgins, a scientist in phonetics. Language embedded in a certain set of rules is employed by Higgins to teach the language of genteel class to a flower girl that he is confident would pick up the so called language of upper class society. The flower girl belongs to the category of people mentioned as 'gutter' people in the play. No doubt, Higgins is shocked at the sounds that Eliza produces, such as "Ah-ah-ah-ow-ow-oo" (Shaw, 20).

In a class based society honor is considered to be a privilege of the people from the elite class. People from the lower classes are thought to be having no sense of honor, self-respect etc. most of the people from the lower class also possess the same image of themselves. Mrs. Pearce is shown to be such a typical lower class woman. She, representing a subdued woman from the lower class and considering the lower class as her eternal destiny, warns Eliza when she speaks in disrespectful and rough way to Higgins. She says to Eliza, You must not speak to the gentleman like that. (Shaw, 22)

The flower girl comes to Higgins place later on and offers him money to teach her to speak better English in order to enable her to find work in a flower shop. Higgins intends to teach her the language of genteel class and pass her off as a duchess at the ambassador's party. The flower girl, Eliza Doolittle, is taken by Higgins as his pupil for a few months. She is the ill-legitimate daughter of Alfred Doolittle, who displays no responsibility towards her. Shaw has drawn our attention to the lot of children born out of wed locks and then abandoned to live on their own. Eliza destitute, a marginalized character is further treated with humiliation by Mr. Higgins. Shaw considered poverty to be the root cause of all atrocities in the society. Eliza, being poor, considers cleanliness itself to be a virtue. Shaw upheld that the need for

money drove a destitute to sin. *Pygmalion* is a result of Shaw's concern for abolishing poverty, the panacea for social evils. Every word that Higgins speaks to Eliza is a direct attack on her essential femininity. In the beginning of the play, when Eliza is required to be bathed by Mrs. Pearce, Higgins house-keeper, Higgins calls Eliza a "Monkey Brand."

However, Eliza is not suppressed by her words and believes that sense of honor is a matter that is equally possessed by all human beings irrespective of status, class, etc. She proves her point of view, when she replies to Mrs. Pearce, Well, why wont he speak sensible to me. (Shaw, 23)

She tells Mrs. Pearce, servant of Mr. Higgins, that she has equal sense of honor as is possessed by Mr. Higgin. She further elaborates that if her master does not speak to her in a polite and respectful manner, she has got every right to retaliate back in the same coin.

The words used by Eliza are very incomprehensible to others. Her way of talking is laughed at by the people who have a better control over the language. The context referred to, the social one where the day to day life of the upper classes is given greater importance and their language.

Eliza as an object of experiment and not individual having her own life. Higgins knows that if Eliza fails in the proposed language test at the garden party she would be beheaded by the king, even then Higgins is ready to proceed with his programs to carry out his bet with Colonel Pickering. Mrs. Pearce inquires of Higgins what would become of Eliza after the completion of his teaching to Eliza and completion of their bet. To this Higgins replies that if he leaves her in gutter or lefts her up to the position of a lady, that would make no difference for her in her life. Whatever Higgins and Pickering are doing is just to complete their bet and never do them to bring any positive change in her life. When Mrs. Pearce asks Higgins to think about Eliza future.

Higgins says,

"Well, when I 've done with her, we can throw her back to the gutter; and then it will be her own business again; so that's all right." (27)

In *Pygmalion*, people like Eliza and Alfred Doolittle, are the ones who are powerless owing to their economic status and which makes itself visible the moment they open their mouth. On another occasion in the play, Higgins warns that Eliza would be beheaded at The Tower of London, if she fails to pass the test of language, to speak like a duchess, to speak like a woman from the upper class, at the garden party. Higgins adds that the king's action of beheading her will serve as an example for everyone else who try to change their class. Eliza is not subdued by Higgins warning. She even refuses to go to the party and appear in the test. She believes that she has got the right to learn the language of the upper class, the standard language or what so ever that may be. She also thinks that no one is entitled to take her life for taking steps to improve her life and rejects going to the garden party.

She says that she has got the same feelings to improve her life as everyone in the upper class is believed to possess. She says, I wont go near the king. I have my feelings the same as anyone else. (Shaw, 28)

Eliza Doolittle is shown not believing in class distinction in society. Wherever and whenever she is faced with such like hindrances, she is found to be making constant struggles to overcome them. She is

found to be a representative woman who has been working for achieving equal rights for everyone irrespective of class.

The play presents a story of unequal power relations between Higgins and Eliza. She becomes her pupil and a quick learner too but Higgins never for once forgets her lowly life and treats her as a poor flower girl throughout the play. Eliza fails to gain any words of respect from Higgins. The English lessons make Eliza much more equipped to look for better opportunities in life. Eliza's act of throwing slippers at Higgins when the latter is looking for them is both her frustration as well as a resistance. Higgins fails to read Eliza's heart probably because for him she was still a 'gutter' girl. Eliza acquires the said language very effectively to the purpose that Higgins teaches her. But this betterment takes place after her resolute fight with Higgins whom she calls a "selfish brute" and Eliza is fearful at the very thought of going back to the low place from where she was brought for Higgins experiment. Eliza finds herself unfit to sell flowers.

The inequality in *Pygmalion* is one of class and hence the resulting disequilibrium. Knowledge is shown to be centralized in the hands of the wealthy and the educated. The playwright voices his demand for the imparting of knowledge to the under-privileged for the betterment of society. Eliza is put under the circumstances to learn to speak a language and not Mr. Higgins parting with his alphabets and made to live with cockney dialect and put under circumstances of which Eliza is a part of Higgins wants to satisfy his whim of winning a bet by presenting poor Eliza as a duchess by teaching her to speak a genteel tongue. Shaw's plays are loaded with witty women. There is imbalance of power because Eliza belongs to the working class and economically marginalized in relation to Higgins.

Whatever Mrs. Higgins remarks about the experiment of Higgins and Pickering on Eliza in carrying out their bet that also shows exploitation of Eliza by both the individuals.

Mrs. Higgins says; you two infinitely stupid male creatures: the problem of what is to be done with her afterwards..... (Shaw, 36)

Mrs. Higgins supports the cause of the upper class by declaring the two fellows as stupid creatures because she thinks that class change is something impossible as far as Eliza is concerned. She expresses her sympathies with Eliza and shows her concern for the future of Eliza. Eliza through her actions proves all their views as baseless and futile, especially through her performance in the garden party. She performs better what is talked to her by Higgins or what the two betters expect of her. In a way she not only changes herself apparently, rather she undergoes complete inward transformation.

Pickering's words I have been away in India for several years and manners have changed so much that I sometimes don't know whether I'm at a respectable dinner-table or in a ship's fore-castle. (62)

Pygmalion portrays the social condition in England reflects class struggle as a collective reaction to the condition. Thus, a story of the transformation of a flower girl from a lower to an elite class. It employs Eliza Doolittle's struggle, a flower girl, wishes to be a lady to free herself from poverty and stupidity. Her character reflects the class struggle and how she faces resistance in the way of changing class, how upper classes look at the lower classes as something devalued, how the values of upper and lower classes are represented. The feminist character Eliza Doolittle gains her freedom from the dominating male character Henry Higgins. She started to fulfill her needs on her own by opening a flower shop and learned good education with mannerism. She lives her life with her own desires and thoughts and decided

herself to marry Freddy by rejecting Henry Higgins. Thus, Eliza emerges into a transformation from uneducated to learned capable woman of realizing her way up in the society.

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