

CHAPTER III

My Plays are "sui generis"

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When Shaw Claimed that his plays were "sui generis" and that his plays should not be called tragedies or comedies, he actually brought forth the most important characteristic of his art. Shaw is called a heretic because he flouted and scoffed at the conventional moral attitudes; this is his ethical heresy. But in one more respect his heresy is of no less importance. It is in his idea about Comedy that this heresy lies. To be more plain, this heresy is in the field of aesthetics where he mixed the apparently irreconcilable things - the serious and the ludicrous. In his hand Comedy became at once serious and trivial ; it is levity which marks and colours his serious discussions. This is something new in the history of literature, this mixing of the serious and the funny. We are to note that the serious and the trivial are not just put side by side, but they are mingled and made one giving rise to the problem which deserves to be considered and paid attention to. By putting the irreconcilables simultaneously and making them really one, Shaw has proved himself a problem to the critics - whether to take him as an earnest and serious thinker or just a buffoon who would make fun of serious thoughts.

It is necessary to know Shaw's views about Comedy - its nature and its functions. His views are, on the whole,

1. G.B.S. : Man of the Century Vol II - Archibald Henderson.

Appleton - Century - Crofts Inc. 1956. P 729.

classical when he maintains that a comedy must pass a sound moral judgement as it should provoke laughter. It is Shaw's idea about biology and economics that made him a comic genius.¹ Comedy is a form of art which at its best addresses itself to the intellect rather than to the emotion. Laughter can be aroused by a buffoon and even by a fool; a Stephen or a Matthew can well provoke us to laughter.² But laughter in a comedy is not just physical laughter; it is intellectual and, as such, comedy cannot be an instrument in the hands of a buffoon. Buffoonery and comedy are distinctly different from each other, the latter involving thought whereas the former has nothing to do with thought. It is obvious that the life of comedy depends not on buffoonery, but on serious thought.

Comedy arises, at bottom, out of the general predicament of mankind or from the particular predicament of an individual; it lies in the recognition of imperfections of man, but not in the violent indictment on these imperfections. It is now understood that a true comedy does not only move one to laughter, but also compels one to think of imperfections -- one's own imperfections and those of the society as a whole. This is precisely the views of Shaw. It is for this that we find in his plays serious discussions carried on in such a way as to arouse laughter.

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1. This idea has been developed by Dr. S.C.Sengupta in *The Art of Bernard Shaw* 4th. Edn. 1960. A Mukherjee & Co. P.Ltd.
 2. Stephen and Matthew belong to Every Man in His Humour of Ben Jonson.

Dr. S.C. Sengupta's observations is worthy of serious notice when he says that "Shaw's opinion on economics and art have combined to make him a serious comedian"¹. The qualification "serious" is not necessary, because, contrary to popular misconception, the stuff of a comedian is always serious. Again, the observation of Dr. Sengupta becomes relevant only when the nature of laughter in a true comedy - that it provokes laughter while passing sound moral judgement - is well understood. Shaw knows his economics well and his views are socialistic, with some qualifications and limitations though. He has found that Capitalism is the root of all our problems and troubles; and all our sentimental attachment to established institutions are the by-products of Capitalism. He discusses seriously the evils of Capitalism; attacks the conventional virtues, beating them hollow with unthought of arguments. As an economist he looks at poverty as a disease and a crime; he is not sentimental about poverty like the sentimental socialists. The reason he has advanced why Shakespeare has not taken the poor as the protagonist in his plays actually makes Shaw's own art clear. In the preface to The Dark Lady of the Sonnets Shaw writes, "Shakespeare's characters are mostly members of the leisured classes Industrial slavery is not compatible with that freedom of adventure, that personal refinement and intellectual culture, that scope of action,

1. The Art of Bernard Shaw - Dr. S.C.Sengupta. A.Mukherjee & Co. P.Ltd. 4th. Edn. 1960. P 59

which the higher and subtler drama demands".

The problem of poverty is surely a serious matter and Shaw knows it from the experience of his youth and struggle against poverty. He recognises that poverty would not allow the soul of a man to soar. But it should not be understood that Shaw has found any real stuff in the emotions and sentiments of the richer classes. The fact really is otherwise. Shaw has come to think that the emotions and sentiments of the richer classes are hollow almost as a rule; his dramas provide ample illustrations of this. Thus in his plays we find him beating the emotions of the leisured classes to expose their hollowness; but in so doing he never idolizes the poor or their poverty, for he has no sympathy with them. Now, Shaw, as noted in the quotation above, excludes the poor from the place of the protagonist because poverty hinders the freedom of the soul and the refinement and culture which is the essential quality of the "higher and subtler" forms of drama. Again, though the leisured classes always speak of morality, Shaw holds that morality cannot exist in a capitalistic society in which the poor do not enjoy any scope for action and the door of intellectual culture is shut out for them. These people in a capitalistic society speaking highly of morality are abnormal people who are fit subjects for comic treatment, for comedy deals with

1. Preface to The Dark Lady of the Sonnets. The Complete Prefaces of Bernard Shaw. Paul Hamlyn Ltd. 1965. P 767.

abnormality and contradictions. This contradiction Shaw finds in another important field which he discovered with his knowledge of biology. Shaw finds out the internal dichotomy between Instinct and Intellect. The conflict between Instinct and Intellect is also a source of comedy. Shaw deals with the serious subject of the conflict between these two both of which are parts of life's continuous striving to attain perfection. The Life Force makes experiments, progresses through trials and errors; its experiments are sometimes comic, but it has a serious purpose in view. Even Comic experiments are undertaken with all seriousness ; and serious things are comically treated.

As shown in the Introductory Chapter, the London theatre of the late eighties and nineties of the Nineteenth Century was an uncertain theatre or complex theatre in which various traditions got mixed up. In that theatre melodrama jostled with fashionable comedies, "problem plays" and full scale productions of Ibsen, James Barrie, and Oscar Wilde. From the middle of the last century, however, it had been changing from a theatre of make-believe to a theatre of sophisticated versimilitude. Its dramatic traditions were not only multiple, they were even conflicting and, therefore, confusing . There was a growing strain of the fashionable, that is, drawing-room play with the ideal of presenting life truthfully ; simultaneously present was a strain of romantic-rhetorical drama devoted to an idea of impassioned flamboyance. The formal ideal of the so-called "well-made play" written after the manner of the French

playwrights, particularly Scribe and Sardou, was there ; and there was the ideal of social-didactic play of Ibsen. Those were the days when Ibsen was looked upon as a social reformer rather than an artist. Shaw's dramatic criticisms reveal these various strains prevalent in the London theatre in the last part of the nineteenth century. These were the traditions in dramatic writings and stage productions which provided the immediate context of Shaw's own dramatic works.

Shaw fought almost single-handed against the drawing-room drama, the rhetorical-romantic drama and the "well-made play". His advocacy of the Scandinavian realists reveals his attitude towards these types of plays. It should be noted, however, that it is not for Ibsen and Ibsenism only that Shaw launched his Campaign. He intended to bring into existence a critical-realistic drama in which dramatic situations or actions had no value except as instruments to test the cherished ideals and conventions and to reveal character. The rival traditions referred to above supported a "conventional" drama. In the "well-made play" in which a curious dramatic situation was the centre of interest around which the whole play revolved, ordinary social ideals and conventions formed a background and a basis which had to be taken for granted, or the situation would disappear and lose all importance. The "drawing-room drama" as the name itself suggests, aimed at creating a photographic image of life and manners in a fashionable drawing-room. It dealt with the genteel people, concerning itself with a realism of the

surface ; it tried to reproduce this fashionable life with no, or the least, offence. Naturally in these "drawing-room plays", as in the "well-made plays", ideals and conventions of the "moral" people had to be taken for granted.

Between the construction of the "well-made play" which I have discussed elsewhere in this work and the substance of the "drawing-room play" there was a historical link ; but this link was not necessitated by any internal demand. The line of the "drawing-room play" descended from Robertson to Arthur Pinero although , as William Archer pointed out, it had its effective beginnings in "the humble, bourgeois movement headed by Eugene Scribe and his innumerable¹ collaborators". The line of the "well-made plays" was also identified with Scribe. The most skilful playwright of the "well-made play", among the contemporaries of Shaw, was Arther Wing Pinero. In Pinero the "well-made play" and the "drawing-room play" met in one place. Shaw, not without reason, lumped together the "well-made" construction and the "drawing-room" substance in his attack on conventional drama; and he bombarded them heavily.

The romantic-rhetorical drama, which was violently romantic, was also conventional in its matter and manner. In spite of its conformity to the conventional, it was much less fashionable and, in Shaw's view, much less dangerous to his

1. Old Drama and the New - William Archer.

objectives than the superficially realistic dramas.

Shaw's main strategy, in his war against conventional drama and in his attempt to change the condition of the theatre, was to attack the enemy with its own critical assumption. He invoked the criterion of stage-realism and deliberately demonstrated "conventionality" everywhere. He derived immense delight in naming, dissecting and then putting to ridicule particular stage-conventions. "The subtle atmosphere of absurdity with which Shaw hoped," observes Martin Meisel, "to surround the French realist was the absurdity inherent in any lapse from advertised virtue and was achieved by exposing their theatrical artifice. Shaw's sleight of hand here, in criticism as in play writing, was to substitute particulars of stage conventions for moral conventionalism, which was the true antagonist of his philosophical realism and his drama of unsettled ideals".¹

Shaw recognised that moral conventionalism was something different from, or rather opposed to, moral realism. Moral conventionalism, which is the off-spring of romantic idealism, is self-blinding. Moral conventionalism means unquestioning acceptance of laws, customs, attitudes, and ideals as standards of judgement. To conform to established canons is the basis of this. Shaw was not the man to conform to the romantic idealism; he looked at it with an intolerant eye.

1. Shaw and the Nineteenth Century Theatre - Martin Meisel.

Oxford University Press. 1963. P 68.

Robertson wrote the "drawing-room" play. And yet it was he who started a revolution in the sixties and seventies of the nineteenth century in the theatre-world of London. Shaw's critical contemporaries looked upon Robertson as the source of the movement, in the field of English drama, which was aimed at "elimination of exaggerative and rhetorical conventions which was the pre-destined line of progress"¹. Shaw's war against the traditions of the "well-made" play and the "drawing-room" play was so total that he, unlike Archer, looked on the Robertsonian drama as nothing but "a tailor's advertisement making sentimental remarks to a milliner's advertisement in the middle of an upholsterer's and decorator's advertisement" as he put it in his characteristic provocative manner.² Shaw found nothing to delight him in the absence of wit and rhetoric, and little to celebrate in the whole Robertsonian tradition which had led to the reduction of drama to sentimental and genteel conversation in a drawing-room. Shaw found, moreover, that the dramas of Robertson, Pinero and Jones were victims of conventionality -- moral conventionalities as well as conventionalities of character. Side by side his campaign against the "drawing-room" play, Shaw waged his war against the so-called "well-made" play by exposing its essential unreality. Like the "drawing-room" play the "well-made" play was also committed

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1. Old Drama and the New - William Archer. Boston. 1923. P 228.
 2. Our Theatre of the Nineties Vol III - G.B. Shaw. Constable & Co. Ltd. P 53.

to produce a show of reality. An ideal "well-made" play was built around single situation with a big amount of emotion or amusing piquancy. Shaw referred to the "well-made" play as a mechanical rabbit, clockwork mice and "a mere situation hung out on a gallows of plot"¹. The illusion of reality was identified with a visible and unbroken chain of circumstantial probability. In practice, however, to achieve a logic of events the "well-made" play developed a set of plot conventions suited to the conditions of the stage. Shaw ridiculed these conventions. Referring to the machinery of the exposition in Pinero's The Second Mrs Tranguery he pointed out sharply that in that play "Two whole characters are wasted on sham parts, and the hero, at his own dinner party, is compelled to get up and go ignominiously into the next room to write some letters when something has to be said behind the back"². Shaw noted the artifice of the play and declared that it was impossible to avoid the conclusion that what most of the critics of the time meant by mastery of stage-craft was nothing but recklessness in the substitution of dead machinery and lay figures for vital action and real characters. The final effect of Shaw's comment was to expose the artificial method of the "well-made" play; more, it also rejected the criterion of circumstantial plausibility altogether. But Shaw's chief objection to the "well-made" method was that any play which depends on an intriguing

1. Our Theatre of the Nineties Vol I. G.B. Shaw. Constable & Co. Ltd. P 8.

2. Ibid Vol I. P 45-46.

situation and circumstantial plausibility for ultimate dramatic values was likely to depend on conventional moral and social values which were very obnoxious to him and against which he fought his whole life. The "well-made" play depended, Shaw felt, on static attitude and moral commonplaces. It was conventional and mechanistic and hence incapable of producing vital drama which the play of ideas was to be. It is clear that Shaw found the drama of the late nineteenth century lamentably "dated" in ethics and philosophy. The dramatists conformed to the moral attitudes of their grandfathers. Shaw postulated, it seems, the drama as the agent for advanced ideas challenging the conventional outlook.

Shaw's attacks on the condition of the drama of the late nineteenth century did a great deal to bring the drama of ideas into existence. But there was more to be done.

In order to see the drama of ideas established, it was necessary, Shaw correctly foresaw, that Bardolatry must come to an end. When the struggle for the drama of ideas was brewing up in England under the leadership of Shaw, when the battle for establishing Ibsen in the English theatre was raging, the greatest obstacle to that end was "the most unassailed English institution" - Shakespeare¹. It was natural, therefore, that Shaw, the champion of the drama of ideas, took the cudgel against Shakespeare and used it in his peculiar calculated way.

1. George Bernard Shaw - G.K. Chesterton, the Bodley Head. London (1961) P 94.

Shaw, who introduced himself to Shakespeare quite early in life, knew his great predecessor well and always devoured attentively whatever came to his hand about Shakespeare. It seems at first surprising that Shaw who was so charmed by the music of Shakespeare and spoke to protest vehemently against any attempt to mutilate Shakespeare's texts, should also speak volumes against him whenever he found an opportunity --in columns of papers, in lectures and private utterances. But when we examine the situation in which Shaw found himself as the champion of the emerging drama of ideas, we see that this attack, often merciless, virulent, and unjust, was quite natural. Moreover, he found a lot of joy in demolishing the established idol. But this made him, understandably, quite infamous. His comments on Shakespeare startled all England; these appeared blasphemous to the Bardolators. But some people came to think that Shaw, in thus criticising Shakespeare, was trying to make himself appear great, which, it should be noted, is a completely wrong approach. Shaw's struggle was not to establish himself as greater than the great master, but to establish the new force in the dramatic literature - the drama of ideas. The Shavian "boutade" against Shakespeare was cool and calculated; but this was done not out of perversity or envy. It may be added that debunking is a characteristic feature of Shavian comedy and in debunking Shakespeare he seems to have tried to demolish an icon.

Shaw's main charge against Shakespeare was his

Philosophic incompetence. He complained again and again that Shakespeare's weakness lay in his complete deficiency in the highest form of thought. Ibsen's appearance in the European theatre had far-reaching impact because, so Shaw thought, he knocked out his predecessors, particularly Shakespeare. "Until then Shakespeare had been conventionally ranked as a giant among psychologists and philosophers. Ibsen dwarfed him so absurdly in those aspects that it became impossible for the moment to take him seriously as an intellectual force".¹ As a champion of the drama of ideas it was natural that Shaw would like the playwright to be an intellectual force and here he found Shakespeare wanting.

Another complaint of Shaw against Shakespeare, which he thought fundamental, was that Shakespeare's test of the worth of life was the hedonist's test; since life could not be justified by this or any other external test, Shakespeare came out of his reflective period, Shaw thought, a pessimist oppressed with a logical demonstration that life was not worth living.² Despite the enormous joyousness which Shaw attributed to Shakespeare, he, on the basis of tragic themes from Shakespeare's masterpieces, drew the illogical conclusion that Shakespeare himself was a pessimist beyond redemption. This type of criticism, of course, is quite fantastic and questionable, though Shaw made it seem plausible.

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1. Postscript to Our Theatre in Nineties- G.B. Shaw in the Complete Preface of Shaw. Paul Hamlyn Ltd. 1965. P 79.
 2. G.B. Shaw. : Man of the Century Vol II - Archibald Henderson. Appleton Century Crofts Inc 1956. P 700.

Shaw always maintained that Shakespeare was a gentleman with all the pretensions of the higher bourgeois; that the characteristics of the educated gentleman reared by the Public School and Universities were just those which he found Shakespeare's to be : "... the snobbishness, the naughtiness, the contempt for tradesmen and mechanics, the assumption that witty conversation can only mean smutty conversation, the flunkeyism ^{towards} social superiors and malice ¹ towards social inferiors "

The defects of Shaw's "boutade" against Shakespeare are numerous. In the first place Shaw committed the blunder of depreciating his predecessor because he was not a social reformer, as if the reformist zeal was the only mark of the artist. The other great blunder of Shaw was to depreciate Shakespeare for lacking any sustained and consistent philosophy of human life or society. It is true that Shakespeare is not a Kant or a Nietzsche ; but the dramatic works of Shakespeare are full of reflections on human life and destiny containing a body of thought which cannot be neglected. Moreover, Shaw could not see that one could become a great artist without having an articulated philosophy of life. Shaw is guilty of judging art by moral principles which led him to use harsh words about such an immortal character as Falstaff only because Falstaff appears to be a wretch.

1. Preface to The Dark Lady of The Sonnets- Shaw. The Complete Preface of Shaw. Paul Hamlyn Ltd. 1965. P 759.

But Shavian criticism has its own value. Shakespeare was deified by most of the romantic critics of the nineteenth century. The English-speaking people of the world started to look upon Shakespeare as an infallible god to say anything against whom was immoral and blasphemous. This was not a healthy condition because idolatry is always blinding and, in literature, destructive. Through his startling comments, replete with commonsense and often penetrating, Shaw exposed the hollowness of Bardolatry; he brought Shakespeare back to the human level and made people realize that he was a human being and a poet, not a god.

As already noted, Shaw took Shakespeare heavily to task with the singular aim of establishing Ibsen in the English soil which meant establishing the drama of ideas.

The fight for the new drama was not yet complete. It was a fight not only against the so-called "well-made" play and "drawing-room" play and against Bardolatry. It was a fight against a moral outlook; a fight which Shaw undertook with his characteristic zeal. As already noted the "well-made" play and the "drawing-room" play had their own audience who were upholders of Victorian ideas of morality and standard of conduct. But the nineties of the nineteenth Century witnessed a revolt against almost everything orthodox and conventional. In particular, this brief period saw the passing off of Victorian insularity and the rising influence of continental ideas. New social, political and religious ideas were in the air. Though the fight against Victorian

attitude was fought by many, it was particularly to Shaw that the defeat of Victorianism is due. Shaw wanted every man to think for himself without blindly accepting the Victorian standards of morality. In order to make the man conscious Shaw attacked the moral attitudes, customs and institutions and laughed at them. He satirised romantic idealism about love, war, and religion. Thus he prepared an audience who would accept the "drama of ideas" as the legitimate drama and the vital drama of the time. The shock given by Shaw to the people nourished by Victorian standard of morality and judgement was great though today they do not become shocked by his scathing remarks. In India of today the moral standard, compared to that in today's England, is rather Victorian and so when an Indian reads Shaw's dramas he still feels piously scandalized.