



The Doctor's Dilemma : A Study of G.B.Shaw's Medical Satire

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Abstract : The Doctor's Dilemma is a play by George Bernard Shaw first staged in 1906. It is a problem play about moral dilemmas created by limited medical resources and the conflicts between the demands of private medicine as a business and a vocation. The eponymous dilemma of the play is that of the newly honoured doctor Sir Colenso Ridgeon, who has developed a revolutionary new cure of tuberculosis. As his friends arrive to congratulate him on his success, he is visited by two figures who present him with a difficult decision. He has room for one more patient in his clinic; should he give it to Louis Dubedat, a brilliant but absolutely immoral artist or Dr. Blenkinsop, a poor and rather ordinary physician who is a truly good person? Dr. Ridgeon's dilemma is heightened when he falls for Jennifer Dubetat, the artist's wife, who is innocent of her husband's profligacy.

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The play "The Doctor's Dilemma" has rather more of a plot than John Bull's other Island, but the plot is merely as talking horse for the satire of the practitioners of medicine and surgery. It is amusing that Shaw borrowed the title from Hesba Stratton, the authoress of Jessica's first play who had used it in one of her stories. Shaw gravely acknowledges her permission to appropriate it. The best thing in this play is the character of Dubedat, who was originally designed as merely a person to create the dilemma, but who gained Shaw's interest and came alive. Jennifer is pallid compared with Candida or Lady Cicely; even Katherine Cornell could not give her much interest on the stage, except in her first scene with Ridgeon. Shaw called the play "a tragedy" in the subtitle either in the hope of camouflaging his satire or out of mere perversity. The preface includes lengthy attacks on vaccination, which are completely irrelevant to the play but are among Shaw's grievances against doctors. His wholesale objection to use of animals for experimentation may be excused as a noble error; his equally wholesale condemnation of vaccination is the result of a curious obsession. Vaccination became a sort of King Charles's head to him - a subject on which he was prepared to talk endlessly and irrationally. This is probably the first of the prefaces into which he incorporated lectures given before a socialist group. The odd irrelevance of many of the late prefaces to the plays is explained by this practice; by trying his lectures to the tails of his plays, Shaw insured them a wide circulation.

A.C. Ward has succinctly summed up the central issue discussed in the play. "Trimmed of all its secondary questions and interests the basic problem in The Doctor's Dilemma is who is man valuable, a good

man who has no genius or a man of genius who has no other goodness". Sir Colenso Ridgeon, the doctor in Show's play has to give a life and death answers to the problems; he has to resolve his dilemma which show fittingly describes as "The Doctor's Dilemma". In the circumstances in which he is involved, Sir Colenso Ridgeon can cure either the dull and inconspicuous good man, Blenkinsopp, or the pointer-genius and morally unscrupulous Louis Dubedat. Ridgeon is caught on the horns of a dilemma; he is between the devil and the deep sea. Ridgeon was experimented with a new medicine which would be a novel method of curing tuberculosis. In the words of Ridgeon "Well, it's always the patient who has to take the chance when an experiment is necessary. And we can find out nothing without experiment".

We can conceive of goodness as an abstract value like the ancient Greek philosopher. Yet, no man can be absolutely good or totally perfect; there is always some grain of imperfection in the human psyche.

As A.C.Ward puts it "Even a saint a holyman - if he is truly a man and not a god - is only good within the limits he imposes upon himself by withdrawing from the total experience of human life, he does not attain pure goodness but only an approximation to it". "The ideal Good Man" from this perspective "is an imagined person who attains perfection in all things of which human creatures are capable". But such a Good Man is a figment of imagination, he exists only in the world of platonic ideas or Socratic idealism. We have therefore, to limit our conception of the Good not to the Absolute Good but to some particular good or combination of particular good and sooner or later, we all have to face some form of the problem confronting Sir Colenso Ridgeon; that most of us may not be as critical as the doctor-researcher.

Bernard Shaw is a stern realist and an uncompromising moralist. If all human beings were bad, the world would be an impossible place to live in, if, on the other hand, everybody is the purges of moral virtue and artistic excellence, it would be the best of all possible world. But the world is filled with men and women with a strong mixture of virtue and vice. The Doctor's Dilemma is a serious play. G.K.Chesteriton in his inimitable paradoxical style refers to its most absorbing and effective elements. He brackets it with "Getting Married". As regards the most amusing and effective elements in The Doctor's Dilemma G.K.Chesteriton observes "it is a throw-back to his old game of guying and men of science. It was a very good game and he was an admirable player. The actual story of the 'The Doctor's Dilemma' itself less poignant and important than the things with which show had lately been dealing. Chesteriton finds something of his own paradoxical character in his contemporary G.B.Show. Shaw presents the scientists and doctors in a queer, quizzical fashion. Being a laughing philosopher, he finches his serious thinking with wit. He presents the doctors in fancy dress. As Meredith says, a comedy should arouse thoughtful laughter. Show calls the play as a tragedy but it is not a tragedy of the type of Saint Joan. Prof. S.C.Sen does not find The Doctor's Dilemma as a true comedy. It partakes of the nature of a tragedy or a serious Drama. "The inadequacy is most glaringly apparent in his tragedy The Doctor's Dilemma. As a socialist, Shaw knows that diseases are generally caused by poverty and overwork and he also holds that it is the duty of society to cure them by introducing socialism". In the preface, Shaw approaches the problem, the problem of health on the socialistic point of view. He, therefore, pleads in the preface that the best way to keep healthy is to be well born and well brought up and to make the doctor a civil servant with a respectable living wage paid out of public funds. The Doctor's Dilemma is somewhat wear and feeble as a problem drama. In the words of S.C.Sen Gupta "In the drama, Shaw fences with the problem rather than face it openly and boldly."

In The Doctor's Dilemma Sir Colenso Ridgeon is not a villain and Shaw presents no conflict between hero and villain. The dilemma of Colenso Ridgeon is a complicated one. Partly he wants to marry Jennifer Dubedat in the event of her husband's death and partly he wants to save the good wife from a worthless fellow. In the fourth act, when Dubedat is to die, Ridgeon explains that his principal consideration which determined him to cure Blenkinsopp was that Jennifer might never suffer disillusionment. In the words of Ridgeon "So long as he goes before his wife finds him out, I don't care, I fully expected this". Sir

Patric replies, "It's a little hard on a lad to be killed because his wife has too high an opinion of him". Again in the last act when Ridgeon meets Jennifer at the exhibition of Dubedat's pictures, he admits that he left her husband to die on purpose and that his motive was to marry her himself and to shield her from the discovery that her husband was an unmitigated rascal. A moment later Colenso Ridgeon comes to know that in obedience to her late husband's wishes, she has married again and the play ends with this explanation, "Then I have committed completely disinterested murder". Thus, Ridgeon's dilemma of making a choice between a goodman and a good art is complicated by his having taken a fancy to the artists wife. It is the dilemma which the play right skillfully presents in the play and not the villainy of a doctor who kills the husband with an intention to marry his wife. Shaw has vindicated Ridgeon against the sin of Dubedat's death by explaining the absurd motive which impels the doctor to let the artist die his own death. Hence, the play is a tragi-comedy made tasteful by the splendid character-drawing of the doctors. The Shavian classification of the conventional genres of drama are prescribed by Aristotle in the Poetics are worthy of consideration.

Shaw in his characteristic heretical fashion comments on the doubtful character borne by the medical profession. "Again I hear the voices indignantly muttering old phrases about the high character of noble profession and the honour and conscience of its members. I must reply that the medical profession has not a high character; it has an infamous character". G.B. Shaw stresses the tragedy of illness quite rightly in the preface. "I don't know a single thoughtful and well informed person who does not feel that the tragedy of illness at present is that it delivers you helplessly into the hands of a profession which you deeply mistrust, because if not only advocates and practises the most revolting revelries in the pursuit of knowledge and justifies them on grounds which would equally justify practising the same revelries on yourself or your children or burning down London to test a patent fire extinguisher, but, when it has shocked the public, tries to reassure it with lies of breath-bereaving brazenness. This is the character of the medical profession has got just now."

In an interview with Shaw, Archibald Henderson asked him to give him the leading specimens of both types of drama - tragedy and comedy. To Henderson's amusement, he placed his own *The Doctors Dilemma* as his peak, not of comedy but of tragedy. To quote precisely Henderson's words "This, I felt was exactly that fundamental misapprehension that inability to see himself as to hers see him which has made Shaw seem so queer to the rest of the world. When I thanked him for the amusement his rating of *The Doctors Dilemma* as a culminating point of the evolution of tragedy afforded me, he replied with a patient demonstration that his play was a tragic-comedy, a rich development than more comedy a higher form than more tragedy."

Shaw describes *The Doctors Dilemma* as a tragedy by way of challenging the veteran dramatic critic, William Archer, who thought that Shaw was not capable of writing a tragedy. Shaw took up the challenge and wrote the play in question. In Shaw's opinion, the play is not a tragedy proper but a rich vein of comedy runs concurrently with the tragic strain "Even the comedy which runs concurrently with it : the comedy of the medical profession as at present organised in England, is a tragic-comedy, with death conducting the Orchestra". In fact Shaw's play has an undercurrent of comedy. Archibald finds the play "funniest than most farces". The tragedy of Dubedat discovered Archibald Henderson "is not his death but his life; nevertheless his death, a purely poetic one, would once have seemed wholly incompatible with laughter. It takes place in the presence of the newspaper reporter, who is almost as ludicrous and farcical as much people are in real life and the perfectly genuine and moving distress is expressed by misquotations of Shakespeare in the manner Huckleberry firm.

What constitutes a good doctor? How should medical services be organised? On what basis should the doctors choose who is to be given the chance to live and who, in consequence, may die? All of these questions and more are tackled by *The Doctor's Dilemma*, a play that, while perhaps not the greatest of

Shaw's works, is peppered with thought provoking arguments and, crucially, is still highly relevant to our times. It is in consequence, an undoubted medical classic.

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