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# A Hollow Sham: Satirizing Romantic Heroism and the Absurdity of War in G.B Shaw's *Arms and the Man*

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***Abstract***
This research paper explores George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man* as a powerful and enduring satire that deconstructs the romanticized ideals of war and love prevalent in late 19th-century European society. Set against the historical backdrop of the 1885 Serbo-Bulgarian War, the play serves as a pointed critique of conventional narratives surrounding heroism, nationalism, and social hierarchy. Shaw utilizes comedy not merely for entertainment, but as a vehicle for sharp social commentary, employing wit, irony, and parody to challenge deeply ingrained societal myths and ideological constructs. Through a deliberate subversion of dramatic expectations, *Arms and the Man* undermine traditional glorifications of warfare by exposing the futility, hypocrisy, and absurdity inherent in militaristic values. At the same time, the play confronts the idealization of romantic love, emphasizing the contrast between illusion and reality. Shaw critiques the tendency to elevate passion and honor above reason and truth, advocating instead for a worldview grounded in realism, critical thought, and emotional authenticity. This paper also examines the play's satirical strategies, including comedic exaggeration, situational irony, and dialogic sharpness, as tools to dismantle cultural pretensions and false ideals. By situating the work within its socio-political context and drawing connections to ongoing global discussions about war, ideology, and social identity, the study highlights the continued relevance of Shaw's critique. Ultimately, this play is presented as a timeless reflection on human folly and a compelling argument for the rejection of romanticized heroism in favor of pragmatic and ethical engagement with the world.

***Index Terms*-Militarism Unmasked, G. B Shaw, Romantic idealism, Patriotism and heroism**

***Introduction***

George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950) the Irish playwright, critic and polemicist remains one of the most influential figures in modern drama and social thought. A Nobel laureate in Literature (1925) and the only person to have won both a Nobel Prize and an Oscar (for his screenplay adaptation of *Pygmalion* in 1938), Shaw's career spanned over six decades, during which he crafted over 60 plays, essays and critiques that challenged Victorian conventions and championed progressive ideals. A committed socialist and co-founder of the Fabian Society, Shaw used his work as a platform to dissect societal hypocrisies, advocate for social reform and interrogate the moral and political contradictions of his time. For Shaw, Ibsen's innovations provided a foundation for his own "drama of ideas," as seen in *Arms and the Man* and other works. By incorporating realism, satire and intellectual discourse Shaw followed in Ibsen's footsteps, using theatre as a medium for social reform and ideological debate. This transformation in drama marked a shift from spectacle and sentimentality to plays that questioned the status quo and encouraged audiences to reflect on the world around them. Shaw observes that Ibsen's impact brought about a significant change in English drama, by introducing a "new technical factor." As he claims:

> This technical factor in the play is the discussion. Formerly you had in what was called a well-made play, an exposition in the first act, a situation in the second, an unravelling in the third. Now you have exposition, situation, and discussion; and the discussion is the test of the playwright. The discussion conquered Europe

> in Ibsen's *Doll's House*; and now the serious play-wright recognizes in the discussion the real centre of his play's interest. (Quintessence141)

Shaw's plays are characterized by their sharp wit, intellectual rigor and subversive humor often blending satire with philosophical debate to dismantle romanticized notions of class, war, love and human progress. Rejecting the melodramatic traditions of 19th-century theater, he pioneered the "drama of ideas," prioritizing ideological conflict over plot-driven action. Works like *Man and Superman* (1903), *Major Barbara* (1905), and *Saint Joan* (1923) exemplify his ability to fuse comedy with incisive social commentary, while *Arms and the Man* (1894) stands as a landmark satire that exposes the absurdity of militarism and the illusions of heroism. According to Christopher Innes, Shaw's *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* marks the beginning of modern British drama, and the point where traditionalist drama gave way to modern drama. He says:

> The ferment of the modern era was already present in the final decade of the nineteenth century. Issues like women's rights or class justice, which have become major contemporary themes, were already finding reflections on the stage. The year 1890 marks the beginning of modern drama in England, as the date of Bernard Shaw's lecture on *'The Quintessence of Ibsenism'*. This can be seen as the watershed between traditionalist and modern perspectives, with its call for a revolution in the nature and function of the dramatic experience. (08)

This explores Shaw's legacy as a provocateur and reformer, contextualizing his radical ideas within the turbulent sociopolitical landscape of late 19th- and early 20th-century Europe. It examines how his unorthodox upbringing, socialist convictions and disdain for dogma shaped his artistic vision, positioning him as a bridge between Victorian moralism and modernist skepticism. By interrogating themes such as class inequality, the futility of war and the performativity of social roles, Shaw's work continue to resonate as a critique of power structures and a call for rationality in human affairs. His enduring relevance lies in his ability to revoke audiences—not merely to entertain, but to question, reflect, and reimagine the world.

***Discussion***

The final decades of the 19th century were characterized by an intensified wave of European militarism, driven by imperial ambition, nationalist fervor, and romanticized visions of war. In this socio-political climate, George Bernard Shaw emerged as a bold and unconventional voice, sharply critiquing the prevailing glorification of military ideals. Through his plays, Shaw sought to dismantle the myths surrounding heroism and warfare, exposing their absurdities and contradictions. *Arms and the Man*, first performed in 1894, stands as a quintessential example of his early theatrical works that blend wit, satire, and social commentary. By subverting traditional war narratives and presenting characters who challenge conventional notions of bravery and honor, Shaw transformed the stage into a platform for intellectual resistance. His play not only entertains but also provokes reflection, urging audiences to reconsider the values underpinning nationalism and military pride. 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 organization." (27) George Bernard Shaw, as a founding member of the Fabian Society, championed the cause of gradual social reform through intellectual debate and policy change, rather than through radical or violent revolution. His philosophical outlook was firmly grounded in rationalism, humanism and a steadfast commitment to truth over romanticized illusion. This ideological foundation is evident throughout his dramatic works, which consistently aim to provoke critical reflection and confront entrenched social conventions. Shaw used the stage not merely as a means of entertainment, but as a platform to engage audiences in questioning moral assumptions, political ideologies and cultural myths. In *Arms and the Man*, this manifests in his rejection of the romanticism that dominated popular culture and literature of his time. In a letter to William Archer on 23rd 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 ( 427).

The play was written in the aftermath of the Serbo-Bulgarian War of 1885, which provides its historical backdrop. However, Shaw's focus is not on historical accuracy but on the ideological critique. He uses the war setting to examine the social constructs that glorify conflict and to question the human cost of maintaining such ideals. One of Shaw's most effective strategies in critiquing militarism is his juxtaposition of characters that embody contrasting worldviews. Raina Petkoff and Sergius Saranoff represent the romantic idealism that glorifies war. Raina influenced by operatic and literary narratives, views war as a stage for heroic deeds and noble sacrifices. Sergius, her betrothed, is celebrated for a reckless cavalry charge that succeeds more by accident than by strategy.

Despite this, he is revered as a war hero, 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" (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" (158).

Shaw satirizes both sides, portraying them as mere puppets manipulated by foreign powers—Russians supporting the Bulgarians and Austrians backing the Serbs. This notion is confirmed by Major Petkoff, a Bulgarian officer, who candidly admits, "We shouldn't have been able to begin fighting if these foreigners hadn't shown us how to do it: we know nothing about it; and neither did the Serbs" (Shaw 43). He reiterates this in another remark: "Those who were leading the Serbs were all Austrians, just as our officers were all Russians" (Shaw 43).

These statements make it clear that both the Bulgarians and the Serbs are depicted as powerless instruments in the hands of more dominant European nations. What intensifies the satire is that the play's central character is neither Bulgarian nor Serbian, but a Swiss professional soldier named Bluntschli. Ironically, Bluntschli fights for the Serbs not out of ideological conviction but because, as he puts it, "they came first on the road from Switzerland" (Shaw 24). This trivial rationale undermines conventional ideals of patriotism and heroism, suggesting that such concepts have become hollow and even absurd in the context of modern warfare. In Shaw's portrayal, war is stripped of noble purpose, revealing instead a farcical and dehumanizing enterprise. Amusingly, in this play, there is no true hero. Sergius, the idealistic soldier who views war as a glorious endeavor, is stripped of heroism. All his deeds and actions are, in fact, unheroic. Shaw explicitly mocks him by portraying him as someone who nurtures misguided and outdated beliefs. The playwright even satirizes Sergius' military triumph with his cavalry regiment, showing that it happened by pure chance—because the Serbs "got the wrong ammunition" (Shaw 27). It is this accidental and unheroic victory that ironically turns Sergius into the hero of the hour. Yet, around this undeserved success, a grand halo of heroism and romantic illusion is constructed. This illusion is vividly illustrated in the highly romantic speech Catherine delivers to Raina, describing Sergius' "peerless" victory. The speech begins as follows:

> …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 16-17)

From a military standpoint, Sergius' actions lack any true heroism. However, Raina, captivated by the romanticized illusion of war, continues to idealize him, interpreting even his most trivial deeds as heroic. Ironically, despite her outward admiration, she harbors internal doubts about the authenticity of his bravery and chivalry. She voices this uncertainty candidly: "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 17). Raina's skepticism extends beyond Sergius to encompass the broader ideals of heroism and patriotism. As she confesses, "Our patriotism, our heroic ideals, I sometimes used to doubt whether they were anything but dreams" (Shaw 17). Nevertheless, despite these doubts, she chooses to remain in her world of romantic fantasy, convincing herself that her fiancé is the celebrated hero of the war who acted with wisdom and courage. This self-deception delights her so much that she ecstatically proclaims, "My hero! My hero!" (Shaw 19) As Mohammed Baqir Twaij (1996) perceptively observes, "heroism...at that time was decided either by the beloved's joy or her despair" (06). This moment serves as a powerful illustration of the deeper thematic undercurrents at play, revealing not only the irony embedded in the situation but also Shaw's broader critique of societal values and romanticized ideals. Bluntschli candidly informs Raina that her so-called hero, Sergius, is neither wise nor competent in military strategy. He criticizes Sergius for leading a cavalry charge against Serbian troops who were armed with guns—an action that, in Bluntschli's professional opinion was both irrational and suicidal. He asserts that it is completely unprofessional "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 26). Bluntschli even mocks the absurdity of the maneuver by comparing it to "slinging a handful of peas against a window pane." (27)

Through this incisive satirical commentary, the pragmatic Swiss officer lays bare the emptiness of Sergius's glorified heroism, subtly revealing that his actions were driven less by noble sacrifice and more by self-preservation masked as valor. His reckless behavior, far from being a mark of courage, underscores the absurdity of romanticized warfare and challenges the traditional ideals of honor and bravery so often celebrated in military narratives. This encounter begins to dismantle Raina's idealized image of Sergius, revealing that her romantic conception of him as a noble and chivalrous warrior is merely an illusion. The mythic "mantle of knighthood" she

had draped around him proves to be nothing more than an empty façade. These stark revelations begin to awaken Raina from her fantasies, confronting her with the harsh realities of war and human nature. Yet, what disturbs her even more is Bluntschli's unexpected confession that he carries chocolate instead of ammunition. He explains, "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 25). This revelation shocks Raina, as it starkly contrasts with her romanticized notions of warfare and heroism. For Bluntschli, practical necessities such as food are far more critical than arms, as they sustain the soldiers' lives amidst the chaos of battle. This perspective is later validated by historical experience. As A. C. Ward notes in his (1964) Introduction to *Arms and the Man*, "the two World Wars proved beyond doubt that food—symbolized here by chocolate—is just as vital to military operations as ammunition" (97–98). Raghukul Tilak (2005) supports this view, emphasizing that a soldier's fundamental concern is not the pursuit of military glory, but the preservation of his own life. Tilak writes: "A soldier's staple fare is not arms of heroism, but food and explains that this is precisely why Bluntschli flees from the battlefield and chooses to carry chocolate to the front instead of cartridges" ( 278)

It becomes increasingly evident that through the character of Bluntschli, Shaw offers a realistic portrayal of the common soldier—one who seeks to avoid the horrors of war whenever possible. Bluntschli is not the embodiment of traditional military heroism, but rather a pragmatic and self-aware individual who values survival over glory. Through him, Shaw delivers a powerful and unromantic message about human nature in times of war. According Raghukul Tilak (2005) "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." (278) This perspective sharply contrasts with the idealized, chivalric image of soldiers that characters like Raina initially believe in, reinforcing Shaw's broader critique of romanticized war narratives.

Perhaps the most striking and unsettling revelation for Raina comes when Bluntschli declares that the soldier's primary responsibility is not to display courage or perform grand heroic feats but rather to ensure his own survival. He articulates this idea plainly stating, "Our duty [is] to live as long as we can" (Shaw 21). This statement directly challenges the deeply ingrained romantic ideals that Raina holds about military honor and valor. Throughout her life, she has been taught to glorify soldiers as noble beings who willingly sacrifice themselves for abstract ideals such as patriotism and glory. Bluntschli, however, presents a starkly different vision of warfare—one rooted in self-preservation, realism and the practical necessities of staying alive in the face of death. Tarik Habieb insightfully observes:

> 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 (57-58).

This notion is not only shocking to Raina but also profoundly disillusioning. It undermines the foundation of her admiration for Sergius, whom she sees as a gallant war hero. Bluntschli's blunt assertion forces her to confront the uncomfortable reality that true heroism in war may be more about survival and strategy than about reckless bravery or theatrical gestures. His words strip away the romantic veneer she has placed over the concept of war, exposing it as a grim and pragmatic struggle where the greatest triumph is often simply to endure. Moreover, Bluntschli's philosophy echoes Shaw's larger critique of glorified warfare. By portraying a soldier who values life over empty honor, Shaw challenges the conventional war narrative and reveals the absurdity of risking human lives for the sake of appearances. In doing so, he positions Bluntschli not only as a mouthpiece for realism but also as a subversive force that compels characters like Raina—and the audience—to reconsider the true cost and meaning of war.

### *Conclusion*

Ultimately, *Arms and the Man* emerge as a striking and timeless denunciation of militarism, extending its relevance well beyond the era in which it was written. Through his sharp wit and incisive use of satire and irony, Shaw effectively unravels the idealized portrayal of war, revealing its underlying absurdities and hypocrisies. In doing so, he challenges the deeply ingrained social constructs surrounding heroism, honor and patriotism, urging audiences to adopt a more realistic and critical perspective on warfare and its glorification. By subverting heroic archetypes and presenting war through a lens of realism and reason, the play invites a reassessment of values that continue to shape attitudes toward conflict. As contemporary society grapples with ongoing wars and ideological divisions, Shaw's

call for rationality, compassion and the demystification of violence remains profoundly relevant. *Arms and the Man* not only entertain—it enlightens, urging us to confront the absurdities of war with courage and clarity.

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