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## Gender Reformation in George Bernard Shaw's *Mrs. Warren Profession*

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This study takes into account global debates surrounding women's role in development and how gender inequalities perpetuate. This paper provides a theoretical framework for an examination of women's empowerment. *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, a play by Bernard Shaw challenged the social stigmas that existed during the time and gets at Shaw's desire for social reformation. Shaw critiques the capitalist system and blames the rise of prostitution and similar "lifestyles" on capitalism, showing that the middle-lower classes do not benefit from capitalism and must resort to such professions that disregard dignity and morality and how "new woman" came into being in this play.

"Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size."

— Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

Gender study has many different forms. One view exposed by the philosopher Simone de Beauvoir said: "One is not born a woman, one becomes one".<sup>[5]</sup> This view proposes that in gender studies, the term "gender" should be used to refer to the social and cultural constructions of masculinities and femininities, not to the state of being male or female in its entirety. However, this view is not held by all gender theorists. Other areas of gender study closely examine the role that the biological states of being male or female (anatomical, physiological, and genetical explanations of male and female body parts, structure and nature of functions of body organs, genetic carriers etc.) have on social constructs of gender. Specifically, in what way gender roles are defined by biology and how they are defined by cultural trends. The field emerged from a number of different areas: the sociology of the 1950s and later (see Sociology of gender); the theories of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan; and the work of feminists such as Judith Butler.

George Bernard Shaw writes in this context in the preface to *Plays: Pleasant and Unpleasant: The First Volume Containing the Three the Unpleasant Plays*:

"I had no taste for what is called popular art, no respect for popular morality, no belief in popular religion, no admiration for popular heroics. As an Irishman I could pretend to patriotism neither for the country that I had abandoned nor the country that had ruined it. 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, discipline, subordination, good manners, and selection of fit persons for high functions. Fashionable life, open on indulgent terms to unencumbered 'brilliant' persons, I could not endure, even if I had not feared its demoralizing effect on a

character which required looking after as much as my own. I was neither a skeptic nor a cynic in these matters: I simply understood life differently from the average respectable man ... Judge then, how impossible it was for me to write fiction that should delight the public."

In addition to being an accomplished playwright, Shaw was also known for being a critic, essayist, vegetarian, and campaigner for the simplification of spelling and reform of the alphabet, feminist, anti-vivisectionist, social activist, and one very outspoken and opinionated character. Shaw created an extensive body of work in his lifetime, which spanned nearly a century. There was hardly an aspect of human activity that he did not comment on. Shaw remained engaged throughout his life with the issues at the centre of *Mrs. Warren's Profession* and his other early plays - injustice, poverty, and the status of women.

The turning point in Shaw's career was his discovery of socialism, the religion in which he found his life's calling. Of this conversation, he remarked, "I became a man with some business in the world." Shaw read Karl Marx but recognized that Marxism would not be embraced by ordinary workers. As Shaw observed, "Marx never got hold of [the working man] for a moment. ... The middle and upper classes are the revolutionary element in society; the proletariat is the conservative element." Shaw believed that the change to socialism must come gradually, "by prosaic installments of public regulation and public administration enacted by ordinary parliaments, vestries, municipalities, parish councils, school boards, etc."

Shaw became one of the earliest members of the Fabian Society, a group of middle-class socialists, which was named after the Roman general Quintus Fabius Maximus, famous for advocating a war of attrition over direct confrontation with Hannibal. The organization believed in "the inevitability of gradualism" and emphasized gradual replacement capitalism with socialism. The Fabian Society also endowed government with the quasi-religious role of the development of individual character, believing that society could be rebuilt "in accordance with the moral possibilities." Shaw's own description of socialism reflects his cold perspective on humanity: "Socialism is not charity nor loving-kindness, nor sympathy with the poor, nor popular philanthropy ... but the economist's hatred of waste and disorder, the aesthete's hatred of ugliness and hatred of disease, the saint's hatred of the seven deadly sins." basing society on hatred fit well with Shaw's disdainful character. His fifth attempt to publish a novel, *The Unsocial Socialist*, was accepted for serialized publication in 1884. As a member of the Fabian Society, he produced pamphlets such as *The Fabian Manifesto*(1884), *The True Radical Programme* (1887), *The Impossibilities of Anarchism* (1893), *Fabianism and the Empire* (1900), and *Socialism for Millionaires* (1901).

Shaw was influenced by socio-economic traditions of the Victorian era. The late Victorian era brought a tremendous change in England which was marked for Victorian women. The materiality of the industrial revolution collided with the unrest occurred between the romanticized model of Victorian domesticity. There was an increase in the number of women going for work, and, on the upper end of the class gamut, opportunities for women in education and political era.

In Victorian era, an ideal woman had to be a virtuous wife and mother under the male protection of her husband and father like a "lamb in the house", whose entire purpose was to devote herself to and offer and sacrifice herself for her family within the domestic sphere. The economic and political fact reflected this model: married women could not own property in their

own names and even their earnings belonged to their husbands. Also, women were deprived of the right to vote.

In the late nineteenth century, women acquire more rights and also the opportunities for themselves. There were certain reforms made like, the Married Women's Property Act of 1882, it allowed women to keep their earnings and can also hold property in their own names. The women's suffrage movement began to gain momentum, just after the turn of the century, though women would not be granted the vote in the UK until 1918.

With these political changes, there was a rise of "new woman": a young, erudite lively force, which had cherished independence and castaway the idiomatic restrictions on dress, decorum and behavior by Victorian society. Vivie Warren appears as a "new woman" as projected by Shaw in *Mrs. Warren's Profession*.

The "new woman" bid for freedom for their sex. They desired for self-reliant living and sought out meaningful work and education. These "new women" declined traditional behavior and lightened the line between the sexes, confounding society, but clearing a path for future augmentation by women.

"Mrs Warren is not a whit a worse woman than the reputable daughter who cannot endure her. Her indifference to the ultimate social consequences of her means of making money, and her discovery of that means by the ordinary method of taking the line of least resistance to getting it, are too common in English society to call for any special remark. Her vitality, her thrift, her energy, her outspokenness, her wise care of her daughter, and the managing capacity which has enabled her and her sister to climb from the fried fish shop down by the Mint to the establishments of which she boasts, are all high English social virtues. Her defence of herself is so overwhelming that it provokes the St James Gazette to declare that "the tendency of the play is wholly evil" because "it contains one of the boldest and most specious defences of an immoral life for poor women that has ever been penned." Happily the St James Gazette here speaks in its haste. Mrs Warren's defence of herself is not only bold and specious, but valid and unanswerable. But it is no defence at all of the vice which she organizes. It is no defence of an immoral life to say that the alternative offered by society collectively to poor women is a miserable life, starved, overworked, fetid, ailing, ugly. Though it is quite natural and RIGHT for Mrs Warren to choose what is, according to her lights, the least immoral alternative, it is none the less infamous of society to offer such alternatives. For the alternatives offered are not morality and immorality, but two sorts of immorality. The man who cannot see that starvation, overwork, dirt, and disease are as anti-social as prostitution--that they are the vices and crimes of a nation, and not merely its misfortunes--is (to put it as politely as possible) a hopelessly Private Person."

(p.10 *Mrs. Warren's Profession*)

Mrs. Warren's *Profession*, a play by Bernard Shaw, was written in 1894. Shaw challenged the social stigmas that existed during the time and gets at Shaw's desire for social reformation in this play. Shaw critiques the capitalist system and blames the rise of prostitution and similar "lifestyles" on capitalism, showing that the middle-lower classes do not benefit from capitalism and must resort to such professions that disregard dignity and morality.

During the time in which Shaw's work was produced women were expected to act and be of a certain way. Both Vivie and Mrs. Warren fall outside the lines of conventionality. As Mr. Praed points out Vivie is "conventionally unconventional" Vivie can be described as such because she is an educated woman who is very forward with actions and speaking. Vivie also rejects to marriage proposals during the play, which during Victorian times would be unheard of, because that is considered rejecting the role of the woman. Along the same lines her mother, Mrs. Warren depicts a person who has been forced to become a prostitute and now run multiple brothels, that is her profession. This play show the struggle between individuals, such as Mrs. Warren trying to gain respect from her daughter, and it also shows the struggles these individuals have because of the society they live in and the social classes they belong to. As Susan B. Anthony said:

"Before mothers can be rightly held responsible for the vices and crimes, for the general demoralization of society, they must possess all possible rights and powers to control the conditions and circumstances of their own and their children's lives. (1901)"

The play goes to the core of Victorian society and does a good job commenting on it. It shows the product of capitalism and uses Vivie to represent a gender reformation, as a character that defies the Victorian expectation of a woman and grew into a "new woman" of 21<sup>st</sup> century. Charlotte Bronte in *Jane Eyre* rightly said:

"I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will."

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