



Formative Influences on George Bernard Shaw's *Literary Career*

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George Bernard Shaw was a versatile genius. He was an orator, music critic, a Fabian Socialist, a dramatic critic, novelist, philosopher, theologian and dramatist. Considering him as a 'Superman' and superior to any of his contemporaries Ifor Evans rightly remarks: "The great figure in English drama in the late nineteenth and in the twentieth Century is unquestionably George Bernard Shaw".¹

Bernard Shaw's mother Lucinda Elizabeth Gurley/ Bassie, the ideal woman of Shaw was an arrogant and indifferent lady. She was the daughter of a reckless father and was brought up by her tyrannical, iron-heeled aunt 'Ellen'. The illusions and frustrations in her life made her hard at heart. She wished for herself to be free from the clutches of 'Parents', 'Home', 'Family' and 'duty'- things she loathed from the very beginning of her life.

G. B. Shaw's mother was cold to her husband, children and friends. She had, however, two things - 'an independence of mind and imaginative power'. She had a 'mezzo Soprano' voice with extra-ordinary purity of tone. Unfortunately, she parted from her husband in 1871 and went to London with her two daughters. There she started her professional career as a music instructor at North London College. Music was only a last trump in her hand that she used to rescue herself from poverty and misery.

Shaw's mother rescued herself from the predicament by her musical talent. She had no comedic impulses and never uttered an epigram in her life. Shaw's comedy is a part of his inheritance. Lucinda Shaw was a woman of character, energy and something genius, who made up for her husband's spinelessness by acting as the assistant of an enterprising and able musician, George John Vandaleur. To this influence Mr. Shaw's early knowledge of, and interest in, music must be ascribed, and I may as well record here my suspicion that, but for the accident, of his mother's association with Lee, he would never have possessed either.

Though she was a brave woman, yet she leaved maternal emotions and domestic interests. She left her children entirely to the care of her servants. They kept them under their control with such threats and intimidations that a cock would come down the chimney if they did any mischief. Shaw has rendered in *London Music* a graphic picture of these servants who were utterly unfit to be trusted with the charge of three cats, much less three children.

The addiction to wine of Shaw's father made Shaw a teetotaler. Carr Shaw who mostly read newspapers, could talk about the works of great writers like Scott, Dickens, Robinson etc.

Obviously, Shaw inherited humour and comic impulses from his father and the flight of imagination from his mother. A brilliant and sensitive child Shaw listened to Lee's discussions and was much impressed with his noble ideas and unconventional notions. Before Shaw was 15, he had heard Lee recite works of the great music masters like Beethoven, Verdi, Gounod, Wagner and Mozart. He was particularly impressed by Mozart's opera, "Don Giovanni", from which he learnt seriously without being dull. Shaw himself candidly admits:

In my small boyhood, I by good luck had an opportunity of learning the Don thoroughly.... indeed it educated me artistically in all sorts of ways and disqualified me only in one that if criticism Mozart fairly.²

Shaw's primary education, his reading and writing was impacted by a governess, Miss Caroline Hill. Shaw's clerical uncle William George Carroll taught him Latin. At the age of ten, he was sent to Waselyn Conational School, Dublin. He had a bad experience of school education. He wondered how unskilled teachers spoiled the genius of the students: "The classes were too large, and the teachers untrained in pedagogy, mostly picking up a living on their way to becoming Wesleyan ministers".³

Shaw had the experience of school life like Charles Dickens whose account of Salem House in his autobiographical novel *David Copperfield* is in no way happy one. Shaw took his school as a hated prison or a damnable boy prison and summarized his impressions of school life as 'the most completely wasted and mischievous part of my life'. He said: "Mankind cannot be saved from without by school masters or any other sort of masters; it can only be lamed and enslaved by them".⁴

Shaw's literary career started very early, his first story being about a man with a gun. In 1875, he published his first letter on two revivalists, Moody and Sankey. In 1879, while helping to manage business of the Edison Telephone Company with one hand, he wrote his first novel with the other. It was called *Immaturity*. It followed four other novels - *The Irrational knot* in 1880; *Love among the Artists* in 1881, *Cashel Byron's Profession* in 1882; and in 1883, *An Unsocial Socialist*. In his works art is just a by-product and what matters is not how he says, it is but what he says. He joined Zetetical Society (The word Zetetical Society means Seeking) where he met Sidney Webb and Sydney Oliver, who later on became his friends even his guides on British and world affairs. He chooses the Zetetical Society where he made his maiden speech in a 'condition of heart-breaking nervousness'. The British Museum had served Shaw as one of the most important sources in his formative years. If the British Museum was his study-room and library, The Fabian Executive was his university. British Museum laid the foundation of Shaw's success in debate. There he used to read Marx's *Das Capital* and Wagner's *Tristen and Isolde* that he had a great impact on the formative years of young Bernard.

Bernard Shaw embraced Socialism after hearing a speech from Henry George in 1882. He overcame his shyness and started delivering lectures from the platform on Socialism and made it

repeatedly a subject for writing several Harangues. Perhaps, Shaw followed Bacon's idea that 'speeches make a ready man'. In 1885, William Archer introduced him into starting his career as a critic by obtaining for him the position of a book reviewer in the *old Pall Mall Gazette*. Fortunately, Shaw came out with flying colours in his effort. William Archer introduced him to Edmund Yeats, the editor of the world, as a picture critic and Shaw maintained it from 1886-1889. Shaw also worked as a picture critic for Annie Besant's magazine *Our Corner* at the same time. Shaw was a leader writer in T.P.D. Conon's *The Star* for about three weeks in 1885. Later on he worked for it as a music critic from May, 1888 to 1890, under the pseudonym of "Carnodi Bassetto" (The Italian name of a musical instrument which went out of fashion in Mozarts' days.)

His career as a critic began in National Gallery of Ireland. Since his childhood, under the guidance of his mother and his music master, Lee, Shaw had started learning 'The methods, and playing on Piano' and other orchestral instruments. Shaw, as Frank Harris remarked, 'took to music as a duck takes to water'. He studied all the scientific musical text-books including Mozart's *Succinct Thoroughbass*. He himself said: "When my mother went to London, I suddenly found myself deprived of music, which had been my daily food all through my life".⁵

He turned to journalism, when he exhausted himself as a music critic. This time also he was helped by Frank Harris who made him a contributor to his own journal *The Saturday Review*. His articles were published in four volumes four years after they were written.

Shaw joined Fabian Society, formed on September 5, 1884, and read out the first Fabian Essay, "Why Are the Many Poor?" It was founded by the followers of "Davidson's Fellowship of the New Life". Shaw was regarded as one of the 'Star Speakers' among the Fabians. He was not a drawing room socialist. He was a true Fabian Marxist. Shaw had a large circle of Fabian Socialist friends like Sidney Webb, Sidney Oliver, William Clark, Graham Walls and others, "So much for the Fabian friendships that went to the making of G. B. S. the brilliant."⁶

He wanted socialization of the means of production and exchange under municipals or state control. He maintained that without equality of income, no civilization could survive. He edited many Fabian essays and summarised them *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism* 1928. Shaw resigned from it in 1911.

Shaw was a wizard of words. Shaw aimed at reforming English Drama in three ways. He vehemently opposed the Irving tradition of acting and presenting drama on the stage. He attacked his contemporaries for the note of compromise in their plays and he accepted and advocated the ideas and technique of Ibsen. Shaw held, 'High dramatic art does mean Ibsen.' Shaw found the theme of Ibsen's plays nearer to his heart. He wrote:

Ibsen had exposed sentimentality, romanticism, make-believe and made his business to show men and women in society as they really are and thus evoking the tragedy that may be inherent in ordinary humdrum life.⁷

Ibsen made a profound effect on the mind of Bernard Shaw and went a long way in moulding his views on women. His assertion that woman has an individuality of her own, besides her sexual role, profoundly influenced Shaw. Shaw's essay the *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* is concerned more with women than with Ibsen. Later at Webb's party she met its brilliant author whom, after having nursed in a serious illness, she married in 1898. Two years after, Shaw became a borough counsellor of St. Pancras – the only public office he held. He, however, resigned this post in 1903. In it a young, disappointed Irish woman discovers a message of courage, hope and emancipation.

In 1905, his most philosophic play *Man and Superman* was published. It was followed by *John Bull's other Island*, *Major Barbara*, *Doctor's Dilemma*, *Getting Married*, *Pygmalion* and *Heartbreak House*. In 1914, commonsense about the war was published which made him detested man in England. In 1918, the great Metabiological Pentatouch *Back to Methuselah* was written and completed in 1920. St. Joan brought him dazzling success and he was awarded Nobel Prize in 1925 but boldly discarded it as 'Life-belt thrown to a swimmer who has already reached the shore in safety'. Later, he accepted the prize and gifted its money for the establishment of Anglo-Swedish Literary Alliance. In 1931, *Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism* and *The apple Cart* were published. Then he went on a tour to U.S.S.R. where he called on Stalin. Next year he went on a world tour. In 1943 Mrs. Bernard Shaw died and Shaw also died on 2 Nov. 1950. They were cremated in the garden of their Ayot St. Lawrence House, with their mixed ashes strewn there.

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- 3 Bernard Shaw, *Sixteen Self Sketches*, London: Constable and co. Ltd., 1949, pp. 20-21.
- 4 Frank Harris, *Bernard Shaw*, London, 1931, p. 71.
- 5 G. B. Shaw, *Sixteen Self Sketches*, London, 1949, p. 34.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 68.
- 7 R. A. Scott James, *Longman, Fifty Years of English Literature, 1900-1950*, London: Green and Co. 1951, p. 18.