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Representation of the Fallen Women: Prostitution as a Moral and Social Problem in George Bernard Shaw's Mrs. Warren's Profession

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Introduction

Shaw was an Irish playwright and has won a Nobel Prize for English Literature in 1925. Mrs. Warren's Profession was published in 1898 but it was banned as soon as it was published. It was enacted for the first time publicly in 1925. Shaw's most famous plays Widowers' Houses, The Philanderer and Mrs. Warren's Profession, were a criticism of a special phase that is the capitalist phase of the modern social organization. During the Victorian Age, prostitution was a wide-scale 'problem' in Britain due to its ignorance of recognizing the society's capitalist nature as its main reason. The very essence of it went against every moral value that was promoted during this time. Values such as chastity, prudence and grace were dismissed and disregarded by 'fallen women'. These women were led into prostitution for varying reasons, the most prominent being social and economic concerns. Shaw's main aim was to unmask the double-faced societal thought that gained profit on one hand and slammed Prostitution on the other hand. The connection between the solid pillars of the middle-class and prostitutes was that they supported (from behind) and profited from industrial enterprises which employ women and girls on wages which are insufficient to support them. Shaw posits that real immorality is not in sex trade but the poverty that forces a woman to take that path. Shaw in his book *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism* writes, "The word 'Prostitution' should either not be used at all, or else applied impartially to all persons who do things for money that they would not do if they had assured means of livelihood" (30). Punishing the men who bought prostitutes was not an option and punishing a prostitute was not necessary because the amount of shame and admonition that resulted in a woman becoming a prostitute was an enough punishment. But there was no amount of shame levied on the men, only the women. If the act of selling sex was immoral, surely the act of buying sex was immoral as well. The women who were rescued from a life on the streets were forever labelled as outcasts and never accepted back into the fold of society. And yet the men whose money and sexual desires facilitated the women's demise are free of shame and legal repercussions. According to Cheng, "Shaw's play is one of the most powerful and shocking plays, dealing with the theme of prostitution as big business in bourgeois society, which gives a sharp and bitter attack upon the very foundation of the so-called 'civilized' capitalist world" (Selected reading of British dramas 438).

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Influenced by the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, Shaw employed the themes of socialism and realism in his plays. Hence, he challenged the Victorian stage, which was mainly dominated by the musical comedies and melodramas for the entertainment of the theatre goers. The political and social ideas expounded in his plays required a certain intellectual stimulation that permitted him to leave a mark on Western theatre. In line with his attachment in the Fabian society and socialist ideas, Shaw not only witnessed the suffragette movement in Britain, but also supported the women struggle. Hence, due to this, he presented challenging female characters that question the stereotypical woman images in the Victorian era. Prostitution is a trade that dates back to before the bible, but it was not until the nineteenth century that it was considered a serious threat that could morally affect the society. Tom Winnifrith, a nineteenth century literature critic, claims there is a general supposition that: "Prostitutes thrived in Victorian times because young men were thwarted of their sexual outlets by Virginal creatures" ('Dickens' in *The Fallen Women in the Nineteenth Century* 95). Prostitution can have various reasons like seduction, enforcement, survival, abduction, alcohol, survival and many more. Not all working class women were 'saved from the streets' by husbands and parents. Prostitutes were mainly the women who were orphans, dirty, poor, deferred in the society, jobless and starving. Prostitution is levied at any women who stepped outside the norms of modest behavior that upset the status quo. Lack of opportunities for women under capitalism and poverty are the main points of criticism against society's attitude towards prostitution. Holroyd states that "Shaw uses the socially disreputable profession as a metaphor for the way in which society actually conducts its business. Shaw directed his corrective pen toward the fiction of clean money-making and exposed, through the metaphor of prostitution, capitalism's coupling of gender, money, sex, and freedom disguised by middle-class family values" (*Bernard Shaw: A biography* 113).

Shaw criticizes the thought about 'morality' in the minds of people in Victorian society as prostitution was considered to be a 'filial', 'disgraceful', 'immoral' and a 'corrupt' act. After the feudal society went out of order, the Bourgeois led the foundation of the capitalist world. The new formation of the 'machine-oriented' government, led to high scales of unemployment in the society. Men and women were ready to work under any amount of prescribed wages to survive. In this struggle of survival, women faced a 'diabolic nature' of struggle. Whenever women questioned for increasing their wages like that of men they were given two options by their employers- either they can work with the same wage or they will be replaced by another 'man' in place of them. An income of 18 pence to a shilling with enormous hard work can bring a woman to an underfed life. This led few of them to choose prostitution which would at least end their 'finding for bread'. Prostitution was a part of the 'labor market' as many women working in the factories were also 'trafficked'. Shaw, as a socialist, uses the path of prostitution to indict capitalism. Charles Carpenter in his book, *Bernard Shaw and the Art of Destroying Ideals: The Early Plays*, comments that "Prostitution in Mrs. Warren's Profession represents an ultimate example of the bartering of human lives and destinies that the capitalist ethic condones" (49). It is through examining the capitalist mode of production and its ravaging nature of pursuing the maximized interests, Shaw's insights can be explored into the oppression and discrimination experienced by women as well as the problem of prostitution. Men who hire prostitutes were not held liable for their criminal actions and yet the girls and women who provided such services are deemed as social outcasts. Through this play, Shaw examines the cultural attitude towards the commoditization of women as a prostitute.

Confronted with ill health, poverty, and marital subjugation on the one hand, and opportunities for financial independence, prestige, and self-worth on the other, Kitty Warren follows her sister into a

successful career in prostitution. The emotional fervor of the play is the relationship between Mrs. Warren and her daughter Vivie, and the events leading to the unfolding of Mrs. Warren's business. The reactions of Vivie on learning that her high-end education is being funded by this profession are played out extraordinarily in this play. Also, the binary nature between 'mother love' and 'filial duty' is skillfully depicted. Economics and double standards of gender expectations are some reasons why young women are seen as sexual objects. Prostitution is known as the world's oldest profession. The Bible has references to harlots and ancient civilizations included brothels. So the existence of prostitution in Victorian England is no very obvious. There also lies a major connection between the prostitutes and the white collared people. These people exploited the women by putting them in a never ending wheel of struggle and also used them for their own 'pleasures'. Victorian Era can be called as an age of commodification of love. Females after getting married had to stay at home because they could not inherit their father's property and neither was allowed to work outside. So, their major work was to keep their husbands happy and take care of their kids. The males took advantage of the females by not only exercising patriarchy but also got involved in various 'extramarital affairs' and visited brothels frequently. All the women had to be dependent on men in one way or the other. Shaw included legions of lawyers, doctors, clergymen, political staffs to bring up the reality who use their high faculties to belie their real sentiments. Shaw tagged the play's objective to be a 'harsh reality' because a rich man without conviction is much more dangerous to the society than a poor woman without chastity. As he portrayed the respectable positioned people of the society as 'corrupted', his play was banned at the very onset and many newspapers like 'The Herald' and 'The New York Times' released articles against this play in 1909. The actors of his play were also arrested, but later all charges were taken up and then the first stage show of his play took place in the Royal George Theatre.

Shaw understood life differently from the average respectable man. He wanted such a societal formation in which every male and female can be comfortable and can have their 'freedom of action'. Shaw says the issue then in the late Victorian England was not whether prostitution and promiscuity should be presented on stage but 'how' they should be presented. Shaw argued to identify that the root causes of prostitution has much more to do with economics than with morality. Marker argues that "Assuredly, Mrs. Warren's Profession is an 'unpleasant' play and hence also a 'problem' play, in the sense that it is serious rather than frivolous in intent, is again concerned with social corruption (in this case prostitution), and is determined to fasten the blame for such vice not on the individual (the brothel madam) but on a (male, capitalistic) social system that fosters it" (The Cambridge Companion to George Bernard Shaw 115). There have been no exact records, but approximately there were somewhere between 8,000 and 80,000 prostitutes in London during the Victorian Age. It is generally accepted that most of these women found themselves in prostitution due to economic necessity. The main propositions towards prostitution were condemnation, regulation, and reformation. Capitalism acts on women as a continual inducement to enter into sex relations for money, whether in or out of marriage. Against this stands nothing but just the traditional respectability which Capitalism ruthlessly destroys by poverty and subjugation. Responsibility for prostitution in Shaw's view lay not with any segment of society, and certainly not with the prostitutes themselves, but with society. Simple economics plays a large role, as does the double- standard regarding sexuality of the society that began in the Victorian era.

Since, prostitution was a popular topic of debate during the Victorian period; many writers used the theme of 'Fallen Women' and prostitution in their work. Many writers like W.B. Yeats, Thomas Hardy, John Fowles, have taken a step to expose the brutality of exploitation of women. These writers have mostly unfolded the reasons of 'fallen-hood'. The common idea amongst these writers is that

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they have targeted the respectable pillars of the society as exploiters, who practice corrupt actions but are neither doubted nor punished. The ultimate sufferer is always the lonely woman who sees life only through one lens and that is 'surviving anyhow'. Prostitution was an active and profitable enterprise during the Middle-Ages. Historians examining town records had come up with the conclusion that most towns and cities had some sort of brothel, often an official one that was actually publicly owned. In *Measure for Measure* Shakespeare underlined 'the virgin' or 'whore dichotomy' by contrasting the convent and the brothel, both institutions that held and controlled women. By the 19th century, in bourgeois culture, the rules regarding prostitution had changed. While Victorian society advocated the idea of the 'angel in the house', its art is overrun with images of the sexualized woman. Pre-Raphaelite paintings such as *The Woodman's Daughter* by John Everett Millais and Abraham Solomon's *Drowned! Drowned!*, consistently attempted to describe the fall and, in doing so, controversially positioned the female as victim. Novels act as etiquette books such as in Jane Austen's 'strictly ordered world', a young woman who bears an illegitimate child, such as Eliza in *Sense and Sensibility*, sinks further and vanishes. Dickens also sympathized with young women who were forced into prostitution through poverty and tried to help them, but he could not even actually name Nancy's occupation in *Oliver Twist* and Martha Endell in *David Copperfield*. However, contemporary western culture, simultaneously pornographies, hypocritical and repressed, preaches prostitution as just another service industry, a lifestyle choice. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* satirizes these developments to a chilling dystopic effect.

The 19th Century had seen the introduction of the Sensation novel – with the master of the genre being Wilkie Collins. George W.M Reynolds used certain themes and styles found in sensation novels but added an extra helping of sex and violence, which proved to be incredibly popular at a time when sexual scandals were of high interest to a morally confused society. Reynolds' novels depicted the working-classes and he employs the theme of prostitution in *Rosa Lambert*. Rosa Lambert, the nominative protagonist, is the daughter of a clergyman who loses her virtue in order to save her brother from being revealed as a criminal. Gradually, the character ends up in the world of prostitution and then dies, but throughout the text, as she goes from one lover to another, she is treated with sympathy. Most writers who utilized the theme of prostitution and vice, sympathized with the fallen women, rather than portraying them as immoral creatures that had chosen to enter into a life of crime and self-degradation. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poem 'Jenny' focuses on the theme of prostitution. The poem is a monologue from the point of view of a client and his views on and concerns about, a prostitute who he uses the services of. 'A Castaway' a poem by Augusta Davies Webster is a dramatic monologue from the point of view of the prostitute, where she defends what she is doing. The reader follows the speaker from her past to her fall into prostitution and learns of the reasons for it and her concerns about society and reform. Thomas Hardy's 'The Ruined Maid' is a dialogue, in which a tale is revealed through a conversation between two characters. Melia, talks of how she has become 'ruined' by selling her body to men and worries that she will now be unsuitable for marriage and that it would be almost impossible for her to find a suitor even within her own class.

Mrs. Warren's *Profession* deals with Kitty Warren who was once herself a Prostitute and now runs a brothel along with George Crofts who has a major share in her business. Mrs. Warren chose this path to quench her thirst of survival while she was working in a restaurant in Waterloo. Eventually she turns herself into a business woman who is aware of the social conditions of the era and the possibility of her survival. Laying out the truth regarding the Victorian society, Mrs. Warren justifies her decision to saying Vivie: "Do you think we were such fools as to let other people trade in our good looks by employing us as shop-girls, or barmaids, or waitresses, when we could trade in them ourselves and get all the profits instead of starvation wages? Not likely" (Mrs. Warren's *Profession*

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with the Author's Apology, II. 66). During the time when she used to practice 'sexual indulgence', she happened to be 'pregnant' with a clergyman named Reverend Samuel Gardner. But they never got married because Rev. Gardner was a person of a 'respectable post' and hence it would be shameful for him if the society would come to know about his corrupt practices. But luck turns its wheel after he despised Kitty Warren; his son fell in love with Kitty Warren's daughter, Vivie Warren. Vivie Warren was a Mathematics degree holder from Cambridge University. Sir Crofts desires to marry Vivie Warren, but Vivie decides to marry Frank Gardner who is the spoilt, clever son of Samuel Gardner. Mr. Pared who is a good friend of Kitty Warren helps her to carry on with her 'Brothel owning' secret from Vivie. After Vivie gets to know about the origin of her mother's money, she rejected not only her mother's money but also her mother's involvement in her life. The mother and daughter's parting was inevitable but too costly on Mrs. Warren's behalf.

Shaw has indeed portrayed Vivie as a 'New Woman' figure but he did not abduct her from 'stereotypical social' thought. She adhering to the qualities of it fails to understand the society's differences leading to rejection of her mother at the end. Vivie underlines the importance of having a choice to her mother: "Everybody has some choice, mother. The poorest girl alive may not be able to choose between being Queen of England or Principal of Newnham; but she can choose between rag picking and flower selling, according to her taste. People are always blaming circumstances for what they are. I don't believe in circumstances. The people who get on in this world are the people who get up and look for the circumstances they want, and, if they cannot find them, make them" (Mrs. Warren's Profession With the Author's Apology, II. 64). Vivie seems to be extra practical who understand 'independence' but not 'the ways to attain it'. Powell States "Mrs. Warren's Profession would have pleased some new women with its straightforward linkage of prostitution and marriage, but its representation of Vivie Warren surely would have been problematic" (The Cambridge companion to George Bernard Shaw 76). Sir George Crofts serves as a foil to Mr. Praed who is a good friend and a well-wisher to the Warren family. Mr. Crofts being a middle class bourgeoisie is associated with this dark business and his character is filled with ego, dishonesty and arrogance which many men comprised of. He himself was a part of prostitution but wanted to marry Vivie, a woman of 'high status'. His characteristics reveals the real 'moral corruption' who on being rejected by a well educated beautiful girl did not step back in making the girl's life shattered into pieces by exposing her the 'secret'. Mrs. Warren did not want Crofts to get married to Vivie because she was well aware of his bad motives. From Vivie's point of view, Mrs. Warren and Crofts represent not only powerful money which can direct people's lives, but also a reality principle behind it and the rules of a game. Mrs. Warren's Profession thus reveals Shaw as a proponent of social reform. He accords in the theatre with a theme that Christian Socialist clergymen were less free to handle due to the common restraints of their day concerning problems related to prostitution and sex.

Shaw's arguments are a major step forward in the fight for women's rights in the Victorian time. The characters of the play can be seen as largely either prostitutes or their clients and Shaw wants to show us how entangled the whole Victorian society was in the prostitution commerce. He characterizes Sir George Crofts as a big, regular client, who profits from brothels all over Europe. Then, he portrays Samuel Gardner as a person who has sold himself for his benefit and turned from immorality to self-righteousness and Frank who is almost selling himself for marriage because he is broken. Lastly he shows, Lizzie, the sister of Mrs. Warren, who has slept her way up to become a respectable lady in a cathedral town. Frank Gardner who is a spoilt, clever son of the clergyman serves as foil to Vivie Warren and he just wastes his father's money and wants to get married to Vivie. His love for Vivie is ambiguous and therefore, he is rejected at the end. Vivie at the end becomes all alone and thinks that she will earn her own living and thus no longer needs her mother's assistance. Vivie's commenting as

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‘the strongest woman in England’ can be taken as a mockery and at the same point a comment outlaid due to disgust and weariness. Greco underlines Vivie’s qualities that transcend traditional woman type for the Victorian society: “Vivie is still one of a distinctly masculine girl in both outlook and appearance, who cares little for convention and unabashedly flaunts her anti-feminine posture” (Vivie Warren's Profession: a New Look at Mrs. Warren's Profession 94). Vivie's image-shaping cannot jump out of the scope of patriarchal discourse and her words and deeds are not so much full of characteristics of ‘new women’ but rather sketched out in accordance with an ideal male. Thus, in the male-dominated Victorian times, a writer's description of women is very difficult to break through the limitations of the mainstream discourse mechanisms. R. Weintraub in his book, *Fabian Feminist: Bernard Shaw and Woman* comments “Shaw once had proposed that Women have the ability to bear the responsibility of promoting the progress of mankind and they should participate in the practice of social change” (75). This play shows the condemnation and criticism of traditional moral values and false ethical standards, as well as Shaw’s concerns about real life and revelations of social misfortune. The social root of women's tragic fate lies in the exploitative nature of the capitalist production mode.

Conclusion

The way of looking at Prostitution has not yet changed in the Modern Era also, though the centuries have passed. We can find ‘Miss Vivies’ many more still now. A. Heywood comments “Like the modern-day radical feminist, Vivie seems to be struggling toward an understanding of gender as the most fundamental of all social divisions, not only in politics and public life or in the economy, but all aspects of social, personal and sexual existence” (*Political Ideologies* 235). Prostitutes are deprived of every Constitutional law in all countries. Prostitution is looked down upon with ‘an equal eye of hatred’ by educated as well as non educated people. Modernism changed people’s views but it could not change the ‘adjective’ of prostitution. Through the mother-daughter relationship in this play, Shaw presents a highly complicated case regarding the rights of women. Modernism is equivalent to social freedom but for that the society must first come out from the ‘basic stereotypical’ ideas about various evils of the society. Prostitution should not be taken as an ‘act’ rather it should be taken as a real ‘job’ just like other white collared jobs of the society. A tolerable society can only be advocated when men and women are comfortable in the society with their actions, leading to non-corrupted judgments.

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