



## STUDY OF SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE PLAYS OF MILLER AND SHAW

Neeraj

M.A English, Maharshi Dayanand University, Rohtak, Haryana (NET Qualified)

**Cite This Article:** Neeraj, "Study of Social Consciousness in the Plays of Miller and Shaw", International Journal of Scientific Research and Modern Education, Volume 8,

Issue 1, Page Number 47-51, 2023.

**Copy Right:** © IJSRME, 2023 (All Rights Reserved). This is an Open Access Article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

### Abstract:

Literary realism is a style in literature to present things and people as they are in real life. It is an opposition to romanticism or idealism. It is a way of looking, presenting, accepting and dealing with situations as they are without any influence of emotions or false hopes. This concept believes in reflecting real life situations. It refers to the trend toward depictions of contemporary life and society. The realist writers presented the society in its true form. Arthur Miller lavishly communicates the themes of social consciousness in his plays. Arthur Miller, in his plays, mirrors the impacts of the First World War and the Depression in society. G. B. Shaw, a towering figure of his time depicted his society candidly for which he suffered criticism in early days. But later on, he established his image as an anti-romantic in his society. As we know that literature is mirror of society, Shaw reflects the same beautifully in his works. The present study attempts to provide an in-depth analysis of the selected plays of Arthur Miller and G.B. Shaw to provide a comparative overview of the social consciousness.

**Key Words:** Literary Realism, Romanticism or Idealism and Social Consciousness.

Literary realism is a style in literature that presents things and people as they are in real life. It is opposed to romanticism or idealism. It is a way of seeing, accepting and dealing with situations as they really are without being influenced by emotions or false hopes. It is a concept that believes in reflecting real life situations. Moreover, most often, literary realism refers to the trend, beginning with certain works of nineteenth-century French literature and extending to late nineteenth and early twentieth century authors in various countries, toward depictions of contemporary life and society in actual terms.

Social consciousness propounds a consciously contradictory concept of the society. The realist ought to describe society as it is but he must also describe it as it should and will be. There are various dramatists in the world that employed social consciousness in their works. Nowadays it is a powerful aspect, pervading all kinds of literary works. The influence of realism on American literature is profound. After the First World War, American people and the authors among them were left disillusioned by the effects of the war on their society. America needed a literature that would explain what had happened and what was happening to their society. American writers turned to what is now known as modernism. The influence of 19th century realism and naturalism and the truthful representation of American life and people were evident in post-World War I modernism. Realism and modernism not only depicted American society accurately and unbiased, but also tried to find the solutions brought upon by the suffering caused by the war. Realists instead of giving one sided view of life they attempted to show the different classes, manners, and stratification of life in America.

Both modernist and realists attacked the moral dilemmas in the society. The only difference was that these dilemmas were different. While that realists attempt to give a comprehensive picture of modern life, modernists wish to express the whole experience of modern life. These authors of the realistic and modernistic period have the same goals. So naturally they write using the same ideas, methods, and principles. Realists focus on different literary aspects to detail how American culture is affected by these changes. They portray the different characters shaped by the society and try to convey the good and evil aspects of life.

Thematically, both groups of authors convey the good and bad aspects of a changing American society. Both rally for change and both ask for the unification of society, but both still linger more on the presence of corruption in America. Both realists and modernists want to paint an unbiased, accurate picture of society by confronting the problems of the individual and of the society.

Arthur Miller in his plays reflects the effects of First World War and the depression in the society. He richly expresses the themes of social consciousness in his plays. His plays express rich social realistic aspects. He follows Ibsen, Balzac and Zola. Miller accepts the social consciousness but at the same time he does not ignore the inner psyche of human mind. He accepts his involvements with the three stylistic modes prevalent in modern drama; the realistic, the expressionistic and the rhetorical.

Miller reaches out to a deeper conception of relationships which he emphasizes in his title. This is something more than honesty and uprightness: it is the quite different social conception of human brotherhood. Miller sees this in a social context, as he explains in the Introduction:

Joe Keller's trouble . . . is not that he cannot tell right from wrong but that his cast of mind cannot admit that he, personally, has any viable connection with his world, his universe, or his

society. He is not a partner in society, but an incorporated member, so to speak, and you cannot sue personally the officers of a corporation. I hasten to make clear that I am not merely speaking of a literal corporation but the concept of a man's becoming a function of production or distribution to the point where his personality becomes divorced from the actions it propels. (Miller 19)

This is extremely important, not only as a clue to the play named, but as indicating the way in which Miller, personally, came to the experience expressible as that of human brotherhood. In any sense that matters, this concept is always personally known and lived; as a slogan it is nothing. And the complicated experience of inheritance from a father is perhaps one of the permanent approaches to this transforming consciousness. There is the creative complexity of the fact that a son, in many senses, replaces his father. There is dependence and the growth to independence, and both are necessary, in a high and moving tension. In both father and son there are the roots of guilt, and yet, ultimately they stand together as men: the father both a model and a rejected ideal; the son both an idea and a relative failure. But the model, the rejection, the idea and the failure are all terms of growth, and the balance that can be struck is a very deep understanding of relatedness and brotherhood.

All My Sons is related to the consideration of the relative importance of personal responsibility and social responsibility. An individual may be responsible to himself and his family; but he should also feel responsible towards the society. Now the question is, whether he can justifiably evade his social responsibility to fulfil his obligations to a smaller social unit like the family. In owning the responsibility towards his family or his sons, which impels him to earn money by dishonest means, Joe Keller seems to disown his social responsibility. He is too much concerned with earning money for his family to keep in mind the good of his society, or to avoid doing any harm to it. The result is his anti-social act of the supply of defective equipment to the Air Force. He does not feel any regret for it, but rather tries to justify it on the ground that others are indulging in earning money too. He claims to be caring much for his family (or his sons); but he causes the death of his elder son, Larry, because of his act. He has finally to commit suicide. Thus, the evasion of social responsibility hardly gives him any happiness; it only results in his tragedy.

All My Sons also deals with the large issue of a crisis in national character. In an era of capitalistic economy in America, the people here have become so money-minded that they can go to any extent to earn money, and to become rich. Loyalty, trust and friendship have begun to be treated as secondary to monetary gain. The interests of the country can be sacrificed at the altar of profiteering, as happens in the case of Joe Keller who hazards the precious lives of young pilots because of his greed. Chris rightly remarks, "This is the land of the great big dogs, you don't love a man, you eat him! That's the principle, the only one we live by". (Miller 86)

All My Sons also deals with the larger issue of the love and sympathy for one's near and dear ones. Larry was Joe's son, and his death grieves him. But so were all the young pilots who were killed in crashes and he should feel grieved for their death too, especially because he himself is responsible for it. As Chris tells his mother, "You can know there's a universe of people outside you, and you're responsible to it". (Miller 89) The arousal of a sense of this wider sympathy for others besides one's own people seems to be Miller's concern in the play.

All My Sons is a drama which has issues related to love, friendship, marriage, business, profession, etc. These issues are treated in it quite realistically. Loyalty and betrayal, intimacy and deception, have also been dealt within it. A comparative examination of various kinds of relationship e.g. relationship between husband and wife, father and son, brother and sister, and so on – has been attempted in it too. The interaction between different members of a family, such as in the Keller family and Deever's family, has been closely analysed and shown by Miller in this play. The social atmosphere during the Second World War and the evils that vitiated it have been brought out by him too. The ill of the judicial system under which an innocent person like Steve Deever has to spend several years in jail while the guilty man like Joe Keller goes scot-free, has been presented for our scrutiny. The capitalistic system which breeds the evils of profiteering, hoarding and money making by unscrupulous means, has been indicated by Miller through the characters like Chris. Thus, various social issues have been treated in All My Sons that impart it a touch of realism. Garff B. Wilson says, "All My Sons is a realistic play, illustrating the theme that a man must recognize his ethical responsibility to the world outside his home as well as in his own home".

Analysis of the plays of Miller has resulted in the conclusion that he indeed wants every man to take individual as well as social responsibility in order to maintain a balance between himself, his family and the outside world. His opinions are not specifically socialist or capitalist, but rather his own political and moral philosophy. Through his plays Miller describes what happens if an individual isolates himself from the outside world and only fulfils his own goals in life without consideration for the lives of others. In conclusion, what Miller is suggesting is that people have a social responsibility to one another, and that we should recognize and respect that responsibility.

George Bernard Shaw is against both capitalism and imperialism as they are responsible for creating disorder and imbalance; it creates wars. As a civilized man, Shaw detests cruelty and killing, whether in war or

sport. He believes in equality as the only possible means to accomplish the good, to strengthen social association and discipline. Equality, in the real sense of the word, alone brings peace and prosperity on this earth. Shaw belongs to the late Victorian age, but his period is named as Shawian age because he was one of those writers of English who could influence the audience with his powerful writing. Shaw used art as a means to transmit his ideas into word. He described very serious things in a comic manner.

According to him, comedy is the best way to deliver the harsh realities of the society and to reveal the different facets of truths concerning the problem of society. He was a social reformer and his philosophy lied in his comic art. His was a distinguished voice. Shaw is a profound thinker. He sees the truth and reveals it through art which in his opinion is the best vehicle for teaching. He often includes long prefaces and epilogues that explain his views and strong beliefs. He regards social criticism as the most important function of all arts. Shaw wants to educate his audience and to persuade them that all the problems in society should be seriously viewed and sincere efforts should be made to resolve all the personal and social crises.

His plays show his intellectual intensity to trace out the root cause of personal and social evil which finally creates imbalance in the society and causes personal and social disorder. He believes that artist has to play the role of a reformer. As a social reformer, Shaw dissected slum landlordism, prostitution, marriage, free love, politics, militarism, nationalism, capitalism and other isms steeped in hypocrisy and deceit. He was a moral revolutionary; his socialism was aimed at transforming the world.

Shaw had very sharp and penetrating vision and could tolerate no evil either in an individual or social institution. His writings are characterized by satire, irony and humor. Shaw is one of the major playwrights of the world who have addressed themselves to the issues of evil existing in multifarious forms sometimes openly and at times acting in unknown and unseen ways. Shaw's art is distinguished by his highly sensitive intellectual concerns. He has very often asserted the intellectual and social commitment of his art. Shaw however takes recourse to irony, humor and satire to dramatize the central issues of social and personal evil. Wit, humor and irony, in fact, are the most important aspects of his plays and also of his intellectual writings. It is because of these devices, his realistic presentation of acute poverty, sufferings and social issues do not get lapsed into drab naturalistic kind of presentation. His dialogues are written in very simple, direct and lucid prose. The simplicity, lucidity and directness of his language attribute a musical cadence to his dialogues.

Shaw's *Man and Superman* is considered a turning point in Shaw's dramatic career. The play is often described as a comedy of manners. Shaw's play *Man and Superman* is a literary work that reflects aspects of hegemony. The drama describes the competition between the characters to obtain power using the medium of hegemony to influence others. Hegemony in this context is wealth, gender and age. The competition of power is a truth of society. Each person or group of people will try to have power over others. It is caused by the different interests of each person or community in the society. Each person will combat and compete in many ways to be the leader or simply to be known within the community. This competition will bring about the segmentation of society into separate social groups, with each person forming a group based on the same interests. The groups will compete with each other to gain power, which inevitably leads to conflicts for the individuals, as well as the community, as a result of different interests.

In the play *Man and Superman*, G. B. Shaw reflects how social clashes happen because of different interests. The characters in this play represent each interest and have their own political beliefs. As a result, they fight each other using hegemony as described above. These different interests will influence not only their everyday problems, but also the political atmosphere. John Tanner, the main character in this play, attracts a lot of competition because of his ideas. He represents the revolutionary youth, and possesses a great deal of potential.

As the representation of youth, Tanner has very progressive ideas for developing his society to become independent. He is also very dynamic in transferring his ideas to motivate society to foster the movement. He believes that it is every person's right to have a free will and the freedom to express ideas, and tries to encourage every person to exercise these rights. Tanner tries to break the youth away from the shackles of the status quo. He fights against their ideology and regards their ideas as useless and out of date. He struggles for the freedom to participate in social change, and realizes that this freedom is the key to encouraging every person to join him in his efforts.

Tanner's mission is to eliminate discrimination in the social dynamic, a condition that will have a positive impact on the social and political atmosphere in the community. Roebuck Ramsden represents the older man and is Tanner's opposition. As the older man, he has had many experiences and also has more capital. Economically and socially, Ramsden is in a higher position than Tanner. Therefore, when Ramsden speaks, people obey and trust him. Tanner, as the young person, is regarded as unstable and lacking experience. Whatever he says is perceived as weak compared to the older man.

Based on these assumptions, Ann's mother chooses Ramsden to be her guardian as she has no trust or faith in the younger Tanner. Ramsden fears he will lose his power toward Ann's family because of the influence of Tanner's ideas. He maintains the societal belief that the older man is the most experienced in solving life's

problems; therefore, Tanner cannot be Ann's guardian. Ramsden is afraid that Ann will make mistakes in her life without the proper guidance.

This different perception about the right guardian for Ann becomes an issue about the experienced person versus the inexperienced, with the former regarded as the intellectual capital. To justify that the young are weak, Ramsden vilifies Tanner's book as dangerous, and regards Tanner's ideas as useless for life's lessons. Ramsden has not even read the book, deeming it a worthless effort, and tosses it in the trash.

This conflict between Tanner and Ramsden is the beginning of the contradiction of the ideopolitical interest in Man and Superman. It reflects the importance of ideas in social change. Ideas are essential to gain the support from other people or the community. They are the main tool for social dynamic; therefore, in the theory of hegemony, ideas are the prominent factors for social change. The conflict between Tanner and Ramsden also represents their different perceptions of women.

As the representation of youth, Tanner wants independence and the same rights for women. Whereas Ramsden still holds an old belief that the woman is weaker than the man, and wants Ann dependent on him. In the feudal system, the independency of woman is considered dangerous, because women are unstable and emotional. From this discussion, we can see that this play has three types of hegemony: man over woman, the government over its citizen, and the older man over the young man.

The play in reality depicts the English society where the woman was placed in an unfortunate position, and was regarded as the weaker creature, physically and mentally. She had to rely on the man, obeying his instructions as he was her guardian. Women had to ask permission if they wanted to leave the house. They were not allowed to work outside of the home, nor were they permitted to make decisions, especially those dealing with the future, marriage, et cetera. These conditions placed the woman in an inferior position within the community. As a result of this unfair treatment, women were dependent on men and required to consult with them on every issue or problem.

In Man and Superman, the women have no freedom of expression, even in regards to their personal feelings. It is because of this societal restriction that Ann's mother cannot help her choose her guardian, or more importantly, eventually marry. As a result, Mrs. Whitefield (Ann's mother) chooses Ramsden over Tanner because of his seniority. The perception that women have no ability to handle their own problems does not only come from men, but also from the women themselves.

The characteristics projected on women by men, such as shyness and instability, often make women feel insecure about making their own decisions. This is exactly the position with Mrs. Whitefield who feels incapable of protecting Ann. Mrs. Whitefield cannot handle the agreement given to her by her husband, which is considered sacred, and of great importance. As result, she must find the appropriate person who can handle the agreement. Based on heredity, only Tanner and Ramsden can do this. Unfortunately, Tanner is not qualified because of his age, and regarded as too inexperienced to take on such a big responsibility. This assumption makes the woman subordinate, and is regarded by society as a second class citizen.

The clashes that occur in society because of different interests cannot be denied. The presence of these differences motivates humanity to struggle for better lives and achieve domination. Therefore, mastery of the intellect through ideas is extremely important for a safe position in social competition. In order not to be the victim in the social war, every person has to equip him/herself with intellectuality. In addition, every person has to actively participate in the exploration of his/ her ideas in achieving the social change.

This drama illustrates that every person must be given the freedom to contribute in social dynamics. Freedom is the most important component in raising the potential of a person to participate in community development. No one can segregate or limit another from developing themselves. Therefore, this play gives us the solution that discrimination based on capital, gender, and age must be abolished in society. Shaw's plays very clearly show his position against social Darwinism that is often justified by a brutal struggle for domination. Shaw firmly stands against war, especially the wars waged for supremacy and control over power and people. He has, as we have already seen, microscopically delineated not only the after effects of wars, but also the basic motives behind the wars. He has also masterfully delineated the evils of war in terms of inter personal and social relationships. Shaw's anti-capitalistic and anti-imperialistic stance brings him much closer to the literary discourses produced all over the globe.

### **Conclusion:**

Having Miller, who condemns the American Dream ideology of 1920's and disapproves of the Capitalist society of that time for abusing its workforce and creating the culture of consumption, on the one hand and Shaw, a seemingly sympathetic of working class outside but a Darwinist inside, on the other hand, one would more likely conclude that it is Miller who is a better representative of the atmosphere of his society and the state of different classes in it. Both Pygmalion and All My Sons being social criticisms of their societies besides focusing on individuals' problems either created by the environment or being the fault of the character himself try to present a problem to the reader, which is going to be solved either by the author within the play or afterward by the reader.

**References:**

1. Garff B. Wilson, "Three Hundred Years of American Drama and Theatre". University of California at Berkeley, Playwright between Two World Wars, p. 446.
2. Greiner, Norbert. "Shaw's Aesthetics and Socialist Realism." The Shaw Review, vol. 22, no. 1, 1979, pp. 33–45.
3. Shaw, George Bernard. (2004). Man and Superman and Other Three Plays. (Introduced by John A. Bertolini). New York: Barnes & Noble Classic.
4. Arthur Miller, All My Sons, ed. Nissim Ezekiel (Madras: Oxford University Press, 1972) 91.