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**CONSCIENCE - A FOCAL CONCERN IN
 SHAW'S MRS. WARREN'S PROFESSION**

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Abstract:

It is an obvious fact that George Bernard Shaw is a keen observer of society. He is known for his creative ability and critical sensibility. He ventures to find solutions to common social issues through his criticism and logical thinking. His exuberant intellect lies in presenting facts creatively to convince the audience with his wit and humor. The main object of this paper is to deal with the theme of conscience which is the prime concern of the play, Mrs. Warren's Profession. To illustrate this point, the conflict between a mother and daughter is discussed at length, as well, his idea of the reason for prostitution is justified by stating that prostitution is not chosen due to female depravity or male licentiousness, but it is only to eke out one's livelihood. However, his aim is to awaken the dormant conscience of the people by driving home the awful truth that it is not the woman but the society at large which is responsible for the social evil of prostitution.

Keywords: *observer, issues, solutions, criticism, wit and humor, conscience, conflict, prostitution, society.*

Introduction

Of the social problems in Shaw's plays, the problem of prostitution is, perhaps, the most potent. It has received greater attention of Shaw than many other problems of the contemporary society. Though prostitution has raised its ugly head in all ages, it had grown more and more virulent during Shaw's time with increase of wealth and population. As G.M. Trevelyan, the social historian, points out, "The harshness of the world's ethical code which many parents endorsed too often drove a girl once seduced to prostitution. And the economic condition of single women forced many of them to adopt a trade they abhorred. Low wages in unregulated sweated industries made temptation strong". On the top of that Shaw's own bitter experience in a London street drove him to attack the social evil through a play, *Mrs. Warren's Profession*. Furthermore, Shaw "Was in full of reformatory mood, very indignant about almost everything and deliberately challenging all the conventions of his age".

Shaw's sole purpose in writing *Mrs. Warren's Profession* is to discuss "The problem of sexual prostitution and its economic roots". Besides, he endeavors to sensitize the dormant conscience of the people saying that it is not solely woman but the society as a whole is accountable for the social evil of prostitution. He makes this clear in his 'preface' to *Mrs. Warren's Profession*:

Prostitution is caused, not by female depravity and male licentiousness, but simply by underpaying, under valuing and over working women so shamefully that the poorest of them are forced to resort to prostitution to keep body and soul together.

Shaw deals with problem of prostitution artistically through the theme of conscience which creates conflict between "A coarse mother, Mrs. Warren, and a cold daughter, Miss Vivie Warren".

Theme of Conscience

Mrs. Warren, a woman with a past, who runs a chain of brothels on the continent, educates her daughter Vivie Warren in good schools and at Cambridge by concealing the secret of her profession. Later,

when Mrs. Warren asks her daughter for protection, Vivie, who has been enlightened about her mother's source of income, mercilessly refuses to stay with her mother, since her conscience does not allow her to continue her life with a woman branded as a prostitute.

Right from the first Act, Shaw introduces discussion on various aspects of complications that arise in a prostitute's family life. As the play opens, Mr. Praed, an artist, meets Mrs. Warren's daughter, Vivie Warren, and enquiringly asks several questions relating to her tastes and inclinations. Vivie, who is ignorant of her mother's profession, talks casually with Praed, who poses doubts on her way of living:

Praed: I'm so glad your mother hasn't spoilt you....
I'm a born anarchist. I hate authority.
It spoils the relations between parent and child,
Even between mother and daughter.
Now I was always afraid that your mother
would strain her authority to make you very conventional.

Vivie: Oh! Have I been behaving unconventionally?

Praed:At least not conventionally un-conventionally.

The artist inquisitively drags Vivie to some unknown facts that have been kept secret by her mother. However, she ignorantly expresses her penchant views:

Praed: I am afraid your mother will be a little disappointed.
Not for any short coming on your part,
...But you are so different from her ideal.

Vivie: Her What?

Praed: Her ideal.

Vivie: Do you mean her ideal of ME ?

Praed: Yes.

Vivie: What on earth is it like?

Praed: People who dissatisfied with their own bringing up generally think that the world would be alright if everybody were to be brought up quite differently. Now your mother's life has been - I suppose you know -

Vivie: Don't suppose anything, Mr. Praed. I hardly know my mother. Since I was a child I have lived in England, at school or college or with people paid to take charge of me. I have been boarded out all my life. My mother has lived in Brussels or Vienna and never let me go to her. I only see her when she visits England for a few days... But don't imagine I know anything about my mother. I know far less than you do.

Praed: Of course you and your mother will get on capitally (Act I, P.279).

Vivie, who has slightly felt unpleasant to think about her mother's life, says:

Why won't my mother's life bear being talked about (Act I, P.280).

Praed, who knows the unpleasant life of Mrs. Warren, cannot reveal the fact as his delicacy impedes him to do so. Praed says:

Isn't it natural that I should have a certain delicacy in talking to my old friend's daughter about her behind her back? (Act I, P.280)

Since Vivie smells the bad life of her mother, she feels that Praed is trying to hide something in this regard. In the mean time, Mrs. Warren's old friends meet together and involve in deep conversation on men and matters. In course of their formal conversation, Mrs. Warren proposes matrimonial alliance to her daughter with Mr. Frank, son of Rev. S. Gardner. Since Mr. Gardner holds a respectable position as a Rector, he refuses the proposal:

Mrs. Warren : ... If the girl wants to get married no good can come of keeping her unmarried.

Rev.S.Gardner: But married to him! Your daughter to my son! Only think: It's impossible (Act II, P.296).

After listening to the conversation between Crofts and Mrs. Warren, Vivie senses the lecherous nature of Mr. Crofts and hates him. Further, when Mrs. Warren asks Vivie about her marriage, she expresses her desire to choose a different path without clinging on to her mother any longer. Vivie says:

Do you think my way of life would suit you? I doubt it.

(Act II, P.306)

Vivie becomes very inquisitive and drags her mother to a discussion through which we can clearly discern the independent and advanced qualities of an educated girl:

Mrs. Warren : ... Do you know who you are speaking to, Miss?

Vivie : No, who are you? What are you? Everybody knows my reputation, my social standing, and the profession I intend to pursue. I know nothing about you. What is that way of life which you invite me to share with you and Sir George Crofts? (Act II, P.307)

Vivie Warren remonstrates and compels her mother to reveal her identity. Not with standing Vivie's persistent questioning, Mrs. Warren discloses her pathetic condition which has led her to embrace a profession which is abominable. Of course, Vivie demonstrates her empathy towards her mother, but heart of hearts her conscience pinches her to show indifference towards her mother's attitude. It is further intensified when she comes to know that Frank and she are half-brother and half-sister. She bluntly rejects the proposal of Frank to marry him and declines to go with Praed to Italy. In a fit of emotional outrage, she says to Praed:

... Once for all, there is no beauty and no romance in life for me. Life is what it is, and I am prepared to take it as it is (Act IV, P.340)

Their conversation goes much deeper and it touches the striking note of Mrs. Warren's filthy profession. Praed again insists Vivie on visiting Italy. Yet, she dismisses his proposal due to over preoccupation of her mind with her mother's ignominious style of living.

The real dramatic conflict between mother and daughter reaches crescendo when either of them gets into a heated debate about their future course of action. Vivie piquantly attacks her mother when she likes to double the amount that she gives regularly to meet her daughter's expenses. She refuses and says:

From this time I go my own way in my own business and among my friends. And you will go your. Good bye (Act IV, P.349)

Though Mrs. Warren assures to meet Vivie's needs, Vivie cuts her mother with her darts like words. It is clear from her version, that Vivie's independent nature is apparently pinpointed by Shaw, to make her an advanced woman choosing her own way of life apart from her mother's influence. "Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession* best shows the conflict between individualism and social forces. Vivie cuts herself off from her own mother when she discovers the source of her income. Vivie settles down to work out her destiny alone, unaided by her family friends".

However, Mrs. Warren cunningly tries to convince her daughter by telling about the hypocritical way of life of people and society. She also threatens her daughter about her existence without any financial support. Besides, she asserts that the society is only after persons like her setting aside virtuosity and integrity. She tries at best to make her daughter seek her refuge to enjoy a comfortable life. But, Vivie who is obsessed with her conscience to become an independent woman categorically observes in jarring terms:

... I don't object to Crafts more than to any coarsely built man of his class. To tell you the truth, I rather admire him for being strong-minded enough to enjoy himself in his own

way and make plenty of money instead of living the usual shooting hunting, dining out, tailoring loafing life of his set merely because all the rest do it. ... I don't think I am more prejudiced or straitlaced than you: I'm certain I'm less sentimental. I know very well that fashionable morality is all a pretence, and that if I took your money and devoted the rest of my life to spending it fashionably, I might be as worthless and vicious as the silliest woman could possibly want to be without having a word said to me about it (Act IV, P.352).

Softened by Vivie's words of dagger, Mrs. Warren promises that she would give up the company of Crofts, but she cannot give up the business, because she may grow melancholic as the business suits her for her survival. Even then, Vivie emphatically gives vent to her feelings with conviction and utters:

No: I am my mother's daughter. I am like you: I must have works, and must make more money than I spend. But my work is not your work, and my way not your way. We must part. It will not make much difference to us: instead of meeting one another for perhaps a few months in twenty years, we shall never meet (Act IV, P.353).

Mrs. Warren pleads and asks her daughter to take care of her in her old age by reminding of her duty to mother. Contradicting her view Vivie says:

... Now once for all, mother, you want a daughter, and Frank wants a wife. I don't want a mother, and I don't want a husband (Act IV, P.354).

Reacting to Vivie's strong conscience, Mrs. Warren bursts out ruthlessly with dejection:

I always wanted to be a good woman. I tried honest work, and I was slave-driven until I cursed the day I ever heard of honest work. I was a good mother, and because I made my daughter a good woman she turns me out as if I was a leper ... From this time forth, so help me Heaven in my last hour, I'll do wrong and nothing but wrong. And I'll prosper on it (Act IV, P.355).

In spite of her ceaseless argument, she could not gain the sympathy of her daughter and accepts her inevitability in perpetuating her contaminated profession, even though it might bring a curse upon her life, yet, at the end she becomes penitent and submits her conscience in a rueful vein of expression. Nevertheless, Vivie dismantles sentiments and endearment that she has to show towards Mrs. Warren and appeals strongly in lacerating terms. She says:

... You are a conventional woman at heart.

That is why I am bidding you good bye now (Act IV, P.353).

As everything becomes obscure and hopeless in persuading her daughter, Mrs. Warren bids farewell once for all. The theme of the play, conscience develops tension between the two characters Mrs. Warren and Vivie. As Sahai observes, "In his attempt to put in tenseness and suspense in the conflict between the capitalist and the individualist in Act I, Shaw soon turns it as one revolving around domestic conflict of sentiment between mother and daughter".

Conclusion

As far as the theme is concerned, Shaw, adroitly deals with Vivie's steadfastness in refusing her mother's way of living by choosing her own path without being swayed by her mother's impeccable moral teaching that she imparts to her daughter, in order to justify her contaminated profession. Thus, it is a proven fact that Shaw has ably succeeded in putting into practice in the play what he has professed in theory in his 'preface':

I have spared no pains to make known that my plays are built to induce, not voluptuous reverie, but intellectual interest, not romantic rhapsody but humane concern.

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