

## A Comparative Study between Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* & Numan Ashour's *People up Stairs*

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### Introduction

George Bernard Shaw wrote *Pygmalion* in 1912. The title of this play was taken from an ancient story of "*Pygmalion and Galatea*." The goddess of love was extremely impressed by the affection of Pygmalion towards Galatea, so she turned the statue of Galatea into a human being. Later on, Pygmalion married Galatea, and they lived happily forever.

Shaw was impressed with Ibsen thoughts and ideas in writing and revealing the problems of his society. Shaw's focus as a social playwright was to restructure the social norms and customs and put those ideas in his writings so that it can change the mindset of his people. Shaw believes that every work must convey an idea about class distinction, decomposition of moral values, poverty, and capitalism. Hence, he dedicated himself to improve the social structure of society through his works (Crompton). In *Pygmalion*, Shaw describes the transformation of a poor independent flower girl into an educated lady who could easily pass as a lady in his highly stratified society. Through the portrayal of the character of Eliza, the audience could realise a woman's sensitivity regarding her rights and dignity.

As for Numan Ashour's play, *People Upstairs* (1976) portrays the conditions of the social structure of Egypt during 1940s. This play depicts the mobilisation of people from the bottom class to higher class and refusal of people belonging to the upper class to accept them in their class system. Moreover, the play displays the rejection of capitalism and feudalism in Egyptian society. Ahmad Hamroush states that

*People Upstairs*, which carries the influence of Shaw's *Pygmalion*, has laid the foundation to achieve a better society, which does not judge people according to their social status. Attempts to portray the socio-cultural background of the upper class have also been reflected in Ashour's play by depicting a picture of the Egyptian society in modern theoretical production. (Pirnajmuddin, Arani and Language)

We can see Prof. Higgins's famous notion that demonstrates the requirement of showing equal treatment to both classes of society without any discrimination through the statement -"the great secret Eliza is not

having bad manners or good manners or any other particular sort of manners, but having the same manners for all human souls in short behaving as if you were in heaven, where are no third-class carriage and one soul is as good as another.”

### **Similarities between Shaw and Ashour:**

Both Shaw and Ashour were deeply influenced by social realism, which highlights woman's issues as freedom, education, and equality between genders, etc. The theoretical framework of feminism and realism will be used to analyse Shaw and Ashour's plays.

Both plays focus on the function of the education system in their respective societies and the mobility of the class system as a direct result of mass education. In both plays, the playwrights—tried to manipulate the idea of the fixed class structure by empowering certain characters and allowing them to climb the social ladder. Eliza in spite of her poverty and inferiority, she has never been a submissive character, she has the courage to defy Higgins' authority and requests him to speak respectfully to her: “Well, you wouldn't have the face to ask me the same for teaching me my own language as would for French: so I want to give more than a shilling take it or leave it”(Berst, Marker and Berg). She even expresses her willingness to pay for her lessons and does not ask for any grace. Similarly, in *People Upstairs*, Anwar, the servant's son, receives a Bachelor degree in law, which has helped him to change drastically from one status to another. Raqiqa, Hanim's nephew, Hassan—also started studying, and he became a famous—engineer which helped him to—change his social mobility as well.

To Shaw drama is the—medium for articulating his own ideas and philosophy. He wanted to cast his ideas through discussion. As it considers a medium to reform society which was first carried out by Ibsen, he adds:

The switch from action to discussion that Shaw detected in Ibsen's work corresponds with the fundamental Fabian approach to social change. Named after Fabius Cunctator, the Roman General who defeated Hannibal's superior forces by avoiding battle, the movement sought to reform society from within, by education, rejecting the violence of open revolution. And when carried over in-to drama, this commitment to the political effectiveness of intellectual persuasion is precisely analogous to resolving a play-action through dialogue. Ibsen has become the prototype for a specifically Fabian form of

theatre – and indeed Shaw makes the connection explicit by including the bust of Ibsen in the setting for one of his early plays the philanderer.” (Berst, Marker and Berg)

As for Ashour, the same notion can be noticed in Anwar who attains the power to challenge all the barriers imposed by powerful owners namely Raqiqa Hanim and Abdul Muktader Pasha

In both *Pygmalion* and *People Upstairs*, the changes in power and language of speech were faced with considerable resistance from the upper class. Higgins’s imposing of power is countered by Eliza’s counter-bidding and resistance: “The science of speech. That’s my profession; also my hobby. Happy is the man who can make a living by his hobby! You can spot an Irishman or a Yorkshire man by his brogue. I can place any man within six miles. I can place him within two miles in London. Sometimes within two streets” (K. J. T. C. C. t. G. B. S. Powell). It depicts Higgins’ efficiency in language that portrays high social culture.

There is a conflict between the two main characters of Shaw’s play through visualizing differences of opinion and clashes between these two which hinders to the main essence of the play: the conflict between classes. In *People Upstairs*, a similar resistance can be seen from the upper class against the other classes as seen when Raqiqa Hanim sends Gamalat one of her old dresses; she gets offended and tears it in-to pieces

Sarhan: Raqiqa hanim can’t come up, she went with her driver, but she sends this dress to Miss Gamalat, she said let her try this dress it is from an expensive material and will fit her.

Tity: I think this is her dress which was in the tailor and may-be it is tight on her.

Gamatat: you see!! You see MAMA!! She is giving me one of her left overs dresses.

The mother: My dear isn’t she your aunt?

Gamatat: What about me? Am I her niece? Or I am one of her servants for that she gave me her tight dress? ... Sarhan gives me!! Give me the dress then she takes the dress and tears it to pieces with full of anger. (K. Powell).

In *Pygmalion*, Shaw again depicts female dependence as the central theme trying it metaphorically to the classic dyads of male, master and slave, coloniser and colonised. Henry Higgins, the Pygmalion who understands all about how people talk but grasps nothing of what they mean, thinks he can dispose of the new improved Eliza in-to the marriage market, but explicitly disavows this as an economic relationship :

Liza: I sold flowers. Now you've made a lady of me I'm not fit to sell anything else. I wish you'd left me where you found me.

Higgins: Tosh, Eliza .don't you insult human relations by dragging all this cant about buying and selling in to it. (K. Griffith, Jr. )

Like Shaw, Ashour has discussed similar issues in his play, and presents Gamalat as an ambitious and empowered woman. Gamalat is the embodiment of oppressed women— who were prevented from their basic needs in life including the right to have a higher education. However, like Eliza Gamalat becomes a central character as she refuses to obey her aunt to marry a rich man. Taking that revolutionary stance, Ashour follows the footsteps of great playwrights like Henrik Ibsen who defends women's rights to achieve themselves as portrayed in *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts*. In making his female characters take centre stage and refuse the rigid doctrines of their patriarchal societies, Ashour, like Shaw and Ibsen, defends women's rights.

Shaw has presented a new technique which is “the drama of ideas”- a kind of drama that provokes the intellect of the audience rather their emotions. Female characters in the nineteenth-century literature were mostly portrayed as helpless weaker sex dominated by male characters and featured old clichés about female roles and conventional sexual morality of Victorian ideas. Devices like naming the characters, style of dialogue, stage direction, character's interactions and paradoxical and anticlimactic endings have contributed greatly to Shaw's characterization. Some of Shaw's characters were based on stereotypes, but he modified them to suit the dramatic requirements of his plays.

“There are clear strains of characters in Shaw play that seem to have little to do with the Nineteenth –century acting lines. There is a strain of imaginative realistic for examples which includes Bluntschli, Caser, Don Juan—, undershaft, kind Magnus and saint Joan . Bluntschli, undershaft and Jean would clearly have been assigned to three different lines in nineteenth-century stock company theatre.” (K. Griffith, Jr. )

Ashour's play focuses on two types of people; the first one is those who believe in the conventional ideology of social structure and resist any change to their status like Abduel Muktader Basha and Raqiqa Hanem, The second one is those who can bring changes in society. Characterisation of Khalil presents a new system in social structure and throws challenges to the conventional ideology of Egyptian society. Hassan is also one of those who do not believe in traditional ideas of social structure. Hassan strictly opposed marrying someone rich and aristocrat from upper class to enhance his social status in society. (Numan Ashour).

In *People Upstairs* there are three different classes. Hassan has been

considered as the main link between these classes. Through characterisation of Hassan, Ashour has linked this play to Shaw's drama. Similar to Shaw, Ashour has also represented political and social thoughts through his characters.

*Pygmalion*'s actions are confined to three areas within the stage: one prominent area is the Covent Garden, which is a large market located at London's West End. Here, a hugely diverse crowd of people, from all walks of are brought together as it is a common ground for all people regardless of class. People from the lower class such as Eliza, strive in an inhospitable terrain to survive through making money from the rich. Covent Garden is the only place in the play where a diverse pool of accents can be seen to mingle freely. The second place in the drama is Higgins's laboratory based in his apartment. Henry Higgins proudly describes his home as an elegant and posh place that Eliza may not have knowledge of and can never reach.

The setting of people up-stairs displays the ideological concern of society in the sense that furniture represents the battle between the old and new social systems and structures. Due to the power of social structure, Abdel-Moktader Pasha was a powerful person and influential figure who manipulates people for his benefits. However, the new social structure has allowed the commoners like Hassan, Anwar, and son of the servant to be educated and get better positions in society. "Furniture that has been used in this play displays a lifestyle that has been considered as outdated and modern qualities that represent fresh ideas that have been considered as trendy aspects of Egyptian society. The first act of this play by Ashour shows disagreements between those people who reject new ideas and the new structure of Egyptian society. They believe in maintaining their class distinction and call themselves traditional upper-class people" (MacLeod and Society)

In addition to all the issues previously mentioned, plays of Shaw and Ashour, make excellence of the "comic irony" which plays a vital role in exposing the negative aspects of their society, and also assessing our understanding of the behavior of people via humor and laughter since they have a great influence on audience's perception of what they see on stage. Humor is the most appropriate to make the spectator discern their flaws visually.

The use of satire is one of the primary writing elements in the plays of both Bernard Shaw and Numan Ashour. Irony and satire lead not only to comical situations but also to tragic ones as they are often accompanied with humour to ease the painful feeling of a tragedy. Every character is depicted in order to give conflicts and tragedies sarcastic and humorous tones which are vividly illustrated in the ideas of the two aforementioned playwrights.

Shaw's sarcastic and satirical tone in *Pygmalion* exemplifies his stellar use of humor in various situations regardless of their severity. The play starts with a humorous tone; in Act one, humor is noted from the bystander and flower girl's mistake of identifying Henry Higgins for a police officer because he is taking notes.

Ashour's ironic tone in the play is very strong as we can see Abdel –Muktader Basha and Raqiqa Hanem as the source of comedy in this play, Ashour ridicules their clinging to the feudal class that is vanishing quickly. He also satirizes their adherence to the traditions of the past and, thus, he presented them to the viewer in the comical form to make the audience mock them.

From the comedic point of view, we see Abdul –Muktader Pasha in a state of fear and constant weakness in front of his wife, because her revolution against him: even he describes her as Gorilla.

Basha : do I enter alone in the gorilla cage?!!

The ironic voice is heard in the final scene between Raqiqa Hanem and Abdel-Muktader Basha, —; Even this position expresses Ashour's sarcastic message.

Abdel –Muktader Basha : I want to write my political diary to give it to the public before I forget.

Raqiqa Hanem: well it is a big disappointment, will anyone remember you, even your brother left you alone, public! Who public! Does anyone feel you?

Basha: How Raqiqa! Why are those people coming here? (Referring to the audience of the theatre)?

Raqiqa Hanem : They came to look at you-

Basha :( He refers to the audience) did you come to see me or laugh at her?! (Numan. Ashour)

Shaw's effective use of language and style is a contribution to his characterisations. The language and style of various characters differ depending upon the nature and situation of the characters. In Shaw's plays which carry essentially socialistic notions, class stratification is echoed through the different ways of using language Michael and Susanne Carroll in their book explains that "different classes have different ways of using language, different strategies for meaning fashions of speaking class structure created different linguistic codes" (G. Griffith)

In the British society at large, language is closely tied to class. From a person's accents, one can determine where the person comes from and usually what the socioeconomic background. That's why Higgins' teaching which has helped Eliza to climb the social ladder, can be regarded as a radical move towards disrupting this social maker by allowing for greater

social mobility.

The same idea can be traced in *People up Stairs*. The language of Adel Muktader Basha and his wife Rqiqa Hanem with its distinctive accent represents the high-class people in the Egyptian society. Both Anwar and Hassan also represent the most respectable characters in the play as they reflect the impact of education on people's behaviours and manners. The language used by Hassan's mother reflects her lack of proper education (Numan. Ashour).

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, in this analytical and comparative study of George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* and Ashour's *People Upstairs*, it can be stated that Shaw has affected Ashour in many ways. Ashour was influenced by Shaw's idea of visualising society from a new perspective, where class discrimination had no place. Moreover, Shaw's techniques and approaches have also influenced Ashour in creating his own masterpieces based on Egyptian society after the Revolution of 1952. Like Shaw, Ashour has presented some of the changes that started to take place in Modern Egypt, such as, women's education and their incessant endeavours to achieve independence and equality.

*Similar to Pygmalion, People Upstairs'* aim is to create a prosperous society with fewer problems. In *Pygmalion*, Professor Higgins criticises the British class discrimination and helps in transforming Eliza from a flower girl to a well-behaved and educated lady of the British society in a clear message of how education can positively transform people. Shaw believes that any ambitious person can enhance his/her social position through education. Similarly, in *People Upstairs*, Anwar and Hassan also defeated all old fashioned, repressive ideas that dominated the Egyptian society before the Revolution in 1952.

In a nutshell, Ashour's writings are highly influenced by the thoughts and ideas of Shaw as both share the target of positively changing and developing their societies to become hospitable places that assist people- male and female – to grow and achieve all their potentialities.

At the end of this analysis and comparison, it can be stated that Ashour's writings are highly influenced by the thoughts and ideas of Shaw which makes them both share the target in changing and developing the society to become a very vital environment to every member in all sectors, which will help to have a prosperous future for nations.

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