

## George Bernard Shaw's Views on Gender and Race

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### Abstract:

*This paper sheds light on the issues of gender and race as they are perceived by George Bernard Shaw. It reads Shaw's *The Adventures of the Black Girl in her Search for God* (1932) in the light of Frederic Jameson's political unconscious concept. It interprets Shaw's narrative as an allegory with two fundamental latent messages that lie beneath its surface religious meaning. The first is concerned with Shaw's defense of women. The second deals with his emancipation of the black race. Women had for years been associated with weakness, intuition, feeling, irrationality and depravity. Likewise, the black race had been dealt with in terms of primitivism, savagery, superstition, ignorance and irrationality in white discourse. The first section of the discussion shows that Bernard Shaw breaks the traditional stereotypes attributed to women. This is achieved through the black girl, the black female protagonist of his narrative. Through the latter, women are given a voice thanks to which they speak out their dissent with the traditional status of subordinate they are attributed in both cultural artefacts and the Bible. The second section sheds light on the ways Shaw criticizes racial discourse and empowers the black race. Thanks to the black girl, the black people are seen through a different and new perspective that deals away from the stereotypes traditionally associated with them in white discourse.*

The racial and woman questions have been central issues in Western thought from the Enlightenment onwards. They took an important place in the Victorian novels like those of Rudyard Kipling and Joseph Conrad. George Bernard Shaw is another writer who may be integrated within the writers who are interested in these two questions of gender and race. In recent years, there has been a large bulk of criticism on Bernard Shaw's texts. This criticism has been carried out under a variety of perspectives, many of which focused on the writer's political and social ideas.

Within the framework of this research paper, it is assumed that George Bernard Shaw in his *The Black Girl* – for short - defends both the black race and women. Therefore, he counters the dominant Western discourse that maintains the idea of the superiority of the white race as opposed to the black one. This is on the one hand. On the other hand, he opposes another type of discourse which is propounded by most of the male thinkers of the period that follows the Enlightenment. This is sexist discourse that maintains the inferiority of women as contrasted to men. Therefore, it seems very appropriate to make reference to Jameson's concept

of interpretation as primarily a practice that reads narrative in such a way as “to reveal its metaphysical and ideological underpinnings” (Jameson, 2002: 43) and to underscore the “latent meaning [s]” behind its “manifest” one (Ibid. 45). This means that the present research takes Shaw's novella as an “allegorical narrative” that has two fundamental latent meanings which lie underneath its manifest meaning. The novella's manifest meaning is related to the black girl's quest for God. This is to say that the surface meaning is more religious than ideological. However, behind the religious meaning lie two fundamental latent meanings which are considered ideological and related to gender and race. First is Shaw's defense of women. Second is his emancipation of the black race.

To start with Shaw's defense of women, one should first account for the status attributed to women in male discourse. From the Enlightenment onwards started to emerge a sexist discourse that took different forms. It had been a common-sense belief that women were inferior to men. This inferiority status restricted their role to the domestic sphere. In Britain, especially during the Victorian era emerged the “separate spheres” ideology, which attributed women the status of the household angel. Because of her supposed “emotion, passivity, submission, dependence, and selflessness” (Kent, 1999: 179), she

had no political, public and economic life; she was not allowed to work outside the family hearth, nor could she participate in the political life of the nation and public debate. The ideal of womanhood was “the angel in the house” that protects the household, bears her children and serves her husband. Even if some feminist voices emerged against this status, it remained as the standard of identification even until the early twentieth century.

After the Great War, many thinkers strongly felt a kind of crisis which affected human relations. At the level of gender relations people started to re-invent the old “separate spheres” ideology and confirm sexual difference between men and women. Therefore, some thinkers like Bernard Shaw recognized the crisis. He interested himself with bringing new ideas concerning gender relations. He sets his novella *The Black Girl* in the Victorian period so as to voice his antagonism towards the inferiority status traditionally attributed to women as well as express his discontent with the re-invention of this status by his contemporaries.

Perhaps the analysis of the feminist issue in the novella should start with the depiction of female characters. And for this a word about the missionary teacher is in order. As a Victorian woman, she was not ahead of her time, for she did not accept the common-place image of the women of her time. Instead of being the faithful “angel in the house”, who obeys and cherishes her husband and raises her children, she is completely the opposite. She does not care about marriage, which she regards as the bondage to her freedom, nor does she care about the feelings of her lovers. She “became engaged to six of them in succession. But when it came to the point she always broke it off; for these love affairs, full at first of ecstatic happiness and hope, somehow became unreal” (Shaw, 1932: 7).

Through the black girl, Shaw also criticizes a traditional stereotype associated with unmarried women. This concerns the idea that all single women are prostitutes. This attitude was shared among men in the Victorian era, when the image of woman was viewed either as “revered wife and mother” or scorned as “prostitute” (Kent, 1999: 180). Indeed, in order to maintain women in the domestic sphere, men insisted on the idea that outside the family hearth women could only be prostitutes. Shaw’s black girl

surprises the first man she encounters in her adventures. When the “aristocratic looking white man” asks her to bring him her “favorite child”, he was surprised by her answer, “I have no child [...] I am a virgin” (Shaw, 1932: 9; emphasis mine). It stands to reason that this man was thinking that the girl was a wife and mother and does not accept the idea that as such she could go outside the family hearth. The girl’s virginity is much important, for it nullifies the idea of prostitution and questions women’s role as exclusively reproductive and sexual. The girl is no prostitute despite her decision to go outside the family hearth and fly with her own wings. By the same token, her quest criticizes the Victorian ideology which “offered two possible images for women [...] the idealized wife and mother, the angel in the house, or the debased, depraved, corrupt prostitute” (Kent, 1999: 190). The black girl shows that a woman can have a public and political life, without being waged with prostitution.

This said about female characters in Shaw’s novella, one should account for his depiction of male ones. The majority of the males in the novella are mocked on by the black girl. She criticizes their behavior which is revealed to be dogmatic and hypocritical. For instance, she nullifies the authority of the Pavlov figure, who knows things for the sake of knowing them. Throughout her conversation with him, one feels her contempt towards his dogmatism. What is the profit of knowing things if these do not contribute to the establishment of justice in the world? She would ask him, when he questions him about the importance of his scientific discovery. He says, “My business is to learn something that was not known before. I impart that knowledge to the world, and thereby add to the body of ascertained scientific truth” (Shaw, 1932: 23). But, “Have you ever considered the effect of your experiments on other people’s minds and characters?” she answers. (Shaw, 1932: 24) Similarly, the men of the “Caravan of the Curious” she also encounters later on are “all fundamentalist with a top dressing of science [...] the stupidest of conservatives and reactionists in politics and the most bigoted of obstructionists in science itself” (Ibid. 38).

Thematically speaking, *The Black Girl* transcends the girl’s quest for God and becomes a quest for the rights of women. The black girl is the

voice through which Shaw's vindication of the rights of women is spoken out. She asks for a public and political life for women. She shows that women could participate in public debates as much as men or far much better than them. There are many instances in the novella where she complains about the injustice and inequality among people and races that are the result of the men-ruled world. For example, she asks one of the men she meets, "Did you make the world? [...] Why did you make it with so much evil in it?" (Ibid. 11); she adds to the myop, "How much better will the world be when it is all knowledge and no mercy [...]. Haven't you brains enough to invent some decent way of finding out what you want to know?" (Ibid. 23-24) One can understand from these witty questions that the men-ruled world is depraved and that it is high time men gave women the chance to participate in the public life so as to ensure a better future for humanity.

**Conclusion:**

In conclusion, what should be kept in mind in the light of what has been said so far is that women and the black race had for years been denigrated in white male discourse. This, it has been observed, is harshly criticized by George Bernard Shaw in *The Black Girl*. His novella displays a sympathetic attitude towards women, for it portrays them in different terms. Through his female protagonist, the black girl, women are given voice thanks to which they speak out their dissent with the traditional status of subordinate they are attributed in both cultural artifacts and the Scriptures. In the same manner, the black race is given voice through the black protagonist. Thanks to the black girl, the black people are seen through a different and new perspective. What is important to notice is that these novelties concerning gender and race express the thought of a white male writer. This means that Shaw's discourse can only be objective; it cannot be biased, for it is not the discourse of a black or female writer.

**References:**

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