

GB Shaw's *Pygmalion*: A Study

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Abstract: *Noble Laureate George Bernard Shaw is considered as the greatest playwright in English next only to William Shakespeare by If or Evans (P.29). GB Shaw's Pygmalion published in 1912 focuses on social realism. The work, apart from being a treatise on social realism, also contains colonial aspects. The present work focuses on the colonial aspects ingrained in the text using postcolonial theories proposed by scholars like Homi Bhabha, Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak. Attempts are made to bring out the typical relationship between Eliza and Higgins who are considered as colonizer and colonized respectively. Eliza is looked as a subaltern who comes from the marginalized sections of the society. She remains inferior to Higgins and gradually attempts to claim her individual status. The role of language in deciding the status of the people and language used as a key tool in developing people and distorting culture should be underscored. Eliza's resistance to overcome oppression and her continuous struggle to fight back pervades the play. The way in which Eliza acknowledges her subaltern position and ascends to her status would be the key focus of the study.*

Keywords: Colonized, Colonizer, Ethnic Identity, GB Shaw's *Pygmalion*, Homi Bhabha, Social Realty

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Introduction

Pygmalion is a play by George Bernard Shaw first published in 1912. Shaw took the title of the work from the ancient Greek legend of the famous sculptor named Pygmalion. Since he could not find anything good in women, he resolved to live without marriage. However, he sculpted a statue so beautifully that he ultimately fell in love with his own creation. Finally, he prayed to the goddess of love, Aphrodite that he might bring the statue to life, whom he subsequently marries. Shaw employs the Pygmalion myth in the play. The play revolves around three main characters: Eliza Doolittle, a flower girl and two bachelors, Mr. Higgins, Professor of Phonetics and Colonel Pickering, friend of Mr. Higgins. The Plot of the play mainly revolves around Professor Higgins, who bets that he can train Eliza, and that he can make a duchess out of her. The play is a reminiscent of the authoritative power that the Colonizer imposes upon the colonized subject. Mr. Higgins also imposes his authority upon the flower girl, Eliza, and ensures that she acts according to his personal will. Eliza as a personal entity has no significance in the society because she is considered as a stereotypical other by Higgins. Eliza, being a person from the marginalized sections of the society is deprived of all the benefits that her contrary counterpart has. Eliza in the play suffers from social backwardness, poverty, and is also considered as a linguistic minority, for her atypical inferior slang she speaks. The setbacks in Eliza are exploited by Mr. Higgins, as a colonizer possibly does and imposes upon her all his whims.

Awam Amkpa, a professor of drama (1999) argues in his text *Drama and Language of Postcolonial Desire*: "formal citizenship or acknowledgement of our individuality and grouping offers the power of effective participation in mainstream society. Higgins, Pickering the aristocrats and their 'hangers on' are all acknowledged as full formal citizens of bourgeois society, whilst Eliza and Alfred Doolittle are informal citizens who can only be recognized when they have been assimilated into the dominant culture"" (297).

Higgins and Pickering belong to the elite groups of the society and they exert power over the powerless

and underprivileged people in the society. The economic might as well as the social stature they enjoy, allows them to dictate terms to the so-called others, who are to oblige their dictates. The exercise of power over the other may be due to gender, race, nationality and class distinction. Higgins' authority is drawn from the economic might and the class to which he belongs. On the contrary Eliza and her father Alfred Doolittle are from the marginalized sections and are deprived of power, owing to their position in the society. In addition to being powerless and marginalized, Eliza and Alfred Doolittle are also considered as linguistic minorities because of the inferior slang they use, which is not identical with the slang that the people in authority use. The use of inferior slang is the prime reason why Eliza is taunted by Higgins when he first listens to her. He also believes that her individual position could be elated by making her language proper like a native, but at the same time is also intimidated by the fact that she would reach the position of the colonizers and start to mimic them.

In the book *'The location of Culture'*, Homi K Bhabha lays emphasis on the mutual power sharing relationships between the Colonizer and the Colonized. Bhabha argues that the scheme of power sharing between the colonizers and colonized is not a straight forward top to bottom exertion, from the colonizer to the colonized. He also deconstructs binary oppositions in which he highlights the distinctions between the black and the white, the colonizer and the colonized and the superior and the inferior. He goes against the binaries and deconstructs the traditional way in which the colonizer treats the colonized by imposing the authority over the colonized. On the contrary Bhabha believes that the colonizer tries to internalize inferiority in the colonized. The colonizer employs strategies like mimicry to impose and internalize inferiority. Bhabha terms this strategy 'Sly Civility', (Bhabha, H. K., 1994, *The Location of Culture*) Bhabha also states that though the colonizer imposes mimicry strategy on the colonized, the colonizer is also afraid of the possible identical, which the colonizer himself is creating. To Bhabha, colonizer wants the colonized to mimic them and their ways and become the same, but never quite the same. The colonizer wants the colonized to imitate the colonizer but not to such an extent where both the colonized and colonizer become the same and inseparable. Bhabha (1994) opines that "*Mimicry is at once resemblance and menace*" (p.123). The problem with mimicry, as a strategy is that mimicry enables the colonized to feign the values and morals of a colonizer, but in turn imitation will ruin the original identity of the colonized and the colonizers are intimidated by the fact that the colonized would also become the imitable colonizers or the colonizer's double.

The colonized also throughout the process of colonization does not remain subjugated but resists. This resistance from the colonized may come in several forms. The colonized may defy orders, revolt or rebel against the colonizers for their oppression. The colonized resists the oppression by several strategies and the strategy of mimicry is not an exception to the rebellion. John Clement Ball in the book, *Satire and the Postcolonial Novel*, (2003) asserts that Bhabha's ideas "*show how colonial power relations inevitably generate resistance and inhibiting ambivalence as by-products of their discursive and administrative structures of control*" (p.37). It should be noted that the colonized does not intentionally imitate the colonizer perfectly, or mimics them too perfectly that the imitation looks superficial. The imitation should come up definitely with slight changes but not as the replica of the colonizer. As David Huddart (2006), a postcolonial critic argues, that the latter resistance strategy means that "*mimicry is repetition with difference, and so it is not evidence of the colonized's servitude*" (p.39). Huddart believes that mimicry must have repetition but with certain differences. He also states that since there is not complete imitation it cannot be considered as servitude or slavery. The resistance to mimicry takes many forms as Gilbert and Tompkins (1996), two prominent postcolonial critics in their well-known book: *Post-colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics*, argue that some colonized subjects either abrogate the formal registers of the imposed language or some others employ words to a different purpose, this way they resist and try to "*decenter the European hegemonic powers embedded in an imposed imperial language*" (pp.165-166).

The colonizer makes attempts to create awareness among the colonizers by drawing differences between

the colonizer and the colonized. The awareness will, on one hand enable the colonizer to assert their authority and make the colonized understand their inferior position completely and also allowing them to know the differences between the colonized and colonizer. Similarly on the other hand, the awareness created by the colonizer will enable the colonized to develop areas for their possible resistance to the colonizer. Wolfgang Iser in his work , *How to do Theory* (2007) stipulates: "*Otherness turns into a mirror for self-observation, and such a relationship sets the process of self- understanding in motion, because the alien that is to be grasped realizes itself to the extent to which one's own dispositions come under scrutiny. The knowledge thus obtained is twofold: by getting to know what is different, one begins to know oneself*" (p.36). Homi Bhabha argues that the formation of the identities of the colonizer and the colonized takes place in the Third Space. Bhabha perceives:"the encounter of two social groups with different cultural traditions and potentials of power as a special kind of negotiation or translation", which "takes place in a Third Space of enunciation" (Ikas& Wagner *Communication in the Third Space*. (PP. 1-7). 2009, p. 2).

In addition to Mimicry, Subalternity is another postcolonial element that could be found in the text. Gayatri Spivak in her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" explores the position of the marginalized natives in the oppressed society. She examines the position of the indigenous natives keeping in mind the typical relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor. Subalternity in any given geo-political space may possibly arise due to subordination caused by factors as varied as gender, class, caste, religion and nationality. However, Spivak believes that subalterns are compelled to observe silence against oppression. According to Spivak, the subaltern represents a category of inferior subjects in colonial and neo colonial societies, who are deprived of their right to speech. Spivak also speaks about the plight of women subalterns, who are marginalized twice. She asserts that women are oppressed by the societies and again they are oppressed by the dominant power; colonial power. She feels that women as subalterns are doubly oppressed. In this context she asserts, "*If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern is even more deeply in shadow.* (Can the Subaltern Speak? Spivak1988).

Discussion

GB Shaw's *Pygmalion* dexterously delineates the complex relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. Since the beginning of the play Eliza Doolittle is believed to be the other because of her gender, appearance, inferior language and accent, poverty and social position. One day while asking people to buy a flower from her, Eliza for the first time encounters Professor Higgins, who is carrying a note with him and taking down everything that he hears meticulously. Eliza observes Higgins' talent to identify the place from which people come, based on their accent and is intrigued by his prudence. Higgins starts to humiliate Eliza after listening to her inferior accent and criticizes her. He believes that a language like English cannot be uttered poorly for it is "*the language of Shakespeare, Milton and the Bible*" (Shaw1964, p.13), and its standards are to be upheld. Eliza after being humiliated contends, "he's [Higgins has] no right to take away my character. My character is the same to me as any lady's" (Shaw1964, p.14). She wants to be treated like every other lady and not like an inferior other. Higgins treats her as a subaltern owing to her poverty and social position. He is disgusted with her inferior accent and outrageously remarks '*A woman who utters such depressing and disgusting sounds has no right to live*' (Shaw 1964, p. 16).

The play has deeper connections with Bhabha's work. Higgins, gradually as the play begins, starts to employ his mimicry strategy as a colonizer and challenges Pickering that he will make Eliza a duchess by refining her accent. Amkpa (1999) discusses: "*From the outset Shaw provides a map of the relations of domination and subordination with Higgins and Pickering as the ideologues and technocrats of the dominant culture, and Eliza's body and mind as that whose subjectivity has to be dominated and objectified*" (p. 294). Higgins is interested in refining Eliza from the beginning, but employs colonial

strategies to bring out the refinement. He believes that Eliza could reach her heights only when she is able to mimic the language and values of the elite. However, Higgins is also aware of the possible threat that would come up if Eliza starts imitating. He fears that she could climb the ladder and become civilized, but is contended because mere imitation of values and language without financial grandeur will yield nothing. As a Professor of Phonetics, he thinks of training and polishing her language to bring a duchess out of her, but colonial anxiety questions his motives. Wedeen (2013) sarcastically states that in *"colonial and modernization discourses people have to move up the evolutionary ladder and become more 'civilized' before they can be free"* (p.869). Higgins, very similarly, tells Eliza: *"Yes, you squashed cabbage leaf, you disgrace to the noble architecture of these columns, you incarnate insult to the English language: I could pass you off as the Queen of Sheba"* (Shaw 1964, p. 16).

The colonial anxiety to look down on the colonized as others and inferiors is evident in almost all the western texts. Edward Said makes an interesting statement in this regard. Said believes that Higgins is a colonizer and humiliates Eliza and claims her to be a liar and also believes that she is in desperate need of a trainer to overhaul her. On the contrary Higgins is depicted as *"energetic, scientific type, heartily, even violently interested in everything that can be studied as a scientific subject"* (Shaw 1964, p.21). Eliza keenly observes the differences between Higgins and her and understands that she is different from him and changes her opinion and accepts her inferiority. She finally asks Higgins to teach her how to speak superior English, with a native accent. Eliza, in other words, is ready to sacrifice her personal self and is ready to accept Higgins as his role model, in order to accomplish her endeavors. She acknowledges her otherness, and to let the blot of sounding cockney be removed, she surrenders herself to her master, who loathes and reproaches Eliza by calling her "a baggage" (23). To Higgins, Eliza is just the other, because of her inferior accent and poverty.

Eliza's intentions are completely different from that of Professor Higgins'. Higgins tries to impose his personal desires and apprehensions on Eliza, who being a subject has no right to defy. Eliza dreams of opening a bouquet and having a shop of her own. She realizes that in order to have her desires fulfilled she must be able to refine her accent and speak gently. The feeling of being coarse and not gentle needs to be accentuated. This feeling in Eliza is a result of her discussion with Higgins, who reproached Eliza for her inferior accent. Higgins, is not just trying to teach Eliza, but is also making her believe that she is an inferior other, who needs to be tamed and polished, which is possible only when she stays in the company of the elite colonizers. This subjugation will make Eliza learn values and etiquettes from the elites. Imitating the elites will make others feel that she is on par with the equals, though not perfectly. Bhabha believes that the colonizer wants the colonized to be very much like him but not quite the same. In Bhabha's view, *"colonial discourse wants the colonized to be extremely like the colonizer, but by no means identical"* (Huddart 2006, p.40). Thus, as Huddart (2006) remarks: *"the play between equivalence and excess makes the colonized both reassuringly similar and also terrifying"* (p.41).

Higgins makes all the efforts to exploit Eliza for his own benefits. He teaches Eliza to speak English properly and after having won the bet, he spits her off. Higgins refines Eliza into a duchess by developing her language and accent. It is through language, Higgins believes, that anything could be made possible. Gilbert and Topkins (1996) believe that *"language is one of the most basic markers of colonial authority"* (p.164).

Higgins responds to Mrs. Pearce's question about Eliza's future and says: *"well, when I've done with her, we can throw her back into the gutter; and then it will be her own business again"* (Shaw 1964, p. 30). Higgins had made efforts to assimilate an inferior other with his own social class and attempted to identify him with Eliza, which is a key concern that Higgins has. He cannot treat her like the way he treated her previously. The costumes, language and behavior are so refined that she could be easily identified with the elites, but Higgins is not ready to accept her as an equal. Pickering also warns Higgins of what he is doing and its consequences:

'Pickering: Excuse me, Higgins; but I really must interfere. Mrs. Pearce is quite right. If this girl is to put herself in your hands for six months for an experiment in teaching, she must understand thoroughly what she's doing.

Higgins: How can she? She's incapable of understanding anything. Besides, do any of us understand what we are doing? If we did, would we ever do it? (Shaw 1964, p. 31)'

Higgins defying all such remarks begins to train Eliza. He also attempts to internalize inferiority in her and makes her accept his authority over her.

'At the end of six months you shall go to Buckingham Palace in a carriage, beautifully dressed, if the King finds out yours not a lady, you will be taken by the police to the Tower of London, where your head will be cut off as a warning to other presumptuous flower girls. If you are not found out, you shall have a present of seven-and-sixpence to start life with as a lady in a shop. If you refuse this offer you will be a most ungrateful wicked girl; and the angles will weep for you. (My emphasis, Shaw 1964, p. 32)'

As Eliza enters her room in Higgins' house, she is appalled. She believes that she does not deserve it. She understands the differences between Higgins and her. This understanding makes her believe that she is the other, and starts to admit her inferiority. She exclaims: *"I couldn't sleep here, missus. It's too good for the likes of me. I should be afraid to touch anything. I aint a duchess yet, you know"* (Shaw 1964, p.33). Since she has acknowledged herself to be an inferior other, she is ready to accept everything that her master will teach her. Mrs. Pears tells Eliza: *"you can't be a nice girl inside if you're a dirty slut outside"* (Shaw 1964, p. 33).

Higgins' attempt to bring a duchess out of Eliza has not come out without resistance. Owing to her resistance Eliza could either not learn proper pronunciation or she must have imbibed differences from the authentic language, which makes her believe that she has not become quite the same as the Higgins. Huddart (2006) maintains: *"This mimicry is also a form of mockery, and Bhabha's post- colonial theory is a comic approach to colonial discourse"* (p.39). Higgins tries to teach her but fears that he would create his double. On the other hand Eliza wants to identify herself with the colonial master, but resists to his strategies. This peculiar and complex relationship is something that Bhabha highlights in his theory.

'Higgins: I shall win my bet. She has a quick ear, and she's been easier to teach than my middle- class pupils because she's had to learn a completely new language. She talks English almost as you talk French.

Mrs. Higgins: That's satisfactory, at all events, Higgins. Well, it is and it isn't.

Mrs. Higgins: What does that mean?

Higgins: You see, I've got her pronunciation all right; but you have to consider not only how a girl pronounces, but what she pronounces. (Shaw 1964, p. 53)'

As Eliza is introduced to the Mrs. Higgins in the house, she behaves in a remarkable way. The remarkable change could be seen in the stage direction, *"Eliza, who is exquisitely dressed, produces an impression of such remarkable distinction and beauty as she enters that they all rise, and quite fluttered. She comes to Mrs. Higgins with studied grace"*, (Shaw 1964, p. 57). She speaks to them in a very sophisticated way and her artificial beauty attracts the attention of the members in the house. She speaks and behaves as if she has taken too much of artificial care to look as a reformed other. Despite this tremendous change, Higgins continues to see her as a colonized other. She is of no importance to him even after being reformed. Mrs. Higgins asks Higgins and Pickering about Eliza's life, since she has completed her training. Higgins believes that he has won the bet and has nothing to do with the girl. She is still a reformed inferior other to him, who has been just an object of experiment. Mrs. Higgins reproaches him for the remarks he made and replies: *"I've had to work at the girl every day for months together to her present pitch. Besides, she's useful. She knows where my things are, and remembers my appointments and so forth"* (Shaw 1964, p.63).

Typically, both Higgins and Eliza have now entered the “Third Space”. He neither looks at Eliza from a commanding position nor projects his fears onto her. Instead Higgins is threatened by the commanding position that even the inferior other has occupied by means of mimicry. Since Eliza has become a reformed other, Higgins fears that his authority is now at peril. According to the views of Bhabha on “The Third Space”, *“minority groups in the metropolises—marginals within the center—adumbrate a third rhetorical space that disrupts and destabilizes centralized authority”* (Huggan2001, p.21). Now Eliza could be seen as an identical twin of Higgins. The other is equally able to project fears and desires onto the colonizer whose authenticity is accessible and imitable. *“The colonized returns the colonizer's gaze”*, Huddart (2006) maintains (p.45). Eliza proves as a threat to Higgins towards the end of the play as she reveals that she will remain independent and a teacher of phonetics like him. Eliza cautions the colonizer by reminding him that she is the same and that she has been well assimilated: *“what a fool I was not to think of it before! You can't take away the knowledge you gave me. You said I had a finer ear than you. And I can be civil and kind to people, which is more than you can”* (Shaw1964, p.103). Higgins is intimidated and he cannot tolerate it: *“Teach him my methods! My discoveries! You take one step in his direction and I'll wring you neck”* (Shaw 1964, p.103). Eliza also believes that she is an equal to Higgins decides not to marry him, *“It is truth everywhere in evidence that strong people, masculine or feminine, not only do not marry stronger people, but do not shew any preference for them in selecting their friends”*, (Shaw 1964, p. 108).

Eliza throughout the play suffers because of her inferior social status. She is a subaltern and therefore admits silence and endures pain. When Pickering, Eliza and Higgins all three returns from the gathering in the fourth act of the play, everybody except Eliza celebrates, Higgins and Pickering feel happy for their success at the gathering. Eliza is not involved in the celebration. She is just an object of experiment to them. Her purpose is done after their victory at the gathering. She has nothing to do with the success according to Higgins. Eliza attempts to invoke response but all her attempts are in vain. Higgins does not have any concern for the feelings and emotions of the poor girl. Eliza observes this reckless tendency of Higgins and leaves the place. *“Eliza looks at him darkly, then rises suddenly and leaves the room, returns with a pair of large down-at heel slippers. She places them on the carpet before Higgins, and sits as before without a word”*, the stage direction reads. Higgins nevertheless does not respond to Eliza's actions and remains ignorant of her presence. Eliza tries to control her emotions and still believes that she cannot go against her master. Though she grows violently furious, she still maintains her stand as a subaltern. Higgins persistent disapproval of her presence makes her violent. *“Eliza's beauty becomes murderous.”* (Shaw 1964). Eliza realizes that she should start speaking against the ills that have befallen on her. A rebellious attitude engulfs Eliza. This is clearly evident when Higgins proposes to marry Eliza. Eliza replies, *“I sold flowers. I did not sell myself”*. Eliza knew that she would remain subservient to Higgins if she accepted the proposal. She overtly turns rebellious and discards Higgins' authority over her. She finally realizes her actual status and not the one that has been forcibly imposed on her. Higgins also understands that it's time for him to look at Eliza with due respect. She has now become the colonizer's double, an apprehension that Higgins had since the beginning. Higgins also believes that if he married Eliza she would not behave in the way she is expected by Higgins. Rather she will not eschew her cultural values and morals by imbibing superficial upper-class social values. She has become indifferent to this. She had towards the end attained a self-realization where she does not feel remorse for her existence. Though her words may seem aggressive, they underscore her cultural tone. Higgins being a colonizer could not understand the enlightenment that the flower-girl Eliza attained towards the end.

Conclusion

In Pygmalion, though Shaw tried to assert social reality, he had created characters that are crucial to understand his ideas. Eliza, though was a weak and subaltern character, grows from a point where she found life to be hopeless to a position where she creates her own identity. Shaw, like all his plays, has

created a strong women character in the play. Eliza's subaltern nature and the way she is treated as the other makes the readers understand the colonial spirit that Shaw perceived. The character also starts growing from the state of innocence to enlightenment. The position of Eliza could be better understood from the last confession of Higgins that Eliza has become "a tower of strength: a consort battleship". She stays subservient to her master for a long time and then realizes her own social position and claims it. Shaw also tries to demonstrate the overemphasis that is being laid on the English Language.

Eliza is perceived as a puppet but she realizes her own potential, as she was being trained by Higgins. She realizes that her individuality lies in accepting things. Though she had to relinquish her values and cultures in the beginning, she was able to sustain them without any digression. Eliza, a subaltern, who stood against all her odds and ills, realized her position and status in life. She also had to face the blows of her master, but her ingrained cultural values made her rise to her heights even after difficulties. The text not only focuses on the Pygmalion myth as well as the social conditions, but also has inherent colonial features in it. In *Pygmalion* Shaw satirizes the colonial attitude of the elite English society. It also emphasizes the ways in which this oppression could be ridden and attempts to create a voice for the Subalterns. Satire, Rabb (2007) argues: "examine [s] national, historical, or ethnic identity [it] bring[s] objects of fear or danger into our midst by blurring the distinction between the broom and the dirt it sweeps, between us and them, or self and other"(p.582).

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