

## **Duchess in the Making: Transformation in G B Shaw's PYGMALION**

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In *Metamorphoses* (10 AD) the Roman poet Ovid wrote about the Greek myth of Pygmalion. Pygmalion, the prince of Cyprus, a talented sculptor, hated women as defective creatures and had decided never to marry. Once he resolved to create a statue of a beautiful woman: “an amazingly skilful statue in ivory, white as snow, an image of perfect feminine beauty”. As the story goes, Pygmalion fell in love with his own bronze statue. He would bring it gifts of jewels, beads, songbirds, baubles and flowers. He would kiss and embrace it as if it were a real woman. Pygmalion was so mad in love that he sacrificed a bull at the altar of the love goddess, Aphrodite, to please her. After he left the altar and went home he found that the statue had come to life. Pygmalion humbled himself at the goddess's feet. This unusual love between Pygmalion and Galatea resulted in their marriage.

G B Shaw uses this myth in his play, *Pygmalion*. The play deals with issues like social status, education, equality and social mobility. We have here people from different social classes whose interaction with one another brings out the class conflict prevalent in the Victorian society. As in other plays, Shaw has a purpose of bringing in a change in the existing system. He himself wrote about the play that it “is so intensely and deliberately didactic, and its subject is esteemed so dry, that I delight in throwing it at the heads of the

wiseacres who repeat the parrot cry that art should never be didactic. It goes to prove my contention that art should never be anything else.” (Pygmalion 7)

The main character, Eliza Doolittle, a messy cockney flower girl, is given an offer by Professor Henry Higgins, a well-known phonetic expert who studies ...the science of speech...” (Act I, 15) that he will train her in six months and ‘pass her as a duchess.’ Eliza accepts the offer as she wants to leave her present life on the streets and have her own shop in the market and live a life of her choice. Eliza is a modern working-class girl and a representative of the ‘new women’ who, at the end of the play, confronts Higgins, her creator who does get attracted to her as Pygmalion does towards Galatea. He is a snob for her. She lives in a society which consists of a well dressed upper class that is in sharp contrast to the poor peasant class. The lower class people work hard to improve their lot but they always get ill treated and humiliated.

The beginning of the twentieth century was a period of tremendous change in the British society. Industrialization heralded a demographic shift and a changed social structure as a result of social mobility. But that did not widely widen into the lower classes as is reflected in Liza’s anxiety for her future. She does not know what is to happen to her after Higgins performs his experiment with her.

In Pygmalion, the ‘transformation’ of Liza shows the capability of an individual to transform itself, to develop and come out “of the fancy with which we all begin as children, that the institutions under which we live, including our legal ways of distributing income and allowing people to own things, are natural, like the weather. They are not.... They are in fact transient makeshifts; and many of them would not be obeyed, even by well-meaning people,

if there were not a policeman within call and a prison within reach. They are being changed constantly by Parliament because we are never satisfied with them.”(Shaw 1).

In Pygmalion, the people are recognized by their dress codes, manners, their way of speaking, money and other such features that can't define a person in real sense. Professor Higgins is a well dressed, well spoken man and has money but his manners are not “genteel.” Same is the case with Eliza's father, Alfred Doolittle. He becomes a well dressed man but is not well spoken but he is supposed to be a gentleman. So, what differentiates one class from another seems to be as elusive as anything:

The Parlor-Maid: Mr. Henry, a gentleman wants to see you very particular. He's been sent on from Wimpole Street.

Higgins: Oh, bother! I can't see anyone now. Who is it?

The Parlor-Maid: A Mr. Doolittle, Sir.

Pickering: Doolittle! Do you mean the dustman?

The Parlor-Maid: Dustman! Oh no, sir: a gentleman.

(Act V, 84-85)

Alfred Doolittle does not recognize even his own daughter, Eliza, just because she has been 'washed' and elegantly dressed.

Alfred: Beg Pardon, miss.

Eliza: Garn! Don't you know your own daughter?

Alfred: Bly me! Its Eliza! (Act II, 46)

The characteristic of the high class people is the way they speak and the language they use. It is language and how you use it from which your class is inferred. The society mindlessly uses the apparent features of dressing, speaking and language to determine the

worth of an individual. It is the treatment that one gets from other people that makes one this or that. Eliza says to Pickering:

You see, really and truly, apart from the things anyone can pick up (the dressing and the proper way of speaking, and so on), the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated. I shall always be a flower girl to Professor Higgins, because he always treats me as a flower girl, and always will; but I know I can be a lady to you, because you always treat me as a lady, and always will.

(Act V, 83)

Eliza is an evolving human being and doesn't believe in the hollowness of the upper class life. She wants to be free from any influence that messes up with her nature and perceptions. She cannot live a mechanized life and confine herself to a society in which money counts more than anything else. A society in which she can marry only for money is not acceptable to her. The marriage will be no better than prostitution. Instead she is ready to accept an uncertain future which, at least, gives her freedom to grow, work and struggle as an independent woman.

Shaw believes in the capability and potential of an individual to improve and excel as he is driven by Life Force. Pygmalion shows us how "nurture" conditions the "nature" in the social circumstance. (Lynda Mugglestone). Eliza masters the speech of a duchess and suggests that all people like her can achieve whatever thing because they are born with the same potential. It only remains a question of what and how much opportunities they get to do so. Shaw is the advocate of this kind of a society where all are given equal opportunities.

Mr. Doolittle, a common dustman, hates the convictions of the middle class morality because it demands hollow adherence to a moral code that seems to be a burden for him. He

will have to go to church, marry his live-in girlfriend, give up alcohol, refrain from picking up women, and give money to his poor relatives. He has his own reasons for not wishing to be a part of the upper class. Towards the end of the play he accuses Mr Higgins of making him into a middle-class gentleman against his will:

Doolittle: "Done to me! Ruined me. Destroyed my happiness. Tied me up and delivered me into the hands of middle class morality.(Act V, 86)

Eliza remains an experiment for Mr Higgins. He does not change his behaviour towards her. She simply seems to be a puppet in his hands he experiments with like a professional. There is no human involvement on his part to uplift her. Eliza discerns the different perception of Pickering and Mr Higgins towards her. She tells Higgins that Pickering "treats a flower girl as duchess" to which he replies, "And I treat a duchess as a flower girl." (Act V, 97) For him Eliza was and will remain nothing more than an experiment. At one point Eliza asks Higgins to call her Miss Doolittle as Colonel Pickering usually does:

Pickering: Well, this is really very nice of you, Miss Doolittle.

Liza: And I should like Professor Higgins to call me Miss Doolittle.

Higgins: I'll see you damned first. (Act V, 94)

The half transformation (as we can call it) of Eliza and Alfred Doolittle shows the difficulty in changing a person, his perceptions, mindset or habits. The upper class too doesn't fall in love with these new entrants. The ideal of the Greek myth falls short of its practicality. Galatea and Eliza end up differently. The complete transformation of one belonging to a lower class seems to be as complex as the complete acceptance by a higher

class. The social equality that can make things desirable is what will guarantee a harmonious social set up devoid of all the hollow etiquettes and morals.

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