

THE THEME OF WICKEDNESS AND FUTILITY OF REVENGE IN *CAESAR AND CLEOPATRA*

C.V. Viswanadha Rao, Department of English, G.C.M. (A), Kadapa, Andhra Pradesh, India
V.Siva Prasad, Department of English, Government College for Men (A), Kadapa,
Andhra Pradesh, India

Abstract:

The nineteenth century drama has undergone metamorphosis from traditional themes to the drama of ideas otherwise known as discussion plays. G.B. Shaw is considered to be an ambassador of the new trend and to that extent, in his early plays, he has dealt with social problems prevailing during those times, with reformatory zeal to enlighten the audience. In this process, he has written “Plays Pleasant” and “Plays Unpleasant” to focus on certain social issues. Whereas, in “Plays for Puritans”, he has remarkably brought out the theme of spiritual concepts to transform the follies and foibles of human beings. In Caesar and Cleopatra, contrary to the Shakespearean point of view, Shaw infuses into it the didactic note - 'wickedness and revenge are futile' to fructify the purpose of human birth. The present paper endeavours to evaluate Shaw's view by analyzing the play with a critical outlook signifying the philosophical undertones.

Key words: *Metamorphosis, traditional themes, drama of ideas, social problems, puritans, spiritual concepts, wickedness and revenge, critical outlook, philosophical undertones.*

Introduction

After treating the social problems of slum landlordism, prostitution, love and marriage quite realistically and satirically, Shaw takes up yet another social problem, Puritanism, which has been pestering the contemporary society. He levels his attack against the Puritanism of the age in his *Three Plays for Puritans*, namely, *The Devil's Disciple* (1896-97), *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1898) and *Captain Brass Bound's Conversion* (1899). However, it is important to note that *Three Plays for Puritans* “Show the preacher struggling in the embraces of the siren Art. The sole desire of the preacher was to communicate his ideas and convictions. Though the preacher succeeded in keeping his feet, he had to fight constantly against the pull and lure of mere literature”.

The original puritans were an English religious non-conformist group in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who objected to ritual and priest craft. They were the forerunners of the present day Free Churches. They lived austere and believed wholly in the Bible as an infallible guide to faith and conduct. The word, puritan, has since become a common noun of any person of strict morals who avoids self-indulgence and sensual pleasure and condemns it in others. Puritans are those who strongly endeavor to revive morals against ebbing ideas of utilitarian attitude towards society. As Trevelyan says “The English of all classes formed in the nineteenth century a strongly Protestant nation; most of them were religious and most of them (including the utilitarians and Agnostics) were serious with that strong preoccupation about morality which is the merit and danger of the Puritan Character”.

During the Elizabethan age, both Shakespeare and Ben Jonson took the puritans to task in as much as they were opposed to the theatre. Shakespeare ridicules Puritanism through Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*. Ben Jonson satirizes the puritans thoroughly in the *Bartholomew Fair* mainly through the character of

zeal-of-the Land Busy. In *Caesar and Cleopatra*, he exposes and ridicules the concept of hero and hero worship and attacks the traditions of legal and permissible ways of revenge in society. Besides, Shaw dramatizes “The folly and wickedness of glorifying human vindictiveness by romantic codes of honour and institution in systems of jurisprudence”. Further, Shaw gives a new twist to the historical character Caesar. *Caesar and Cleopatra* revolves round a central theme - the wickedness and futility of revenge. Caesar appears as a gentle colossus whose clemency, benevolence and magnanimity overwhelm and overawe the lesser mortals. Shaw authentically says in his 'preface':

In Caesar, I have used another character with which Shakespeare has been beforehand. But Shakespeare, who knew human weakness so well, never knew human strength of the caesarian type.

(P.31)

The present paper modestly attempts to discuss and examine Shaw's notion of humanism to elevate oneself above the common human weaknesses to achieve perfection in life.

Analysis of the Play

Shaw's Caesar arrives at the desert of Syria and discerns exiled queen Cleopatra, and later, he becomes instrumental in restoring her position as queen of Egypt.

After winning the battle of Pharsalia, Caesar enters the desert of Syria and confronts gigantic Sphinx. Spontaneously he expresses his deepest feelings comparing himself with colossal Sphinx. He says:

.... I have wandered in many lands, seeking the lost regions from which my birth into this world exiled me, and the company of creatures such as I myself. I have found flocks and pastures, men and cities, but no other Caesar, no air native to me, no man kindred to me, none who can do my day's deed, and think of my night's thought. In the little world yonder, Sphinx, my place is as high as yours in this great desert; only I wander and you sit still; I conquer and you endure: I work and wonder, you watch and wait;

(Act I, P.146)

Gang says, “The Caesar whom we meet in the play does indeed have the transcendental virtue of a higher order of man, but instead of the naiveté and energy of Siegfried, he has a consciousness of age and alienation”. Caesar meets Cleopatra and talks to her as a stranger, without revealing his identity. Sensing her child like nature, he teaches her royal dignity and assures her to be the Queen of Egypt. While Caesar is in the court of Ptolemy, Cleopatra's brother, Ptolemy's men Pothinus and Achillas attempt to take Caesar into their custody. Britannus, secretary of Caesar, counsels and benevolently says:

Oh no, no, no. By no means. Caesar's guests, gentlemen.

(Act II, P.167)

Pothinus, Ptolemy's guard, introduces Lucius Septimius who has slain Pompey, the enemy of Caesar and brought his head to win the heart of Caesar. Caesar being agonized by the word vengeance says movingly:

Vengeance! Vengeance! Oh, if I could stoop to vengeance, what would I not exact from you as the price of this murdered man's blood? Was he not my son-in-law, my ancient friend, for 20 years the master of great Rome, for 30 years the compeller of victory? Did not I, as a Roman, share his glory? And I Julius Caesar, or am I wolf, that you fling me the grey head of the old soldier, the laurelled conqueror, the mighty Roman, treacherously struck down by this callous ruffian and then claim my gratitude for it.

(Act II, P.169-170)

Gang, observes, “When the murder of Pompey is referred to, it becomes simply an occasion for demonstrating Caesar's moral sensibility, his superiority to mere vengeance”.

Then, Lucius Septimius skilfully questions Caesar:

.... You have seen severed heads before, Caesar, and severed right hands too... some thousands of them, in Gaul, after you vanquished Vercingetorix. Did you spare him, with all your clemency? Was that vengeance?

(Act II, P.170)

Touched by his counter argument Caesar says:

.... Vengeance at least is human... those severed right hands, and the brave Vercingetorix basely strangled in a vault beneath the capital, were a wise a wise severity, a necessary protection to the common wealth, a duty of statesmanship - follies and fictions ten times bloodier than honest vengeance ! Why should the slayer of Vercingetorix rebuke the slayer of Pompey? You are free to go with the rest....

(Act II, P.170)

“Rebuked for his past brutalities, Caesar now rejects the 'duty of statesmanship' that had led him to commit them and, rising above anger, offers Pompey's slayer a place in his service”.

Caesar's virtue of munificence receives more dignity to his character, when his commander Rufio tells about Caesar's forgiving nature in freeing all the Egyptians in the court. Rufio says:

.... But mark this, Caesar. Clemency is very well for you; but what is it for your soldiers, who have to fight tomorrow the man you spared yesterday? You may give what orders you please; but I tell you that your next victory will be a massacre, thanks to your clemency.

(Act II, P.171)

As Ptolemy is left alone in the court, Caesar advises him to go along with his men by showing kindness towards the boy king. Caesar kindly says:

Go, my boy. I will not harm you; but you will be safer away, among your friends. Here you are in the lion's mouth.

(Act II, P.172)

Egyptians set fire to some Roman ships, the nearby library of Alexandria catches fire. Theodotus who is much worried comes to Caesar and says:

Slain! Oh, worse than the death of ten thousand men! Loss irreparable to mankind The first of the Seven Wonders of the World perishes. The library of Alexandria is in flames.

(Act II, P.179)

Theodotus pathetically expresses his grief over the burning of books. Caesar without having moved, tells Theodotus that Egyptians should forget the dreamy world.

Caesar : Theodotus! I am an author myself; and I tell you it is better that Egyptians should live their lives than dream them away with the help of books.

Theodotus: Caesar! Once in ten generations of men, the world gains an immortal book.

(Act II, P.179)

As Theodotus prevails upon Caesar to the question of burning and destroying the past, Caesar says:

Ay, and build the future with its ruins.... You who have valued Pompey's head no more than a shepherd values an onion, and who now kneel to me, to plead for a

few sheep skins scrawled with errors.... but you shall pass freely out of the palace.

(Act II, P.179)

Gibbs says, “.... Caesar is also paradoxically enough, a super-philistine. His response to the burning of the library at Alexandria is exciting, and its extra-historical context of the artistic and literary culture of fin de siecl England gives it added point.

When Caesar is in light house along with his men, Britannus shows a bunch of letters, which contains the correspondence between Pompey's party and the army of occupation in Egypt. He further adds that foes of Caesar can be known by reading the letters. Sharply reacting to his secretary's suggestion says:

.... would you have me to waste the next three years of my life in prescribing and condemning men who will be my friends when I have proved that my friendship is worth more than Pompey's was than Cato's is... and I a bull dog, to seek quarrels merely to show how stubborn my jaws are? I do not make sacrifices to my honour, as your Druids do

(Act III, P.198)

When Cleopatra is in her palace, Pothinus comes and tries to instigate Cleopatra by telling her that she is Caesar's prisoner and slave. Cleopatra refuses Pothinus' remark. Then Pothinus asks her whether Caesar is in love with her. Cleopatra says:

.... Pothinus! Caesar loves no one He has no hatred in him; he makes friends with every one as he does with dogs and children. His kindness is not for anything in me: it is in his own nature.

(Act IV, P.212)

Shaw, strikingly makes Cleopatra as Eugene Marchbanks, in expressing her genuine feelings on Caesar's magnanimous nature. Gang rightly observes “.... in her Act IV confrontation with Pothinus, she is allowed a momentary echo of Eugene Marchbanks. To Cleopatra human relations, dominated by alienation and hatred, are relieved only impulses of sexuality. Caesar is prone to none of these feelings, but he does not distinguish between particular adults and children and dogs. This 'heroic' benevolence is profoundly attractive in its universality and almost equally disquieting in its remoteness from the individual qualities of human creatures....”

When Caesar and his men attend the party hosted by Cleopatra, Cleopatra coaxingly says to Caesar, that she cannot satisfy his diet as he abstains from taking drinks. Then Caesar says:

.... when I return to Rome, I will make laws against these extravagances. I will even get the laws carried out.

(Act IV, P.223)

Feeling insulted by Pothinus, Cleopatra commands her mistress Fiatateeta to slay him. At her behest Fiatateeta kills Pothinus. As a result, a lot of protest begins outside the palace. Sensing this, Caesar asks Cleopatra about the murderer. Cleopatra justifying her command says that her action may not be condemned wrong, since she has been affronted by him. In reply to her, Caesar philosophically says:

.... These knockers at your gate are also believers in vengeance and in stabbing. You have slain their leader: it is right that they shall slay you.... And then in the name of that right shall I not slay them for murdering their Queen, and be slain in my turn by their countrymen.... And so, to the end of history, murder shall breed murder, always in the name of right and honour and peace, until the Gods are tired of blood and create a race that can understand....

(Act IV, P.230)

“Caesar's early protest against the horror of Pompey's murder widens out to a larger perception which is in the spirit of Shakespeare's Histories, though it is faintly tinged with brooding intimations of the Life Force, the single most powerful deadening influence on later Shavian drama”.

On being enraged by Pothinus' death, Egyptians menacingly surround the palace to avenge their leader's death. Caesar cryptically explains the consequences that he has to face for Cleopatra's action. Apollodorus asks Caesar whether he too gets the thought of despair. Then Caesar says:

He who has never hoped can never despair. Caesar, in good or bad fortune, looks his fate in the face.

(Act IV, P.232)

After the palace has been relieved from besiegers by the Roman army reinforced, Caesar decides to leave for Rome by appointing Rufio, Governor of Egypt. Besides, he tells Apollodorus to take the charge of Art in Egypt:

Caesar : Apollodorus! I have the art of Egypt in your charge.
 ... Rome loves art and will encourage it ungrudgingly.

Appollodorus : I understand, Caesar. Rome will produce no art itself. . . .

Caesar : What! Rome produces no art! Is peace not an art? Is war not an art? Is Government not an art? Is civilization not an art? All these we give you in exchange for a few ornaments. . . .

(Act IV, P.239)

“Through the portrayal of Caesar's relations with Apollodorus, the play stretches conventional definitions of art and creativity, and places in a critical light the idea that civilization can be measured only in terms of what a society produces in the way of works of fine art.

Conclusion

It is clear from the above analysis that Caesar is a man of clemency and compassion who can stand as a symbol of perfection. In fact, he goes beyond limitations of a human being and proves himself a virtuous person who can face any hard situation with his inner will power and potentiality. Above all, what Bernard Shaw desires to instruct the audience through the “*Plays of Puritans*” is accomplished with his art of characterization and dramaturgy. Hence, the play has received all time accolades even till today without any qualms of conscience. Besides, Shaw seems to din into the ears of the audience in his play that humanism shall replace Puritanism. This is demonstrated in Caesar and Cleopatra through the character of Caesar.

References:

- Ward, A.C. *Twentieth-Century English Literature 1901-1960*, Great Britain: The English Language Book Society and Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1965, P.100.
- Trevelyan, G.M. *O.M., English Social History*, Great Britain: Longmans, 1961, P.493.
- Kaye, J.B., *Bernard Shaw and the Nineteenth Century Tradition*, Norman: Okla: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958, P.129.
- Shaw, G.B. 'Preface', "Better than Shakespeare", *Three Plays for Puritans*, Penguin Books Ltd., Harmondsworth, P.31.
- Shaw, G.B. "Caesar and Cleopatra Act I", *Three Plays for Puritans*, Penguin Books Ltd., Harmondsworth, P.146. Subsequent textual quotations are taken from the same edition.
- Gang, Arthur *George Bernard Shaw, Plays of the Nineties*, P.127.
- Gang, Arthur *George Bernard Shaw, Plays of the Nineties*, P.128.

- Gang, Arthur *George Bernard Shaw, Plays of the Nineties*, P.128.
- Gibbs, A.M. *The Art and Mind of Shaw, Puritanism and Revolt*, London: M.C. Ltd., 1988, P.113.
- Gang, Arthur *George Bernard Shaw, Plays of the Nineties*, P.131-139.
- Salgado, Gamini. “*English Drama*”, *A Critical Introduction, The Twentieth Century*, London: published by Edward Arnold, 1980, P.179.
- Gibbs, A.M. *The Art and Mind of Shaw, Essays in Criticism, Puritanism and Revolt*, London: M.C. Ltd., 1988, P.114.