

## SHAW THROUGH THE LENS OF A CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST

**The Feminist Shaw: Shaw and the Contemporary Literary Theories of Feminism.** By Nishtha Mishra. New York: Routledge India, 2023. Pp. 176. ISBN 978-1-032-16195-2.

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*The Feminist Shaw: Shaw and the Contemporary Literary Theories of Feminism* examines George Bernard Shaw's legacy as the "forgotten feminist" (Mishra 2023, 3) and offers an engaging reading for both academics and general readers. The book begins by noting second-wave feminist Germaine Greer's dismissal of Shaw as "less irreverent than irrelevant" (qtd. in Mishra 2023, viii). Nishtha Mishra studies diverse perspectives and contemporary theories which go beyond both second-wave feminist criticism and traditional feminist readings. The book explores Shaw's contribution to first-wave feminism and moves beyond Eurocentric or Oriental interpretations, highlighting how his legacy and views resonate with contemporary theories, including Islamic and Black feminism, Marxist theory, postcolonial theory, psychoanalytic criticism, ecofeminism, and LGBTQ+ studies.

The book is divided into two main parts. Part One, titled "History, Philosophy, and Influence," summarises the theoretical and historical foundations of Shavian studies and feminist criticism, containing three chapters: "George Bernard Shaw, the Forgotten Feminist"; "Oppression/Representation of Literary Myths"; and "Decoding Life Force and Recognising 'Shavian Superman.'"

The first chapter provides a theoretical, historical overview of feminism, starting from medieval and Shakespearean depictions of women to the contributions of Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir, and explains how Ibsen's influence and Shaw's unconventional mother and progressive marriage inspired his Shavian New Woman and political views. The chapter does not display innovative ideas but lays down the volume's theoretical foundations.

The second chapter builds upon these foundations, exploring Shaw's contributions to gender equality, which he promoted through his publications and humanised New Woman characters. This chapter proceeds with the book's idea of reading Shaw from contemporary and non-Eurocentric perspectives. Regarding Shaw's genius, Mishra mentions the progressive application of Freudian understandings in Shaw's plays, including the notions of psychosexual stages, and praises how "minutely" (32) Shaw nurtured the creation of his characters. Furthermore, Mishra argues for

Shaw's contemporary relevance by paralleling Shaw's evolved female stock characters' nature to cultural symbols presented in his plays, which helped to redefine both the stereotypical Victorian images of femininity and the formerly restrictive mythical images of women as portrayed by male writers. For example, Shaw utilised the archetypal relationship between lunar and menstrual cycles, the virginity myth, and Greek mythology in shaping his female characters (Mishra 2023, 45–53). Mishra also describes how the Shavian stock characters represent different overlapping stages of femininity, shaped by religious practices and beliefs such as Hinduism, Christianity, Celtic lore, and Greek mythology. These myths and religions intrigued Shaw and prompted him to think beyond Eurocentrism. As an example, Mishra mentions *Back to Methuselah* (1921/1922)<sup>1</sup>, in which Shaw reinterprets Lilith, the classical temptress, as the peace-seeking Creatrix of Earth, destroyed by aggression and imperialist approaches. In *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles* (1934/1935) and *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God* (1932), Mishra contends, Shaw refutes that spiritual leadership is incompatible with motherhood and marriage and the limited role of black women as slaves or prostitutes. Eventually, Mishra argues that spirituality and connection with mythologies layer Shavian characters.

The above is explored in the third chapter, in which Mishra details how Shaw promoted the notion of *Creative Evolution* over Darwin's Evolution Theory and was affected by the Yogan philosophy of *prana* or *Life Force*, which gave mothers a more active and empowering role. Partly inspired by embodiments of creative energy in Hinduism, like Yogmaya or Shakti, and the God of Jainism (Mishra 2023, 43), Shaw thought that the empowered female role model involved the right and the responsibility for women to choose whom to produce offspring with (Mishra 2023, 59). Instead of finding the perfect mate, the mother of *Superman* must avoid oppression (59). While Mishra refers to Ann Whitefield (*Man and Superman* (1903/1905)) as the perfect mother (61), she deems Vivie Warren (*Mrs Warren's Profession* (1893/1902)), for example, too cold and lacking harmony with nature and peace (69) for the role. Moreover, Higgins (*Pygmalion* (1912/1913)), due to his attachment to his mother, cannot fulfil the roles of the *Superman* or the *Superman's* father, making Freddy the suitable choice for Eliza (*Pygmalion*) (63; 67).

Shaw's fascination with diverse religions, his critical attitude towards Christianity and 'traditional' values, and his idea of female independence also support his relevance to Marxist theory, ecofeminism, and postcolonial theory, which is apparent in the second main part of Mishra's monograph. Titled "Ideology," it reinterprets Shavian works in the framework of Islamic, Marxist, and Black feminisms, as well as postcolonial theory,

<sup>1</sup> Here and in the rest of the review, the first date in the brackets denotes the date of the first publication, while the second date refers to the date of the first staging.

ecofeminism, and LGBTQ studies. It is divided into four chapters: “The Shavian New Woman: Redefining Femininity,” “Shavian Women on Marxist Feminism,” “Platonic Sisterhood of Ecofeminist Interests,” and “The Third Wave Women Questions: the Concerns of Black Feminism, Postcolonial Feminism, and LGBTQ Theory.”

The first chapter of “Ideology” contemplates the origins of the New Woman and discusses her essential characteristics: Shaw considered financial independence, the refusal of subservience, and involvement in public life (Mishra 2023, 82) among these. Shavian New Women, Mishra highlights, are not “confirmed” spinsters, might seek marriage, and are not necessarily educated or affluent; however, they are quick-witted and assertive (80–82).

In the second chapter, Mishra notes Shaw’s relevance to Marxist Theory. Marxism, aiming for a classless society, maintains, in accordance with Feminism, that the subordination of oppressed classes (including women) is not biologically determined, but is rooted in economic forces, and serves the interests of capital (men). Marxism wants to destroy the system that is based on underpaid work and elitism, the former of which is illustrated in Shaw’s plays in the form of the unpaid work of Eliza (*Pygmalion*), Raina (*Arms and the Man* [1898/1894]), and the eponymous heroine in *Candida* (1898/1894)). Elitism is demonstrated by the Church and authorities when they refuse to recognise Joan in *Saint Joan* (1923/1923) as a soldier (a position reserved for men), and by the commodification of marriage, which parallels prostitution, as well as the poor working conditions in *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*.

The third chapter of “Ideology” reinforces Mishra’s argument about Shaw’s relevance in the framework of ecofeminism: “Platonic Sisterhood of Ecofeminist Interests” suggests that the bond between Shavian women and nature offers an opportunity for his contemporary reinterpretation. Mishra refers back to the idea that religions and myths recognise values and traits traditionally associated with women and marginalised groups (116–117; 119). She singles out *Back to Methuselah* and *The Black Girl in Her Search for God* and reinterprets the plays through the lens of ecofeminism. Eve and Lilith from *Back to Methuselah* seek to live in harmony with nature and resent aggression. As minor examples, Mishra notes *Candida*’s undervalued feminine traits, Joan’s relationship with the land and peace as the leader of the marginalised, oppressed village, Eliza’s longing for cultivation (Higgins), then escaping from cultivation, and Vivie’s refusal to adopt femininity or anything rural or nature-connected (124–129). In this chapter, while Mishra notes feminists’ refusal to read Shaw as a sympathiser or representative of their own ideologies, simply because he was a male dramatist, she argues for recognising Shaw as a “champion” for Victorian women’s liberation (122).

The fourth chapter explores Shaw’s plays in the frameworks overlooked by second-wave feminists, such as Black, Islamic and Queer feminisms, to display Shaw as a

male writer who broke with traditional patterns about scheming women to promote sisterhood. Mishra mentions Shaw's public stances towards slavery, marginalised groups, and homosexuality, as well as his open-minded attitude towards marriage (149), which surfaced for instance in his public support of a minister involved in a same-sex scandal in 1889, his rebuke of the ironic snobbism displayed against the natives in India in a 1914 essay, and his radio address about South Africa exploiting slaves in 1932. The chapter touches upon the previous ideas of the *Life Force*, Lilith as the reinterpreted imperfect Creatrix, and the first *Superman* or mother of *Superman*, the refutation of the incompatibility of spiritual leadership with motherhood and marriage, and the limited role of black women as slaves, prostitutes, or married mothers. Mishra advances the view that the title character of *The Black Girl in Search for God* embodies an early understanding of postcolonialism, Black and third-wave feminism, and addresses misconceptions about Islamic and African cultures spread across Eurocentric societies. In *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles*, Shaw's views on sisterhood, queerness, and "superfamilies" (Mishra 2023, 148) are illustrated by an implied lesbian relationship between two half-sisters accompanied by a man. A Shavian sisterhood is further displayed amongst other female characters, such as Eliza and Mrs Higgins, while its presence is also palpable in Vivie's initial companionship with her mother and later empathy towards prostitutes, demonstrating support and alliance beyond the idea of creating superfamilies. Mishra notes that this supportive portrayal contrasted with those of Shaw's fellow writers who painted women as spiteful and jealous. In conclusion, Mishra thinks that feminists who dismissed Shaw as simply a male writer portraying female characters overlooked both the contemporary issues – gender equality, marginalised groups, and same-sex relationships – he highlighted and how his contemporaries wrote about women.

Mishra's *The Feminist Shaw: Shaw and Contemporary Literary Theories of Feminism* offers an insightful study that emphasises Shaw's relevance to contemporary literary theories, despite certain feminists' dismissal due to his restrictive ideas about women, especially as a male dramatist. Logically structured and thoroughly researched, the book also demonstrates scholarly depth. Likewise, it offers a refreshing, non-Eurocentric approach, and it highlights other cultural and spiritual perspectives of Shavian studies such as ecofeminism, Black feminism, Queer theory, and Hinduism. It is accessible to both the general audience and the academic field, but the main argument, Shaw's relevance in contemporary studies, sometimes becomes somewhat weakened by the rich theoretical framework, and some chapters tend to be less focused. Nevertheless, the volume's rich theoretical underpinnings provide informative data for both the general audience and academics who seek to delve into contemporary Shavian studies.