

## **An allegory of Conflict between Nationalism and Feudalism in Shaw's *Saint Joan***

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### **Abstract**

*This paper explores the significance of allegory of the conflict between the good and evil, between ignorance and knowledge, between religious faith and hypocrisy, between reason and superstition, between truth and falsehood in Shaw's Saint Joan. Joan is the generous lady who comes into conflict with discipline and established authority. She is the saint, the Christ, who is martyred in every age and country so that truth and righteousness may live upon the earth. The conflict of Joan with established authority is a continuing conflict which has always been there. According to Shaw's philosophy of creative evolution, Joan symbolizes the upward urge of the life Force. Her enemies stand for the various obstacles and hindrances that retard life's upward movement. This paper attempts to show how Shaw employs his political allegory to represent the British imperialism and people's mission and struggle to extricate it from the grip of British rulers. Saint Joan is a true figure to go against them, and thereby attained martyrdom in course of her struggle at the end. This paper conceptualizes the theoretical concept of colonial studies in which the oppressors come into the conflict with the oppressed in different ways. Joan as the oppressed go against the oppressors like Cauchon and The Earl of Warwick for the sake of freedom from imperialism cherishing nationalism.*

**Keywords :** allegory, personification, symbolism, imperialism, conflict & nationalism.

### **Allegory and Its Significance**

Allegory is a narrative or any other literary composition with double meaning or hidden moral significance. It is a literary device for conveying abstract truths through the use of concrete symbols. M.H. Abrams refers to allegory: "Allegory is a narrative strategy which may be employed in any literary form or genre (6)." The most popular allegory in English language is John's Bunyan's pilgrim's Progress. In this allegory, the writer narrates the story of Christian who goes out in search of the celestial city. But it has deep moral significance. Christian symbolizes the human soul, his quest for the celestial city, the quest of the human soul for the divine and difficulties which one has to face symbolize the hardships coming in the way of those who search for truth and its righteousness. The excerpt indicates the nature of an explicit allegorical narrative:

Now as Christian was walking solitary by himself, he espied one afar off come crossing over the field to meet him, and their hap was to meet just as they were crossing the way of each other the Gentleman's name was Mr. Worldly-wiseman, he

dwelt in the town of carnal policy, a very great town and also hard by from whence Christian came.(qtd.in Abram ,6)

We can distinguish two main types of allegory: historical and political, and allegory of ideas. In historical and political allegory, the characters and actions represent historical personages and events like that of John's Dryden's "Absalom and Achitophel" in which the biblical King David represents Charles II of England, Absalom represents his natural son. The allegory of ideas represents concepts and the plot which allegorize an abstract doctrine or thesis. In this type of allegory, the central device is the personification of abstract entities such as virtues, vices, states of mind, modes of life and the types of character as in Bunyan's "The Pilgrim's Progress." "The Faerie Queene" is a great allegory of the Elizabethan period. It fuses moral, religious, historical and political allegory in a verse romance. The allegory of The Faerie Queen has ethical, political, moral, political and chivalric elements. The play *Saint Joan* also projects an allegorical conflict representing the struggle between individual freedom and feudal order. George Sampson remarks:

In *Saint Joan* Shaw could present the intellectual conflict; he could not present Joan's simple faith, and she appears as a character careful thought out but never emotionally experienced. Shaw's real success is to be found in the presentation of the arguments, and he makes a strong case for Warwick, for the Inquisitor, and for the Bishop, against whom all our instincts rebel. In fact, this play seems to be a defense of Joan's death, not her life. Joan is a puppet who serves the author's purpose. She never rises up to live her own life and carry us in her death to the heights we reach when the wanton Cleopatra dies. (qtd. in Tiak,191)

### **Nationalism versus imperialism**

George Bernard Shaw chose the drama as the means whereby to criticize and educate society through his happy combination of experience, coincidence and chance. His own experience had taught him that he had no promising future in the novel. In 1898, Shaw published the first collection of plays, entitled *Plays, pleasant and unpleasant*. In the history of English drama, he occupies a position second only to that of Shakespeare. He dominated the English theatre for over sixty years and his influence, name and fame were pervasive. He built up his own theatre – the theatre of ideas. His earlier work in drama is directed towards the statement and criticism of contemporary social evils. Shaw demands truth and despises convention. He punctures hollow pretensions and smug prudishness—coating his criticism with ingenious and irreverent wit. He employs his verbal gaiety not merely for entertainment but to explore every known problem-social, moral, political and religious.

*Saint Joan* is a play of conflict between individual freedom and established authority. Joan, a teenage country girl, is determined to kick the English out of France and to crown the Dauphin (that's a title for the oldest son of a king of France), Charles, as King. Joan has heard voices from God telling her that this is her destiny. Through sheer confidence and natural charisma, she manages to sway the skeptical Captain Robert de Baudricourt. He gives her soldier's clothes, armor, and other supplies to assist in getting to the Dauphin. Upon arriving at Charles's court, Joan wins over most everybody. First, she is able

to pick Charles out of a crowd, which some view as a miracle. Her humility and reverence for the Church get the Archbishop on her side. Then of course, there is the Dauphin himself. It takes a little doing, but after a good old fashioned pep talk she convinces him to stop messing around and stand up for France and himself. Charles grants her control of the army.

Joan meets Dunois, the leader of the French troops at Orleans. He has been waiting for a while for the wind to change. It is the only way he can sail his soldiers up the river and launch a sneak attack on the English. When the wind switches directions upon Joan's arrival, Dunois is convinced that Joan has been sent by God. They march off together, to liberate Orleans revering the message of God :

Robert: What did you mean when you said that St. Catherine and st.Margaret talked to you every day ?

Joan: They do.

Robert: What are they like ?

Joan: (suddenly obstinate) I will tell you nothing about that: they have not given me leave.

Robert: But you actually see them; and they talk to you just as I am talking to you?

Joan: No: it is quite different. I cannot tell you: you must not talk to me about my voices .

Robert: How do you mean ? Voices ?

Joan: I hear voices telling me what to do . They come from God.

Robert: They come from your imagination.

Joan: Of course. That is how the messages of God come to us. (77)

Meanwhile, Joan's enemies are plotting against her. The Earl of Warwick and the Chaplain de Stogumber, both Englishmen, meet with Peter Cauchon, the Bishop of Beauvais. Warwick wants Cauchon to try Joan for heresy. The angry little Chaplain just wants her to die and die painfully. Cauchon agrees to try Joan, but refuses to be a political tool of the English. He says that he will do his best to save her soul. Joan and company have been busy little bees. They've liberated Orleans, won a bunch of other battles, and have just crowned Charles as King in Rheims Cathedral. Joan, however, is unsatisfied. A good chunk of the country, including Paris, is still not under French control. She urges Charles, the Archbishop, and Dunois to press on and liberate the capital city. When they refuse she says she will just do it without them. They tell her that, if she gets captured, they will do nothing to help her escape. Joan struggles daringly against the established authority for the sake of national freedom. Desmond Macarthy writes:

The essence of the theme is the struggle of religious inspiration against established religion and the play can be described as an exceedingly powerful Protestant Pamphlet, the essence of Protestantism being reliance upon internal authority as against the authority of tradition and a corporate religion which also claims inspiration. (qtd. in Tilak, 147)

Joan gets captured and put on trial for heresy. Sure enough, her "friends" do nothing to rescue her. The Bishop Cauchon, true to his word, does everything he can to try and save her. He has helped in this effort by the Inquisitor. It proves to be impossible because Joan's personal beliefs just do not jibe with the Church's. She thinks that God's messengers speak to her directly. They think God's voice on Earth is the Church and the Church alone; meaning the voices she hears must be demons. They also just cannot handle with her wearing men's clothes. She absolutely refuses to dress like a woman as long as she is a soldier. In the end, they are forced to condemn her to death. Her death represents the martyrdom for the sake of freedom. But she is accused of being heretic:

D'estivet : [shouting above the din] She is a relapsed heretic, obstinate,  
incorrigible and altogether unworthy of the mercy we have shown her.  
I call for her excommunication.

The Chaplain (to the Executioner): Light your fire, man. To the stake with her.

*The executioner and his assistants hurry out through the courtyard.*

Ladvenu: You wicked girl: if your counsel were of God would He not deliver you ?

Joan: His ways are not your ways. He wills that I go through the fire to His bosom; for I am His child, and you are not fit that I should live among you. That is my last word to you. (162)

Twenty-five years later King Charles has a dream, in which Joan and good number of the other characters show up to have a chat in his royal bedroom. We learn the fate of everybody and, more importantly, we learn Joan's legacy. King Charles now rules all of France. He set up a hearing to have her name cleared. We also learn from a time-traveling cleric that, many years afterward, Joan was made a saint by the Catholic Church. Everybody tells Joan how awesome she is and how they are sorry that they sold her out. At the end of the play, Joan is left alone in a pool of light. She asks God when the world will be ready to accept saints like her. Her struggle and perseverance reflect her sacrifice she made for the sake of nation. Her sacrifice is itself a symbolic representation of nationalism and Patriotism. Joan says:

Joan: Yes, they told me you were fools and that I was not to listen to your fine words nor trust to you charity. You promised me my life; but you lied. You think that life is nothing but not being stone dead. It is not the bread and water I fear: I can live on bread: when have I asked for more ? It is no hardship to drink water if the water be clean. Bread has no sorrow for me and water no affliction. But to shut me from the light of the sky and the sight of the fields and flowers; to chain my feet so that I can never again ride with the soldiers nor climb the hills; to chain me breathe foul damp darkness and keep from me everything that brings me back to the love of God when your wickedness and foolishness tempt me to hate Him: [.....] I know that your counsel is of the devil, and that mine is of God. (162)

Joan speaks boldly against her the executioner and his assistants who try to make her surrender before them. But she is herself guided by reason- right and good judgment

favoring truth and righteousness rather than by selfishness and ignorance. He challenges the superstitious agents represented by her hostile forces- Chaplain and The earl of Warwick. Her boldness and sacrifice is itself a symbolic or an allegorical sacrifice against colonial attitude of the rulers. Before the soldiers seize her she threatens: “Ladvenu: You wicked girl: If your counsel ere of God would. He not deliver you?Joan: His ways are not your ways. He wills that I go through the fie to His bosom; for I am His child, and you are not fit that I should live among You. That is my last word to you.” (162)

Joan symbolizes the enlightened and progressive element. Joan symbolizes the upward urge of the life force, the urge to rise to higher levels of evolution. The conflict between her and the established authority, which pushes her into her martyrdom, is the major focus in the play. Tilak Writes: “The Tragedy of Joan has a universal appeal, it touches a responsive chord in every heart, only because it is a representation of an eternal conflict, of an ever recurring the tragic pattern”(142). Caushon is the spokesperson of the church, the Earl of Warwick that of feudal order, and Joan stands for liberty of conscience for the freedom of the individual to act according to his or her light. The struggle between them is the eternal conflict between the individual judgment and established authority, nationalism and imperialism represented by Joan, and The earl of Warwick and the church respectively. C.B.Purdon remarks:

Saint Joan is a record of what mankind does to its saints and geniuses. Man wants neither, and so when a great soul appears, the hatred of man flares up against him or her. This truth has been conveyed by the dramatist through the story of Joan who was vital genius, but who was crushed between two mighty forces, the feudal system and catholic church. (qtd. in Tilak, 161)

Since the characters of the play, allegorically speaking, are the representatives of different forces. the conflict between her and her hostile agents represent the universal conflict which is never likely to come to an end. The conflict between genius and discipline, individual inspiration and reactionary authority, and nationalism and imperialism is the focusing point of the play.

## Conclusion

Allegory as a literary trope exhibits the symbolic representation of abstract things or ideas directed against social aberrations, evils, human weakness and so on. It is meant for the improvement of human society and behaviors. It represents either social or political or religious or any other events occurring in society. The conflict between Joan and her hostile agents represents the conflict between the colonizer and the colonized. Joan's self sacrifice symbolizes people's struggle against the British imperialism to extricate the country from British rulers- colonizers. Her voices and visions symbolize the conscience and commonsense of humanity and her hostile forces symbolize ignorance and stupidity. Her self sacrifice and rationality echo the sense of patriotism and nationalism. She does not surrender to the established instructions at the cost of nationalism and to her emotional decision, but her rationality guides her to champion freedom for the country from the imperialism. The conflict between authority and individual judgment is an eternal conflict,

which allegorizes the tragedy of Christ, Galileo and a host of others. It shows the liberty of conscience and individual freedom.

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The End.