

THE FEMALE FORCE IN SHAW'S *MAN AND SUPERMAN*

Wisam Mansour

Öz

Felsefi oyunu Adam ve Süper Adam'da George Bernard Shaw o zamanların yeni teorisi Ubermensch'i çalışır. Oyun - bir bütün olarak - Süper Adam'ın sadece kadın isterse yaratılabileceği görüşünü vurgular; çünkü kadın tek başına irade ve metanet gücü ile seçici üremenin biyolojik sürecinin emrini elinde tutar.

Anahtar Sözcükler

Yaşam Gücü, Evlilik, Shaw, Süper Adam.

Shaw'ın Adam ve Süper Adam'da Kadının Gücü

Abstract

In his philosophical play, Man and Superman, George Bernard Shaw tackled the then recent theory of the Ubermensch. The play, as a whole, stresses the view that the Superman can only be created if the woman wills to produce him; for she alone has the strength of will, the fortitude, and the command of the biological process of a selective reproduction.

Keywords

Life Force, Marriage, Shaw, Superman.

In his philosophical play *Man and Superman* (Shaw, 1957)¹ - first published in 1903- George Bernard Shaw tailors his superman in the fashion of both Nietzsche's "Ubermensch" and Schopenhauer's "Will to Live", as presented in *The World as Will and Idea*. Nietzsche believes that when man learns to control and suppress his brutal desires and overpowering feelings, he will turn into the superman whose mind will govern his body according to the natural law of "The Will to Power" (1964: 87). Nietzsche perceives this power as a fundamental force inherent in nature. It is so active that it creates forms by utilizing the entire surrounding environment for its own benefit. Although Nietzsche seems to draw upon the biological theory of evolution as expounded by both Herbert Spencer and Charles Darwin, he rejects the principles of 'struggle for existence' and the 'survival of the fittest', which have conformed their shapes to the environment by chance (1964: 93). To Nietzsche, it is only "the will to power" that makes the evolution of higher species possible. Therefore, strong and competent individuals with beautiful and healthy bodies and minds should be regenerated for Europe to progress and for the superman to emerge. While Nietzsche professes that only heroic men will be able to make higher civilizations, Shaw states that the heroes are there. They are the women whose will to power manifests itself in several ways that include their control and management of their emotions and desires, their command of sexual selection, and their control of the process of reproduction. In the words of Henderson, the woman has the "key to the materialization of the superman" (1998: 37).

¹ All subsequent references will be to the 1957 edition and page and act locations will be cited in parentheses in the text.

In his essay entitled "The Perfect Wagnerite" written in 1890, Shaw enthusiastically presents the issue of the superman by affirming that "the majority at present -1890- in Europe have no business to be alive; and no serious progress will be made until we address ourselves earnestly and scientifically to the task of producing trustworthy human material for society (Shaw, 1977: 215). In short, Shaw advocates the necessity to breed a race of men in whom the life-giving impulses predominate.

Shaw's assumption discloses two important points: firstly, Shaw's earlier interest in the idea of breeding a species superior to the contemporary, and secondly, his search for political reform not only in Britain but also in all Europe. Some critics, such as Arthur Ganzel (1988) and Shelley Morris (1991), see Shaw's quest for the superman as an extenuation of the Victorian notion of heroism promulgated by many renowned writers such as Carlyle, Kingsley, Tennyson and others. Other critics, such as Harley Parker (1981) and Kiernan Ryamond (1988), conclude that Shaw's notion of the superman is a reaction to the collapse of the Victorian and the Edwardian heroic way of life and politics during the late decades of the nineteenth century and the early decade of the twentieth. Some other critics, such as Marshal Croydon (1971), attribute Shaw's interest in the superman to his much-cherished hope in the advancement of state education and eugenics.

Marshal Croydon correctly observes that at this stage of his career Shaw "must have lost his faith in the revolutionary doctrine of progress, at least in the quick, contemporary progress of the Western society" (1971: 62). Croydon maintains that Shaw's belief in an evolutionary progress has gained momentum under the influence of the writings of Plato, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Samuel Butler. He maintains that though Shaw appreciated Butler's argument against Darwinism, Nietzsche's ideas of the superman, and Schopenhauer's concept of life as "will to live", their ideas did not provide him with a full, consistent philosophy by which man's progress would become a reality within a definite period of time (1971: 72). As a result, it took Shaw some thirty years of investigation and contemplation, ranging from his essay "The Perfect Wagnerite" in 1890, his play *Man and Superman* in 1903, and finally his *Back to Methuselah* in 1921, to arrive at a "Life Force Religion" in which "intelligence would act as the almighty" (Croydon, 1971: 74). In his study of Shaw's poetic belief and teachings, George Roppen indicates that "in Shaw's gospel *Man and Superman* there is an emphasis on creative intelligence wholly absent in the "will" concepts of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, and different from Samuel Butler's idea of cunning that grows unconscious, though it has a similar teleological significance. For with Shaw intelligence is both the end, the means, the final as well as efficient cause of the progress of life" (1975: 357).

Roppen maps out the development of Shaw's theory of the superman as promulgated in both *Man and Superman* and *Back to Methuselah*. He tracks Shaw's thought to the original sources to which Shaw himself largely refers. He skilfully points out that the moral values of Shaw's superman embody Shaw's reaction to the vileness of the "political man" who is the unfortunate product of corrupt democracy and aggressive Darwinism. In his justification of Shaw's interest in human values and virtues, Roppen writes:

In Shaw's campaign for longevity there is a hierarchy of values and virtues, some concerned with nearer tasks, others pointing to the ultimate ideal. Where Shaw's intention is to show that an evolutionary 'jump' is necessary to generate man as a social being, he does, in passages of witty and searching satire, effectively express his zest for moral awareness, self-discipline, earnestness and sense of responsibility. Yet these are means rather than ends, virtues rather than values, all bound up with human conduct in society and directed upon activity and collective effort (1975: 395)

Within the vortex of the Life Force Religion demonstrated in *Man and Superman*, Shaw tackles three social topics of great significance: marriage, female ascendancy, and flawlessness (the concept of the superman). Among these, marriage appears to be the most interesting issue through which Shaw succeeds in amusing his audience by ridiculing and at times assailing various conventional concepts and institutions constituting the total sum of Victorian values, doctrines and philosophy. In the play, Shaw employs three characters - Tanner, Octavius, Ann - in order to unveil the nature of the man-woman relationship. Tanner represents a radical modernist who is well aware of woman's role in the process of marriage. No doubt, the debate over the question of marriage reveals Shaw's actual attitude towards this social institution as an inescapable evil. Unless it is properly approached, marriage will defeat the main purpose of life. Octavius epitomizes the naive romantic lover whose passions and behaviour have been caricatured by Shaw only to make fun of Victorian romanticism and highlight the contours of the new woman. Ann is portrayed as a domineering character assisted by both the force of Nature and her own purposive Will to Power. Commenting on these forces in women, Tanner points out that:

Vitality in a woman is a blind fury of creation." (I, 60) He also adds that women "have a purpose which is not their own purpose, but that of the whole universe, a man is nothing to them but an instrument of that purpose. ... They accuse us of treating them as a mere means to our pleasure; but how can so feeble and transient a folly as a man's selfish pleasure enslave a woman as the whole purpose of Nature embodied in a woman can enslave a man? (I, 61)

Not only does Shaw assert that the man-woman relationship is based on a biological necessity in which man becomes the victim, but he also suggests that all arts of love and beauty are created to serve that necessity. When Tanner shows some intelligence in perceiving woman's nature, her tricks and designs, Ann simply remarks: "you seem to understand all the things I don't understand, but you are a perfect baby in the things I do understand." (I, 78) Apparently, the things that Ann does not comprehend are those, which she performs instinctively in a way more perfect than that of the mother bee.

Tanner wonders whether Octavius has ever read a book in natural history about the relationship between the mother bee and the male. And when Octavius reciprocates by claiming that he cannot write poetry without Ann's inspiration and love, Tanner refers him to the lesson of Life Force in the bee world:

Go to the bee, thou poet: consider her ways and be wise. By heaven, Tavy, if women could do without our work, and we ate their children's bread instead of making it, they will kill us as the spider kills its mate or as the bee kills the drone. And they would be right if we were good for nothing but love. (II, 92)

Hasketh Pearson understands Shaw's emphasis of the value of the body over the brain throughout the whole play as a "phase in the gradual development of the Life Force Creed" (1948: 74). In the third act, for example, when the scene shifts to Hell where Don Juan (previously Tanner) encounters Ana (Ann) and resumes the argument about the nature of love and marriage, the Devil agrees with Don Juan that man's contemplation, imagination, and intelligence are worth nothing compared to the creative power of the body. The Devil points out that: "one splendid body is worth the brains of a hundred dyspeptic, flatulent philosophers." (III, 142) Elaborating on the reproductive power of the body while addressing Ana, Don Juan unequivocally believes that to the woman "man's duties and responsibilities begin and end with the task of getting bread for the children. To her, man is only a means to the end of getting children and rearing them." (III, 147) When Ana inquires if this is his "idea of a woman's mind?" Don Juan replies:

Pardon me, Ana: I said nothing about a woman's whole mind. I spoke of her view of Man as a separate sex. It is no more cynical than her view of herself as above all things a Mother. Sexually, Woman is nature's contrivance for perpetuating its highest achievement. Sexually, Man is Woman's contrivance for fulfilling Nature's behest in the most economical way. She knows by instinct that far back in the evolutionary process she invented him, differentiated him, and created him in order to produce something better than the single-sexed process can produce. Whilst he fulfils the purpose for which she made him, he is welcome to his dreams, his follies, his ideals, his heroisms, provided that the keystone of them all is the worship of woman, of motherhood, of the family, of the hearth. (III, 147)

Tanner and Don Juan (both in reality and dream) find no root of affability and friendliness in love and marriage. While Tanner speaks of love as a crime, Don Juan believes that the sex relation is not a personal or friendly relation at all. For him:

The sex relation, the universal creative energy, of which the parties are both the helpless agents, over-rides and sweeps away all personal considerations and dispenses with all personal relations. The pair may be utter strangers to one another, speaking different languages, differing in race and colour, in age and disposition, with no bond between them but a possibility of that fecundity for the sake of which the Life Force throws them into one another's arms at the exchange of a glance. (III, 161)

Of course, Tanner's and Don Juan's rhetoric explicates Shaw's notion of Life Force as an unavoidable energy which overrules both man and woman, and joins them together only to accomplish its universal plan of reproduction. This biological course of action is considered to be a very distinct social aspect, despite Tanner's hostile attitude towards it. In a desperate attempt at defending himself, Tanner attacks this parochial institution by asserting that marriage to him is an "apostasy, profanation of the sanctuary of [his] soul, violation of [his] manhood, sale of [his] birthright, shameful surrender, ignominious capitulation, acceptance of defeat." (IV, 201) He maintains his acerbic rhetoric against marriage:

I shall decay like a thing that has served its purpose and is done with; I shall see in the greasy eyes of all the other husbands their relief at the arrival of a new prisoner to share their ignominy. The young men will scorn me as one who has been sold out: to the women I, who have always been an enigma and a possibility, shall be merely somebody else's property - and damaged goods at that: a second-hand man at best. (IV, 203)

Though the two partners in the process of reproduction seem to be treated on equal terms, Shaw, exceptionally, celebrates the woman's creative energy and natural aptitude with which she governs man and makes him serve her life-force agenda.

Empowered and loved by Shaw, Ann manages successfully to harness all the men in the play: Octavius, a romantic lover, deeply in love with Ann is willing to do anything to make her happy; Ramsden, a pretentious middle-aged Victorian who acts as a joint guardian to Ann but lacks the courage to affect her behaviour to conform to his Victorian moral and social norms, does not dare to deny her any thing she requests; and finally, Tanner, the most sophisticated and the most mindful male among the three, fails to break away from Ann's dominant character.

From the revealing encounter between Octavius and Ann (IV, 192-196) where Ann scorns Octavius's romantic love and announces her wish to marry Tanner, Eric Bentley detects three important points that reveal modern tendencies in the thorny area of man-woman relationship: "the failure of romantic love", for the new woman's outlook of life is connected with a wider sense of utility; secondly, "the new woman has all the natural right to select a partner whom she thinks to be the fittest"; and thirdly, "man often pays for follies which are not his own" (1979: 71). It is clear that Shaw employs two valid Victorian principles in favour of his argument: the Utilitarian attitude towards man-woman relationship, and the Darwinian principle of sexual selection which appeared in Darwin's second voluminous book: *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871). Therefore, it is natural for Shaw to argue that woman maintains the control in the process of love, marriage, and reproduction.

Ann's second victim is Tanner, who from the start of the play expresses his reluctance and unwillingness to become Ann's joint guardian as he has already discerned that his attempts to direct or manage her will come to nil. Moreover, he is scared that he himself may turn into a target. Therefore, he expresses his desire to take a journey to "a Mahometan country where men are protected from women." (II, 107)

When Mrs. Whitefield says to Tanner that he should not blame her if he marries Ann, Tanner emphatically declares that he has not "the slightest intention of marrying her", (IV, 198) because of many reasons: firstly, "she is a liar", secondly, "she is a coquette", and thirdly, "she is a bully", and finally, "she is a hypocrite". (IV, 199) Yet, deep down in his heart Tanner judges that men can not do without marriage simply because they "do the world's will, not their own." Tanner is terrified and bewildered at the prospect of getting "married because it is the world's will" that Ann "should have a husband." (IV, 203) When Tanner realizes that he is hauled into the vortex of the Life Force, he strives to break out from it relying on his intelligence and wit, but he is defeated.

Tanner to Ann (*despairingly*): Oh, you are witty: at the supreme moment the Life Force endows you with every quality. Well, I too can be a hypocrite. Your father's will appointed me your guardian, not your suitor. I shall be faithful to my trust.

Ann (*in low siren tones*): He asked me who I would have as my guardian before he made that will. I chose you!

Tanner: The will is yours then! The trap was laid from the beginning.

Ann (*concentrating all her magic*): From the beginning - from our childhood - for both of us - by the Life Force. (IV, 205)

Eventually, Tanner's defeat illustrates, on the one hand, the victory of Life Force manifested by Ann's will to power. On the other hand, it shows the comic action of a rational man being undermined by his animal nature. In Bentley's words "Tanner's intellectual pretensions shrink to nothing before Ann's reality" (1979: 157).

Darwinian optimists of the nineteenth century believed that according to the natural laws of evolution and progress, the future man (Superman) will be more advanced and more perfect than the Victorian man, though they suggested a long span of time for such advancement. In contrast to all positivist tradition, Nietzsche confirmed that: "not 'mankind', but Superman is the goal. We must make the future the standard of all our valuations, and not seek the laws for our conduct behind us" (1964: 378). While Nietzsche looked forward to the coming of the superman by a miracle of psychology, Shaw asserts that a selective biological process, in which the woman determines the values, the morals, and the aesthetic, can only engender the Superman. Shaw maintains that woman is fully conscious of her supremacy in the course of breeding the race to come. Don Juan asserts that:

The greatest central purpose of breeding the race, ay, breeding it to heights new deemed superhuman: that purpose which is now hidden in a mephitic cloud of love and romance and prudery and fastidiousness, will break through into clear sunlight as a purpose no longer to be confused with the gratification of personal fancies. (III, 160)

It is clear that while appreciating perfectibility as woman's original purpose in breeding, Shaw launches a war against the Victorian concepts of love and prudery as two distinct detractors of the Life Force. Mixing the true with the false, earnestness with frivolity, and tragedy with comedy, the play presents us with a Shavian image of the Superman. In the encounter between the Devil and the Statue, representing a commander who finds life in heaven unbearable and descends to hell, the Devil instructs his interlocutor to:

Beware of the pursuit of the Superman: it leads to an indiscriminate contempt for the Human. To a man, horses and dogs and cats are mere species, outside the moral world. Thus Don Juan was kind to woman and courteous to men as your daughter here was kind to her pet cats and dogs; but such kindness is a denial of the exclusively human character of the soul. (III, 171)

When the statue wants to know whom this Superman is, the Devil retorts: "Oh, the latest fashion among the Life Force fanatics." (III, 172) Listening to the conversation between the Devil and the Statue (previously Ann's father), Ann ardently inquires about the advent of the Superman. And when the Devil tells her that: "he is not yet created," she ironically reciprocates: "not yet created! Then my work is not yet done. I believe in the life to come." (III, 173) Thus, she implores the universe to send her a "father for the Superman." (III, 173) Shaw, explicitly and implicitly, posits a special breed of woman as the maker of the Superman. It is not just any woman that can bear him. She has to be like Ann: strong, wilful and pragmatic to the bones.

From a theoretical perspective, one is more inclined to agree with Shaw's practical presentation of the idea of the Superman than with Nietzsche's

psycho-philosophical approach, which seems to be sometimes tedious and inaccurate. Nietzsche's concept of the Superman is devoid of scientific truth, whereas one may find traces of scientific truth, biological or otherwise, in Shaw's evolutionary creed of the Life Force. After all, Shaw's concept of the Superman is closely connected with the development of eugenics, the branch of science that inspired much confidence during the early years of the twentieth century.

The question which was often raised against Nietzsche's cry for the Superman (What kind of person is this Superman to be?) is answered in Shaw's "The Revolutionist's Handbook", an appendix attached to *Man and Superman*. In the Handbook, Shaw envisages the superman as "some sort of good looking philosopher athlete" (R.H, 216). Shaw's eugenic paradigm is based on the process of selection in which, in Kevin Austin's words, the "old, unconscious fertility" is to be replaced by a new "conscious fertility", so that only "the intelligent and the self-controlled man would survive" (1982: 106). Naturally, in Shaw's view, woman has the ascendancy in this evolutionary process of breeding for she is the only one who can eliminate the useless members of the society through conscious selection the way the bees instinctively purge their cells of the idle drone.

Shaw has rejected the optimistic view of Darwinian progress. By accentuating the then recent history of the Americans who used to dip a Negro in kerosene and set him on fire, and the English officers who inflicted all types of torture on the subjects of their colonies, Shaw finds no difference between the brutality of the primitive and the civilized man. (R.H, 229) Shaw's method of breeding is teleological and purposive. The first step in the direction of the making of the Superman is assigned to the progressive woman. In his "Revolutionist's Handbook" Shaw continues to affirm, "One thing at least is clear to begin with. If a woman can, by careful selection of a father, and nourishment of herself, produce a citizen with efficient senses, sound organs and a good digestion, she should clearly be secured a sufficient reward for that natural service to make her willing to undertake and repeat it." (R.H, 246) Such selection aims at generating an intelligent person, a philosopher-artist, possibly, like Shaw himself.

References

- Austin, Kevin (1982). **The Story of Don Juan**. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- BENTLEY, Eric (1979). **Bernard Shaw**, London: H&B.
- CROYDON, Marshal (1971). **Shaw and His Contemporaries: Affects and Effects**, New York: Grove Press.
- HENDERSON, Archibald (1998). **George Bernard Shaw, Man of the Century**, New York: Atheneum.
- GANZEL, Arthur (1988). **A Casebook on Shaw's Plays**, New York: Grove Press.
- MORRIS, Shelley (1991). **The Quest for the Superman**, New York: Harper and Row.
- NIETZSCHE, Friedrich (1964). **The Will to Power**, (trans. Anthony M. Ludovici), New York: Russell & Russell.

- PARKER, Harley (1981). **From Shakespeare to Shaw**, Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press.
- PEARSON, Hasketh (1948). **Bernard Shaw: His Life and Personality**, London: The reprint Society.
- ROPPE, George (1975). **Evolution and Poetic Belief**, Oslo: Oslo University Press.
- RYAMOND, Kiernan (1988) **Explorations in Shaw Drama**, London: Routledge.
- SCHOPENHAUER, Arthur (1969). **The world as will and Idea**, (Trans. E. F. J. Payne), New York: Dover Publications.
- SHAW, G. Bernard (1957). **Man and Superman: A Comedy and a Philosophy**, London: Penguin Books.
- _(1977). *Major Critical Essay*, London: Penguin.