

# GEORGE BERNARD SHAW'S PYGMALION IN THE LIGHT OF MICHEL FOUCAULT'S ORDER OF DISCOURSE

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## Abstract

*George Bernard Shaw was the greatest playwright of the twentieth century. His plays are problem plays and plays of ideas. The plays are a discussion of a problem that was close to the playwright's heart. Problems which were prevalent in the society and their possible solution constitute the crux of his plays. The women characters in his plays are more impressive than the men. In Pygmalion, Eliza Doolittle is a poor girl who earns her livelihood by selling the flowers. The play is also a discussion on the language employed by varied strata of society. Language is seen as the dividing line between the sections of society. Eliza's tongue is made fun of by Higgins, a scientist in phonetics. Irrespective of how it would affect her life, Eliza is used by Higgins for an experiment in language acquisition. Eliza suffers the aftermath of such an experiment where she hesitates to go back to her lowly life. Michel Foucault's 'Order of Discourse', studies social relations. Discourse or the utterances in general, find meaning in establishing relations of power in our day to day life. Discourse also takes into account the languages that are excluded due to the imposition of a set of rules. It is these very rules that establish the validity of one form of language over the other. The use of a language that is preferred in a social set up leads to concentration of knowledge with the chosen few and the resulting web of power relations. He avers how discourse comes to be associated with power and knowledge. Eliza is a marginalised character in the play. The objective of this paper is to analyze Pygmalion as a feminist text in the light of Michel Foucault's Order of Discourse which studies the predicament of poor Eliza as a specimen for Higgins' language experiment. The play is a journey of Eliza, who emerges a much stronger woman and capable of realising her way up in the society.*

**Keywords:** Problem Plays, Marginalised, Discourse, Knowledge, Power



George Bernard Shaw, the greatest playwright of the twentieth century, chose his own path, at times, when the English stage was either filled with translation of French plays or dominated by playwrights like Jones and Pinero. The playwright held a high opinion about W.S. Gilbert and Oscar Wilde. But Shaw was greatly influenced by Ibsen. Shaw started as an exponent of realism and a determined inculcator of the plays of ideas. Stage was used by Shaw as a social propaganda. As an active member of 'Fabian' society, Shaw wrote well-known socialist tracts. Shaw believed in creative evolution. He believed in the progress of mankind to higher and higher levels. He believed in social progress. He soon lost faith in the conventional doctrine of faith and started believing in the evolution of the inner qualities of the species. His theory of life force stood for his passion for betterment. Shaw looked upon woman as the life force incarnate. Woman, for Shaw, was the very embodiment of the creative power. Woman, in Shavian terms, had the impulse to create a better world. His plays are a standing reminder that women were held in high esteem by the playwright. He not only stood for the economic independence of the women but also considered them at par with men. The women characters in his plays are emancipated women. They are all strong, although, not necessarily charming. His portrayal of women is very realistic. *Candida*, *Lilith*, *Lysistrata*, *Joan of Arc* are some of the realistic portraits of women by Shaw.

*Pygmalion*, subtitled as *A Romance in Five Acts* has in Act 1, different strata of society seeking shelter in rain under the portico of a church in London because of rain. A flower girl is trying to sell flowers to the people gathered under the church. A note taker is taken to be a cop and the people under the portico tell the flower girl that her activities are being followed by this cop. The flower girl pleads before the note taker that she is a good girl. A mother, a daughter and a son are also introduced in this act. The note taker is Mr. Higgins, an expert in phonetics and Colonel Pickering, an expert in Indian dialects. Colonel Pickering has come to meet Higgins. The flower girl comes to Higgins place later on and offers him money to teach her to speak better English in order to enable her to find work in a flower shop. Higgins intends to teach her the language of genteel class and pass her off as a duchess at the ambassador's party. The flower girl, Eliza Doolittle, is taken by Higgins as his pupil for a few months.

*Pygmalion* can be viewed as a feminist text. The paper intends to study *Pygmalion* as a feminist text in the light of Michel Foucault's *Order of Discourse*. Eliza Doolittle, the flower girl is the ill-legitimate daughter of Alfred Doolittle, who displays no responsibility towards her. Eliza sells flowers and earns her livelihood. Shaw has drawn our attention to the lot of children born out of wed locks and then abandoned to live on their own. As Eliza

says in the play, “I aint got no parents. They told me I was big enough to earn my living and turned me out of the house.”(26). A destitute, Eliza is a marginalised character who is further treated with humiliation by Mr. Higgins. Shaw considered poverty to be the root cause of all atrocities in the society. According to him, it was not possible to live a good life without money. Eliza Doolittle, being poor, considers cleanliness itself to be a virtue. Shaw upheld that the need for money drove a destitute to sin. *Pygmalion* is a result of Shaw’s concern for abolishing poverty, the panacea for social evils.

Discourse is an oft used term by Michel Foucault. The text *Pygmalion* will be studied in the light of Foucault’s discourse. As Foucault said in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* that he used ‘discourse’ to refer to the general domain of all statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements (Foucault 80). The general domain includes every such statement that is made in our everyday routine life. Foucault also held discourse catering to a group of statements, such as, discourse on femininity. These discourses carry meaning as understood in particular cultural set- ups employed to have certain results...As in *Pygmalion*, every word that Higgins speaks to Eliza is a direct attack on her essential femininity. In the beginning of the play, when Eliza is required to be bathed by Mrs. Pearce, Higgins’ house-keeper, Higgins calls Eliza a “Monkey Brand” (23). Here it must be pointed out that discourse is a particular statement which also includes unwritten rules and structures which produce particular utterances and statements. For Foucault, this set of structures and rules would constitute a discourse. It is not the text that Foucault was interested in but the general utterances that could help one in the analysis of statements that lead to the estimation of social stratification. *Pygmalion* presents a language experiment by Higgins, a scientist in phonetics. Language embedded in a certain set of rules is employed by Higgins to teach the language of genteel class to a flower girl that he is confident would pick up the so called language of upper class society. The flower girl belongs to the category of people mentioned as ‘gutter’ people in the play. As understood from Foucault’s account of discourse, the language of the genteel class in the play under discussion can be said to be the discourse that consists of meaningful statements uttered by a particular class of society. Under the unwritten rules of our society, a language adopted by kings and Queens and by the upper class nobility is termed as genteel whereas the language of lower strata of society is as unacceptable kind of discourse as much as their presence within the society. In the play *Eliza Doolittle*, the flower girl belongs to the category of gutter people who are kept at arm’s length by the so called upper class. No doubt, Higgins is shocked at the sounds that Eliza produces, such as “Ah-ah-ah-ow-ow-oo” (20), that have no meaning in the rules prescribed. And not to forget Pickering’s words “...I ve been away in India for

several years; and manners have changed so much that I sometimes don't know whether I'm at a respectable dinner-table or in a ship's fore-castle. (62) Pickering's is here referring to the mixing up of upper classes with those of lower ones instead of the old convention of only the upper class inhabiting the popular gatherings.

As a regulated set of statements which combine with others in predictable ways, discourse leads to the distribution and circulation of certain utterances and statements. But some statements are circulated widely whereas others have a restricted circulation. This, he terms as the notion of exclusion. Discourse, then, comes to be associated with relations of power. As in the play, the language associated and used by the upper class society is widely accepted and that used by the poor people is excluded and is considered unfit for use. Higgins is the one in power with his complete hold on the language and Eliza falls under the category of the excluded people. It is the use of the excluded language, which fails to provide a good work to Eliza. The flower girl owing to her tongue is rendered powerless in the social set up in which she has to survive.

Knowledge is constructed, organized, shared and used through particular forms of speech, writing and language - or what is called a discourse. Shaw intends to show in the play that the language employed by the upper class people carry the imprint of knowledge that is at the same time denied to the language of the commoners. Discourse is the context of speech, representation, knowledge and understanding. Discourse cannot be dissociated from knowledge and understanding. The language of the upper class finds an ample representation in our society as it is according to the unwritten rules found to constitute knowledge. The words used by Eliza are very incomprehensible to others. Her way of talking is laughed at by the people who have a better control over the language. It defines what can be said, studied and the processes of doing so. It is the context in which meaning itself is produced. The context referred to, is the social one where the day to day life of the upper classes is given greater importance and so is their language. *Pygmalion* is a realistic play and the discussion of language as marking one's status is an important point put forward by the playwright.

According to Foucault, these discourses condition people's lives and inform their thinking. He focussed on power as central to the human condition. Foucault was able to argue that human relations, science, institutions are all caught up in a struggle for power and discourse is a terrain on which this struggle is carried out. The person or the institution that controls the discourse also controls the subjects in those discourses. Higgins says, "Well, when ive done with her, we can throw her back to the gutter; and then it will be her own business again; so thats all right."(27) In *Pygmalion*, people like Eliza

and Alfred Doolittle, are the ones who are powerless owing to their economic status and which makes itself visible the moment they open their mouth. Discourses construct and legitimize unequal power relations. The play presents a story of unequal power relations between Higgins and Eliza. She becomes her pupil and a quick learner too but Higgins never for once forgets her lowly life and treats her as a poor flower girl throughout the play. There is subjugation of the sections of society through particular discourses. Higgins looks down upon Eliza although the latter is quick enough to handle his appointments and good at doing every little errand for her master. Specific institutional forms of control were created to ensure that these sections remained subjugated. Popular representations like art and literature controlled the images of these sections. These images, in turn, naturalized the difference and subjugation of particular sections. These discursive processes justified and led to the installation of 'corrective' mechanisms- institutions- to keep the sections controlled. The bystander in Act 1 does not take time to think that the note-taker is a cop who might be following the activities of the flower girl as being low-born she was bound to be of an objectionable character. The beginning of the play is a reminder where the flower girl is warned that she is being followed by a cop owing to her status as the others present in the same place belonged to a better section of society. She is at once alarmed and terrified, "I'm a respectable girl", "I aint done any wrong by speaking to the gentleman." (5) She says she is a 'good girl' trying to sell her flowers and earn her living. The discourse and institutional structures combined to give power to particular classes or authorities. These discourses are thus, a manifestation of the will to power where structures of power in society retain their power over the marginal and the subordinates through the creation and control of particular discourses. Eliza is able to learn better English as she desired but her status of being marginalised remains so till the end. She fails to gain any words of respect from Higgins. Higgins brands all young women as 'idiots'.

Foucault states that discourse is related to power in the sense that discourse is both the source as well as the result of power. Discourse can be both, the reason for power to be operative as well as the greatest obstacle in the dispensing of power. Discourse leads to resistance and it also acts as a strategy adopted to fight and resist power. Foucault contended, "Discourses transmit and produce power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it" (Foucault 100-101). The English lessons make Eliza much more equipped to look for better opportunities in life. Eliza's act of throwing slippers at Higgins when the latter is looking for them is both her frustration as well as a resistance. Higgins fails to read Eliza's heart probably because for him she was still a 'gutter' girl.

Foucault thinks of discourse as the major field in which the impacts of power are visible. He believes that a relationship between power and discourse is much more complex than it seems to be. Foucault states that “Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true;...( Foucault 131) The statements which are uttered by the people in authority are easily acceptable in a society and distinguished from the statements of those who are not in authority. The discourses of those in power are said to be true and those of not in power are said to be false. This analysis of truth is not political in any sense but it should be taken as a general description of the word ‘truth’. Eliza’s social standing of being a flower girl, her recurring dialogue ‘I am a good girl’, of the need to prove again and again her good character and the realisation of the facts making her stand on a cross-road and the resulting dilemma after the facts are realised by her. Foucault further infers that any kind of information might add to our knowledge but at the same time it might result in affirming the power relations already existent in the society. In *Pygmalion*, language learning does not make Eliza a society girl. Her status of belonging to low class stands as such. But Foucault argues that the production of knowledge is not wholly oppressive rather production of information does help in changing the status quo of the marginalised. Eliza acquires the said language very effectively to the purpose that Higgins teaches her to but she also decides to leave Higgins house and marry Freddy who belongs to a better class of society than hers. Both of them open a flower shop of their own. But this betterment takes place after her resolute fight with Higgins whom she calls a “selfish brute” and Eliza is fearful at the very thought of going back to the low place from where she was brought for Higgins experiment. Eliza finds herself unfit to sell flowers.

Knowledge is an abstract force. Our endeavour should not be about increasing the quantum of knowledge, instead it should be a knowledge which produces facts. Eliza, after being trained in the language considered superior, is able to evolve a better person and come to terms with her life. Foucault states in his chapter entitled “Prison talk”, that ‘It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power’ (Foucault 52). Towards the end of the play, she is no more the deprived ‘other’. Eliza finds herself better equipped to face her life and that too on her own terms.

Where there are imbalances of power, it results in inequalities and disequilibrium. The inequality in *Pygmalion* is one of class and hence the resulting disequilibrium. Knowledge is shown to be centralised in the hands of the wealthy and the educated. The playwright voices his demand for the imparting of knowledge to the under -privileged for

the betterment of society. Eliza is put under the circumstances to learn to speak a language and not Mr. Higgins parting with his alphabets and made to live with cockney dialect and put under circumstances of which Eliza is a part of. Higgins wants to satisfy his whim of winning a bet by presenting poor Eliza as a duchess by teaching her to speak a genteel tongue.

Shaw's plays are loaded with witty women. Shavian philosophy concentrates on women who are socially marginalised. There is imbalance of power because Eliza belongs to the working class and hence economically marginalised in relation to Higgins. Language itself with the stamp of 'Received Pronunciation' is superior to the one with regional dialect otherwise Higgins might have had a regard for the regional dialect.

Foucault sets out to describe the ways in which knowledge does not simply emerge from scholarly study but is produced and maintained in circulation in societies through the work of a number of different institutions and practices. Higgins represents the institution of a polished language and succeeds in providing the language of a genteel class to a girl who never had the opportunity to read a book in her life. Thus, Foucault wants us to see knowledge as not the sole propriety of a selected few. In *Pygmalion*, Higgins is an institution and through Eliza, English in a better tongue is passed on to a girl of poor class. Eliza is a fast learner who performs the role of a supposed Duchess as good as expected by Higgins. But as soon as Eliza learns the language of the genteel class, she utilises it to the best of her abilities to land up in a better station in life, much opposite to what Higgins expects her to. Like every woman character of Shaw's play, Eliza emerges as an emancipated woman making the best use of knowledge that comes her way. "..., discourse is the power to be seized" (211). Knowledge, as put forward by Foucault, is not the sole property of a chosen few. The analysis shows the interconnectedness of power, knowledge and discourse in the context of *Pygmalion*. The analysis also highlights language as a weapon in the form of dominant discourse marking the status of an individual in a social set-up affected by societal stratification and consequent compartmentalisation that is hard to dispense with. The play not only voices the discourse on femininity but also speaks volumes about the angst of those lower in status and aspiring to rise to higher levels by way of their earnest efforts but still considered as deplorable in the eyes of the upper cream.

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