

Shailesh Ranjan
Assistant Professor,
Dept. of English,
Maharaja College, Ara.

.....
B.A Part – III (Eng – Hons.) Paper – VI
.....

Pygmalion

(G.B.Shaw)

.....
Pygmalion as a ‘Problem Play’

A problem play is a play in which the dramatist is chiefly concerned with the presentation of a problem. It is a drama of ideas and in it the situations and the characters are so selected as to bring out different aspects of a problem. The plays which deal realistically with the manifold problems of the modern man were given the name “Problem Play” by Sydney Grundy. The pioneer of this new drama was a Norwegian dramatist, Henrik Ibsen by name. The great dramatists of earlier ages from Sophocles to Shakespeare and Sheridan had built their plots round the fundamental feelings of the human heart like love, jealousy, hatred, ambition, fear of the gods, love of glory etc. Ibsen observed that the modern man is confronted with various social, political, racial, legal and domestic problems and so he thought that he could present modern life best by discussing various problems in his plays. Some of the main features of problem plays are as follows :

- The Problem play is a drama of idea. Shaw called it 'a factory of thought'. Galsworthy says, "The perfect dramatist rounds up characters and facts within the ring fence of a dominant idea." The plays of Galsworthy and Shaw had a profound effect on public opinion in the country; and after the appearance of the plays, many reforms in jail administration and health and judicial systems were brought about by the Government.
- These plays are very realistic. The dialogue is used for the discussion of ideas and so has to be in prose. The characters are ordinary men and women. There are no 'larger than life' heroes and there are no villains. The lives of people are spoilt by the powerful institutions and systems of society which come into clash with human beings and annihilate them
- Conflict is essential in drama, but in problem plays there is no external conflict. The conflict is mental and not physical. There is only a clash of differing ideas of the subject.
- In Problem Plays there is no action on the stage. The characters are introduced as pegs to hang the ideas on.

In England, Problem play flourished in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Henry Arthur Jones, George Bernard Shaw and John Galsworthy were three great writers of such drama. Jones believed that drama should parade social criticism. He began a light probing at Victorian convention as early as the eighties with 'Breaking a Butterfly' (1885) based on Ibsen's A Doll's House (1879). His other famous works are 'Saints and Sinners' (1894) The Crusaders (1893) and The Case of Rebellious Susan (1894). John Galsworthy occupies a distinctive place in modern English drama. His naturalism reminds of Ibsen. He portrays the contemporary English society in his drama and presents them with some specific social problems like marriage, sex relationship, labour disputes, of the law, of solitary confinement, of caste

feeling or class prejudice. All his plays are tragedies in which he deals with the various social, domestic, moral and legal problems of modern man. He believed that in modern age individuals, who are weak, come into conflict with inhuman laws and institutions of society which crushed them. Galsworthy strikes upon such forces in his play 'Justice' in which he shows that the social machinery does not differentiate between a hardened criminal and a weak criminal who has committed crime in a moment of great emotional stress. The judges do not go into the motives of the crime. The complainant, the prosecutor, the judge, and the jailer are all good persons and yet Falder's life is completely ruined and he finally commits suicide. This play also shows how cruel solitary confinement is. 'The Silver Box' is another famous problem play of Galsworthy in which he shows that there is no equality before the law. There is one law for the rich and another for the poor. 'The Fugitive' focuses upon the problems of unhappy marriages where as 'The Pigeon' exposes the evils of shelter homes and poor houses.

George Bernard Shaw had the longest career in the history of English literature. He flourished on the literary surface of England with the publication of 'Widower's Houses' in 1892 and his last work appeared in 1949 with the title of 'Buoyant Billions'. Shaw always focuses upon social issues like education, marriage, love, etc in his plays. He wrote very interesting comedies dealing with the problems of love and war (Arms and the Man) , prostitution (Mrs Warren's Profession), slum landlordism (Widower's Houses), evolution (Man and Superman), marriage (The Philanderer) ; the eternal triangle (Candida), phonetics (Pygmalion), and democracy and constitutional monarchy (The Apple Cart), Shaw's plays became very popular with his audiences as well as his readers. In spite of it Shaw is quite different from Ibsen in his approach to drama. Ibsen made his characters discuss a problem from all point of view and left the reader free to judge what was right. Shaw, on the other hand, only presents his own point of

view. His plays are sermons or lectures and not discuss at all. His aim is not to make us think but to convert us to his point of view. It is the drama of ideas but only the ideas of Shaw are presented forcefully.

Pygmalion is one of the most popular plays of G.B.Shaw which was written in 1913. It is a story of Mr. Higgins, a professor of Phonetics, and Eliza Doolittle , a flower girl. Mr. Higgins accepts the challenge of Colonel Pickering, the author of a book on Sanskrit, to teach Eliza as a lady and present her as a duchess in ambassador's party after six months. In this play Shaw presents a difference between a rustic flower girl and duchess and states the importance of education and economic security. A poor girl may become a beautiful lady if she is assured economic security and given proper opportunity. Eliza's grand success in the Ambassador's party bears testimony to this fact. Nobody can think that at one stage Eliza was an ignorant and foolish flower girl. In the last part of the play after the success in ambassador's party, Eliza becomes disappointed. She begins to seek for emotional fulfillment. Professor Higgins and Colonel Pickering congratulate each other for their success of experiment but forget the efforts of Eliza. Being an emotional girl, she feels that she is no longer of any use to him. She feels alienated and uprooted from her identity. Earlier she was poor and illiterate girl who pass her life by selling flowers but after taking a training of six months, she is fully aware of the problems that now faces her. She can not return to her old position nor she can live in the house of Mr. Higgins or become a part of middle class society. In a fit of anger she throws slipper towards Mr. Higgin and requests him to tell her what belongs to her and what does not belong to her : "What am I fit for ? What have you left me fit for ? Where am I to go ? What am I to do ? What to become of me ?" (Pygmalion.p.76).

In this mental condition, Eliza decides to leave Higgin's house before Higgins and Pickering get up from bed. Later Higgins faces difficulty in his daily work because he does not know what appointment he has and what things he needs. These works were looked after by Eliza. He is depended upon her and now after her departure, he feels helpless ; "But I can't find any thing. I don't know what appointment I've got. I'm ...". Later, when Eliza is determined to marry Freddy, a romantic young man, Higgins does not welcome her idea but liza opposes his idea : "If he's weak and poor and wants me, may be he'd make me happier than my betters that bully me and don't want me."

Thus, Shaw has presented 'Pygmalion' as a problem play in which a lower class girl, Eliza Doolittle, tries to upraise herself by proper training but feels alienated and faces the problem of belongingness. Here Shaw also presents his idea that education is the bridge which fills the gap of the different class of the society.

.....XXXXXXXX.....