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Mother-Daughter Inhibitions in the Lives of a British Prostitute and a Cambridge Graduate

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Abstract

George Bernard Shaw's main purpose in writing *Mrs. Warren's Profession* is to discuss another problem play "the problem of sexual prostitution and its economic roots."¹ His aim is to awaken the dormant conscience of the people by driving home to them the dreadful truth that it is not the woman but the society at large which is accountable for the social evil of prostitution. He makes this clear in his Preface to *Mrs. Warren's Profession*. Shaw says, "Prostitution is caused, not by female depravity and male licentiousness, but simply by underpaying, undervaluing and over working women so shamefully that the poorest of them are forced to resort to prostitution to keep body and soul together."² The inefficacious and effeminate culture that grapples the society with infidelity sustains the growth of prostitutes in the world and grim with every sprite and draught of male dominance that prevails. Society at large mocks the gullible that adroitly breaches the lacuna of sanctity leading to prostitution.

Keywords: Effeminate, Prostitution, Gullible, Problem Plays, Poverty

In the eighteenth century, industrialisation changed the whole of Europe and America. Many workers in agriculture and other handmade production methods switched to a new technology for improving the product demand in cotton textile, chemical, iron and water power schemes. Numerous factories emerged during this century in London and created a demand for workers, especially child labour. People started to travel to London as it was the main hub for employment and they resorted to all types of works utilising every opportunity. Children were given the menial and dangerous work of scavenging cotton fluff from beneath the moving machinery. This industrial revolution

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flooded London with workers giving rise to terrific slums and horrific prostitution. The Victorians had a difficult time to overcome the pathos and misery of this eschewing profession.

As for the title of the play, Shaw states that there are two versions. According to one version, *Mrs. Warren's Profession* is "only a paraphrase of a scene in a novel of my own 'Cashel Byron's Profession' (hence the title, "*Mrs. Warren's Profession*") in which a prize-fighter shows how he was driven into the ring exactly as Mrs. Warren was driven on the streets."³ Another version is that of Miss Janet Achurch, an actress and a friend of Shaw who suggested to Shaw to name the play as *Mrs. Daintry's Daughter*, Shaw states: "I finally persuaded Miss. Achurch who is clever with her pen to dramatise her story herself on its original romantic lines. Her version is called *Mrs. Daintry's Daughter*. That is the history of *Mrs. Warren's Profession*."⁴ In fact, Shaw has taken a hint from "a Victorian character, the soiled woman, that tragic Magdalene,"⁵ as remarked by Benedict Nightingale, but the idea has been given an ironic twist.

Mrs. Warren's Profession was written in 1893, published in 1898 and first private performance was on Sunday fifth January 1902 at London's New Lyric Club in asylum because of the Lord Chamberlain's ban on this play. The first public performance was in London that took place on 27 July 1925, the year Shaw received the Nobel Prize in literature for his indomitable work on idealism and civilization, and spreading his message across the world for transparency and humanity. In 1905, this play couldn't be performed and the license was revoked as there were obscene issues in the play and the police of the New York arrested the crew and the staff according to the Comstock Laws of that year. But this play was revived and edited later for five times before the play was closed after its first performance.

The major themes of this play are poverty and wealth, oppression and freedom. The theme of incest has also contributed to strengthen the theme of prostitution. As a result of incest, the problem of prostitution gains significance. According to Bentley, Shaw combined the themes of prostitution and incest in order to make quite a rational point, "Our mad society draws back in horror from incest, which is certainly not a pressing menace and perhaps not even a bad thing, while it encourages prostitution, which is a virulent social pestilence."⁶ Shaw knows that the poverty of England in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries plays a pivotal role in demarcating the poor from rich. Mrs. Kitty Warren, whose profession is prostitution is tortured by the atrocities of the rich, goes to work for a very low wages and rebels for her destiny on streets and thereby resorting to prostitution. She was oppressed by the rich but frees her 'Will' to get good life either in rhapsody for making a better living or to be shunned by the society of which she chooses the former. Shaw deals with the problem of prostitution artistically through the theme of conscience which creates conflict between "a coarse mother, Mrs. Warren, and a cold daughter, Miss Vivie Warren."⁷ Surendra Sahai points out, "technically, *Mrs. Warren's Profession* achieves dramatic conflict through the complexity of its theme and the economic and the emotional aspects of its plot."⁸

Mrs. Warren's Profession occupies the highest place as the 'best play ever' even today of its charm to endure audience with its dynamic plot and technique by Shaw. The plot of the play is closely knit. It acquires dramatic conflict, act by act as the theme of the play, conscience; develop tension between the two characters Mrs. Warren and Vivie Warren. As Sahai Observes "in his attempt to put in tenseness and suspense in the conflict between the capitalist and the individualist in

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Act-I, Shaw soon turns it as one revolving around domestic conflict of sentiment between mother and daughter.”⁹ This play by Shaw is considered as the discussion play where the narrative technique is authorial and discussion type. In fact, *Widowers' Houses* is also a discussion play on slums, but this play really stands out as one among the many plays written and directed by Shaw on prostitution. The play is divided into four acts: act one shows the eagerness of Vive towards her mother and inquiringly asks Mr. Praed about the attitude of Kitty, her ideologies, her emotions and her upbringing. Vive was kept far from her mother and people were paid to look after Vive from the beginning of her education. Act two gives us an enchanting discussion between the mother and the daughter. Vive is very keen to know about her father, relatives and family friends, but Kitty is in helpless situation to tell anything. Meanwhile Sir George Crofts has an eye on Vive which Kitty observes and warns him not to have such intentions on her daughter and threatens him that he will be thrown out of London soon if he continues with the same crooked feelings over her daughter. Act three pertains to a sensitive but harsh discussion between George Crofts and Vive Warren about her mother. Here two secrets are revealed by Crofts: firstly, Vive and Frank are half siblings and secondly, Vive's mother is a prostitute and runs brothels across Europe as the managing director and partner with Crofts. With this secret Crofts tries to manipulate Vive and takes advantage of the situation for two reasons again: first, he wishes to marry Vive and second, he assures that after his death she can even have a better life with a huge property around her. Act four challengingly advances to the best of its dramatic art as Nora Helmer, the protagonist of the play, *A Doll's House* (1879) by Henrik Ibsen, the mentor of Shaw, slams the door of her house and leaves everybody behind, goes on further to lead her life independently. Likewise in this play Vive Warren shuts the mouth of her mother Mrs. Kitty Warren once for all and abandons her to lead her life freely and independently as an advanced woman of the era of those times. This shocking partition of mother and daughter at the end of the play echoes the attitude and sensibilities of a modern woman in the present generation as well.

Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* focuses on an independent woman who recognises that she no more needs her husband and children, leaves them to their fate as her own conscience is being poked for no reason. Nora Helmer, the protagonist of the play has similarities with Vive Warren and both follow their stream of consciousness till the last act of their roles where their mental process mingles with conscious thoughts, expectations and feelings of their individual characters. Torvald Helmer, the husband of Nora is a man of righteousness who embraces Nora as his loving wife but could not resist his anguish when he discovers the manipulation done by Nora by forging her father's signature in a bond just to protect her husband from the guilt. But he realises this at the end of the play that Nora has taken the responsibility to protect him but in vain. Torvald is compared to Kitty Warren, the mother of Vive who always is delighted to have such a daughter and a support to her in old age. Vive understands this but could not do her best in supporting her for the rest of life and leaves her mother to lead a life on her own without the old identity as 'the prostitute's daughter'. Ibsen saw drama as a medium for social criticism as Shaw too has accepted and brought fine artistry in blending the social problems perfectly on his stage.

The characters in this play exhibit alluring personalities, though they are not good characters, it is very interesting to see them all. Mrs. Kitty Warren, the protagonist has an

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outstanding charisma in running a chain of brothels in Europe with an enigmatic purview on her later part of life, dazzles around with her flamboyance in her present. She has an eye on temperament and motivation; who surprises all with her twists in her life. She is a determined woman with a heart to accomplish her intentions. She is in a way a protester who protests against the evil, the society has done to her. She wages a war against herself for retribution with her innocence. She has courage to outstand as an independent woman of London who does not merely bother the bureaucrats and its consequences of being 'labelled as a prostitute' of those times but rather dominates her conscience for a free-living in the country. Her character gives us a message to have an independent life whatever the society has given you, return it to the society with a spearing challenge in one hand and a burning desire in the other to face the society: either the society should instruct you or you should instruct the society. This is a big redemption Shaw has given in the hands of Kitty Warren to mark her own destiny.

Mrs. Warren has invited all her best and notorious friends: Praed, Sir George Crofts, Rev. S. Gardner and Frank for supper. In course of their formal conversation, Mrs. Warren proposes matrimonial alliance to her daughter with Mr. Frank. Since Rev. S. Gardner holds a respectable position in the society as a Rector, he refuses the proposal. Mr. Crofts cunningly suggests to Mrs. Warren not to marry her daughter with Frank who has no profession or property. Vivie Warren remonstrates against her mother's repeated demand to head her words:

Mrs. Warren: ... Have I no rights over you as your mother?

Vivie: Are you my mother? ...Then where are relatives? my father: our family friends? You claim the rights of a mother: the right to call me fool and child; to speak to me as no woman in authority over me at college dare speak to me, to dictate my way of life; and to force on me the acquaintance of a brute who anyone can see to be the most vicious sort of London man about town.¹⁰ (Act II, P.307)

Vivie persists to know about her father and ruthlessly attacks:

... How can I feel sure that I may not have the contaminated blood of that brutal waster in my veins? (Act II, P.308)

Shaw through Mrs. Warren puts forth his strong ideas relating to the exploitation of women labourers by the capitalists and how women are compelled to work as slaves with so much of pain. "... the employers who pay women less than subsistence wages and overwork them mercilessly to grind profits for themselves out of the pitch of the nation."¹¹ Mrs. Warren pathetically narrates the circumstances under which she has to embrace the profession. Mrs. Warren says:

The other two were half sisters:..... One of them worked in a whitelead factory twelve hours a day for nine shillings a week until she died of lead poisoning... Then I was waitress; and then I went to the bar at Waterloo station: fourteen hours a day serving drinks and washing glasses for four shilling a weak ... Do you think we were such fools as to let other people trade in our good looks by employing us as shop girls, or barmaids, or waitresses, when we would trade in them ourselves and get all the profits instead of starvation wages? (Act II, PP 312-313)

Though Mrs. Warren assures to meet Vivie's needs, Vivie cuts her mother with her darts like words. It is clear from her words, that Vivie's independent nature is apparently pin pointed by Shaw, to

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make her an advanced woman choosing her own way of life apart from her mother's influence. "Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession* best shows the conflict between individualism and social forces. Vivie cuts herself off from her own mother when she discovers the source of her income. Vivie settles down to work out her destiny alone unaided by her family friends."¹² But Mrs. Warren cunningly argues and tries to restore the situation to a normal state. The heart of a mother is best seen here to reconcile her daughter as she is the only source of support in her old age. No friends of Mrs. Warren come to rejuvenate the lost hopes on her daughter and life. Her mother cleverly allures Vivie, "You're too young. It means a new dress everyday; it means theatres and balls every night; ... it means everything you can think of. And what are you here? A mere drudge, toiling and moiling early and late for your bare living and two cheap dresses a year." (Act IV, P.350).

Vivie, in turn, expresses her determination to continue her chosen profession different from her mother. She becomes prudent with her mother and says:

No: I am my mother's daughter I am like you: I must have works, and must make more money than I spend. But my work is not your work, and my way not your way. We must part. It will not make much different to us: instead of meeting one another for perhaps a few months in twenty years, we shall never meet. (Act IV, P.353)

Mrs. Warren with a stentorian voice demands Vivie to look after her since she has become old. Every parent's dream in old age is to lead life happily with their children. This realisation occurs when they become weak and dependant but it is the duty of every child to look after his/her parents. The catastrophe of sorrow, pain and suffering exists when there is a gap between the young minds and the older ones. Mrs. Warren enigmatically claims her right:

We're mother and daughter. I want my daughter. I've a right to you. Who is to care for me when I'm old? Plenty girls have taken to me like daughters and cried at leaving me; but I let them all go because I had you to look forward to. I kept myself lonely for you. You've no right to turn on me now and refuse to do your duty as a daughter. (Act IV, P.354)

Daniel Cooper, secretary of the Rescue Society of London wrote that "prostitutes often fell at a young age; and having actually fallen they become the victims of occasional temptation, and in the course of years, lapse into a life of open shame"¹³ as Mrs. Kitty Warren has shown us the best example of her life as a prostitute and set a record as Shaw's most courageous woman of the nineteenth century England.

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³ Shaw, Bernard.; *Mr. Shaw's Method and Secret*. Letter to the Editor of the Daily Chronicle, 30 April 1898, Bodley Head Bernard Shaw, Volume 1, Great Britain: 1970, 271.

⁴ Ibid, 271.

⁵ Nightingale.; Benedict.; *A Reader's Guide to Fifty Modern British Plays*, Great Britain: Heinmann Educational Books Ltd., 1982, 25.

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- ⁶ Bentley, Eric.; “The Making of a Dramatist”, 1892-1903, *Twentieth Century Views, G.B.Shaw, A Collection of Critical Essays*, U.S.A., Edited by R.J.Kaufmann Prentice – Hall Luc, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1965, 73.
- ⁷ Quoted from Chesterton, G.K.; *George Bernard Shaw*, Ludhiana: Kalyani Publishers, 1972, 59.
- ⁸ Sahai, Surendra.; *English Drama 1865-1900*, New-Delhi: Orient Longman, 1970, 147.
- ⁹ Ibid, 150.
- ¹⁰ Shaw, Bernard.; *Mrs. Warren’s Profession, The Bodley Head Bernard Shaw, Collected Plays with their prefaces, Volume-I*, London: Max Reinhardt, The Bodley Head Ltd., 1970, 307.
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- ¹¹ Shaw, Bernard.; *Shaw Proud of His Play*, Bodley Head Volume-1, Great Britain: 1970, 358.
- ¹² Ibid, 121.
- ¹³ Quoted from Walkowitz, Judith R.; *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State*, Cambridge University Press, 1982, 17.

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