Gender and Race in the Eyes of George Bernard Shaw

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Abstract

This paper sheds light on the issues of gender and race as they are perceived by George Bernard Shaw. It reads Shaw’s *The Adventures of the Black Girl in her Search for God* (1932) in the light of Frederic Jameson’s *political unconscious* concept. It interprets Shaw’s narrative as an allegory with two fundamental latent messages that lie beneath its surface religious meaning. The first is concerned with Shaw’s defence of women. The second deals with his emancipation of the black race. Women had for years been associated with weakness, intuition, feeling, irrationality and depravity. Likewise, the black race had been dealt with in terms of primitivism, savagery, superstition, ignorance and irrationality in white discourse. The first section of the discussion shows that Bernard Shaw breaks the traditional stereotypes attributed to women. This is achieved through the black girl, the black female protagonist of his narrative. Through the latter, women are given a voice thanks to which they speak out their dissent with the traditional status of subordinate they are attributed in both cultural artefacts and the Bible. The second section sheds light on the ways Shaw criticises racial discourse and empowers the black race. Thanks to the black girl, the black people are seen through a different and new perspective that deals away from the stereotypes traditionally associated with them in white discourse.

Introduction

The racial and woman questions have been central issues in Western thought from the Enlightenment onwards. They took an important place in the Victorian novels like those of Rudyard Kipling and Joseph Conrad. George Bernard Shaw is another writer who may be integrated within the writers who are interested in these two questions of gender and race. In recent years, there has been a large bulk of criticism on Bernard Shaw’s texts. This criticism has been carried out under a variety of perspectives, many of which focused on the writer’s political and social ideas.

From a Marxist perspective, for instance, Tracy C. Davis in *George Bernard Shaw and the Socialist Theatre* (1995) focuses her study on the aspect of socialism in Bernard Shaw’s plays. As far as his narrative *The Adventures of the Black Girl in her Search for God* (1932) is concerned, she observes that it can be read as the writer’s “most explicit suggestion of how to break from the molds of sexism, racist imperialism, and capitalist deadlock” (1995: 127). Besides, Gareth Griffith in his *Socialism and Superior Brains: the Political Thought of Bernard Shaw* (1993) provides a lengthy study of the writer’s political positions as a Fabian committed to the defence of the rights of the proletariat. He suggests that his *Black Girl* can be read as an attack upon the flaws of the Enlightenment project, which aimed supposedly to emancipate mankind and stressed the superiority of Western civilisation (Griffith, 1993: 136).
Issue and Working Hypothesis

One should not overlook what these two critics say about Shaw's Marxist and political ideas. However, they limit their Marxist readings to class struggle in Shaw’s writings. Even if they hint at other issues like gender and race, the latter remain unexplored, and the two critics do not provide literary analysis of Shaw’s work in order to deal with them, nor do they follow a given perspective. They study domination in relation to class relations. And yet domination is not limited to class. It has much to do with other spheres like gender and race relations.

It is the purpose of this article to deal with the gender and race issues in the eyes of George Bernard Shaw. This work aims at exploring Shaw’s defence of women and the Black race. Women and the black race have long been relegated to the same inferiority status in Western male discourse from the Enlightenment onwards. In fact, the Enlightenment project aimed at emancipating mankind, but it has partly failed for its exclusion of women and the black race. The former had been associated with weakness, intuition, feeling, irrationality and depravity. Likewise, the latter had been dealt with in terms of primitivism, savagery, superstition, ignorance and irrationality.

Given Shaw’s socialism and commitment to the defence of oppressed people, it is relevant to assume that he reverses the traditional statuses of dominated attributed to women and the black race. Besides, some of his most popular works were written immediately after WWI. This period was characterised by a widespread criticism of the West and its ideals. It is noteworthy that he joins the idea of Virginia Woolf, who stresses the changes that occurred at the level of human relations in the early twentieth century, “All human relations shifted – those between masters and servants, husband and wives […] when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics and literature” (Quoted in Faulkner, 1990: 35), she suggests. For instance, Shaw’s The Black Girl received a harsh criticism immediately after its publication in 1932. White readers accused Shaw of blaspheme as a result of the ideological underpinnings of his work. His novella had a shocking effect on white readers due to its ‘blasphemous’ topics such as the reversal of human relations and his radical approach towards religion.

As matter of fact, within the framework of this research paper, it is assumed that Shaw emancipates women and the black race. To deal with this issue, the study will be based on his 1932 novella The Adventures of the Black Girl in her Search for God. As for theory, it seems appropriate to make reference to Frederic Jameson’s The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act (1983). The appropriateness of this theory is explained by the fact that Shaw is a Socialist, a version of Marxism that defends the oppressed masses. Jameson’s work is also Marxist in perspective, for it based upon the political unconscious that characterises the majority of cultural artefacts which unconsciously underscore the propounding power dialectic between dominated and domineer.

Discussion

Within the framework of this research paper, it is assumed that George Bernard Shaw in his The Black Girl – for short - defends both the black race and women. Therefore, he counters the dominant Western discourse that maintains the idea of the superiority of the white race as opposed to the black one. This is on the one hand. On the other hand, he opposes another type of discourse which is propounded by most of the male thinkers of the period that follows the Enlightenment. This is sexist discourse that maintains the inferiority of
women as contrasted to men. Therefore, it seems very appropriate to make reference to Jameson’s concept of interpretation as primarily a practice that reads narrative in such a way as “to reveal its metaphysical and ideological underpinnings” (Jameson, 2002: 43) and to underscore the “latent meaning[s]” behind its “manifest” one (Ibid. 45). This means that the present research takes Shaw’s novella as an “allegorical narrative” that has two fundamental latent meanings which lie underneath its manifest meaning. The novella’s manifest meaning is related to the black girl’s quest for God. This is to say that the surface meaning is more religious than ideological. However, behind the religious meaning lie two fundamental latent meanings which are considered ideological and related to gender and race. First is Shaw’s defence of women. Second is his emancipation of the black race.

Shaw’s Defence of Women

To start with Shaw’s defence of women, one should first account for the status attributed to women in male discourse. From the Enlightenment onwards started to emerge a sexist discourse that took different forms. It had been a common-sense belief that women were inferior to men. This inferiority status restricted their role to the domestic sphere. In Britain, especially during the Victorian era emerged the “separate spheres” ideology, which attributed women the status of the household angel. Because of her supposed “emotion, passivity, submission, dependence, and selflessness” (Kent, 1999: 179), she had no political, public and economic life; she was not allowed to work outside the family hearth, nor could she participate in the political life of the nation and public debate. The ideal of womanhood was “the angel in the house” that protects the household, bears her children and serves her husband. Even if some feminist voices emerged against this status, it remained as the standard of identification even until the early twentieth century.

After the Great War, many thinkers strongly felt a kind of crisis which affected human relations. At the level of gender relations people started to re-invent the old “separate spheres” ideology and confirm sexual difference between men and women. Therefore, some thinkers like Bernard Shaw recognised the crisis. He interested himself with bringing new ideas concerning gender relations. He sets his novella The Black Girl in the Victorian period so as to voice his antagonism towards the inferiority status traditionally attributed to women as well as express his discontent with the re-invention of this status by his contemporaries.

Perhaps the analysis of the feminist issue in the novella should start with the depiction of female characters. And for this a word about the missionary teacher is in order. As a Victorian woman, she was not ahead of her time, for she did not accept the common-place image of the women of her time. Instead of being the faithful “angel in the house”, who obeys and cherishes her husband and raises her children, she is completely the opposite. She does not care about marriage, which she regards as the bondage to her freedom, nor does she care about the feelings of her lovers. She “became engaged to six of them in succession. But when it came to the point she always broke it off; for these love affairs, full at first of ecstatic happiness and hope, somehow became unreal” (Shaw, 1932: 7).

It is, however, through the black girl, that Shaw’s feminist purposes are eloquently voiced. Indeed, the way he depicts the black girl certainly aims at giving a different image to women. Through her, the reader gets a new vision concerning women, and this vision is the antithesis of the traditional one attributed to them in male discourse. She is associated with reason, logic, and enlightenment. She is not passive, for she resents authority and does not accept everything that springs from man. She is especially endowed with an inquisitive spirit
since she questions the order of things around her, something that women had for years been excluded from. What is more is her contrast with some of the traditional stereotypes associated with single women.

To start with her ability to reason and logic, one feels it through her meeting with the Pavlov figure. With this short-sighted figure, she was performing scientific experiments; which shows that she is endowed with the capacities of a scientist. She observes, thinks and draws conclusions from what she observes. After making him climb a tree by force of adrenaline telling him that he was “sitting on a sleeping crocodile” (Shaw, 1932: 20), she makes him come down from the tree in the same manner. She tells him, “There is a tree snake smelling at the back of your neck” (Ibid. 22). This shows that she is capable of inventiveness as much as man is. It also shows that she is an intelligent woman, for she could appropriate herself objects around her so as to serve her immediate needs. What is intelligence if not the ability to adapt oneself to new situations quickly and efficiently? The scene with the myop shows that she is capable of this, which breaks the stereotype that women are incapable of reason and only act upon intuition and feeling.

Through the black girl, Shaw also criticises a traditional stereotype associated with unmarried women. This concerns the idea that all single women are prostitutes. This attitude was shared among men in the Victorian era, when the image of woman was viewed either as “revered wife and mother” or scorned as “prostitute” (Kent, 1999: 180). Indeed, in order to maintain women in the domestic sphere, men insisted on the idea that outside the family hearth women could only be prostitutes. Shaw’s black girl surprises the first man she encounters in her adventures. When the “aristocratic looking white man” asks her to bring him her “favourite child”, he was surprised by her answer, “I have no child [...] I am a virgin” (Shaw, 1932: 9; emphasis mine). It stands to reason that this man was thinking that the girl was a wife and mother and does not accept the idea that as such she could go outside the family hearth. The girl’s virginity is much important, for it nullifies the idea of prostitution and questions women’s role as exclusively reproductive and sexual. The girl is no prostitute despite her decision to go outside the family hearth and fly with her own wings. By the same token, her quest criticised the Victorian ideology which “offered two possible images for women [...] the idealized wife and mother, the angel in the house, or the debased, depraved, corrupt prostitute” (Kent, 1999: 190). The black girl shows that a woman can have a public and political life, without being waged with prostitution.

This said about female characters in Shaw’s novella, one should account for his depiction of male ones. The majority of the males in the novella are mocked on by the black girl. She criticises their behaviour which is revealed to be dogmatic and hypocritical. For instance, she nullifies the authority of the Pavlov figure, who knows things for the sake of knowing them. Throughout her conversation with him, one feels her contempt towards his dogmatism. What is the profit of knowing things if these do not contribute to the establishment of justice in the world? She would ask him, when he questions him about the importance of his scientific discovery. He says, “My business is to learn something that was not known before. I impart that knowledge to the world, and thereby add to the body of ascertained scientific truth” (Shaw, 1932: 23). But, “Have you ever considered the effect of your experiments on other people’s minds and characters?” she answers. (Shaw, 1932: 24) Similarly, the men of the “Caravan of the Curious” she also encounters later on are “all fundamentalist with a top dressing of science [...] the stupidest of conservatives and reactionists in politics and the most bigoted of obstructionists in science itself” (Ibid. 38).
Thematically speaking, *The Black Girl* transcends the girl’s quest for God and becomes a quest for the rights of women. The black girl is the voice through which Shaw’s vindication of the rights of women is spoken out. She asks for a public and political life for women. She shows that women could participate in public debates as much as men or far much better than them. There are many instances in the novella where she complains about the injustice and inequality among people and races that are the result of the men-ruled world. For example, she asks one of the men she meets, “Did you make the world? [...] Why did you make it with so much evil in it?” (Ibid. 11); she adds to the myop, “How much better will the world be when it is all knowledge and no mercy [...] Havnt you brains enough to invent some decent way of finding out what you want to know?” (Ibid. 23-24) One can understand from these witty questions that the men-ruled world is depraved and that it is high time men gave women the chance to participate in the public life so as to ensure a better future for humanity.

It follows that she opposes the domestic sphere ideology. This is more emphasised through her antagonism towards the institution of marriage. Thanks to the institution of marriage, men managed to bond women as their property. According to Kent (1999), the “traditional, patriarchal marriage, characterized by inequality between spouses and the notion of the ‘natural’ subordination of the wife, remained the accepted norm throughout the Victorian and the Edwardian eras” (1999: 246). *The Black Girl* harshly criticises the institution of marriage which served as a natural means to the subordination of women to men. Shaw through his black girl compares this marriage to pure tyranny,

> Well, let you be King Solomon and let me be Queen of Sheba, same as in the bible. I come to you and say that I love you. That means I have come to take possession of you. I come with the love of a lioness and eat you up and make you a part of myself. From this time you will have to think, not of what pleases you, but of what pleases me. I will stand between you and yourself, between you and God. Is not that a terrible tyranny?

(Shaw, 1932: 29; emphasis mine)

It is ironically maintained that the institution of marriage is but a tyrannical means referred to by men so as to subordinate women and take possession of them. The black girl reverses the roles so as to make men feel the tyranny they are enduring upon women. This has already been foreshadowed by the black girl when, speaking about God, she says, “He gave me eyes to guide myself [...] He gave me a mind and left me to use it” (Ibid. 19). This not only shows that women are endowed with the same capacities as men but that they do not depend upon men, as well. It is men, through their tyranny, who perpetually subordinate women.

The black girl goes far in her antagonism towards the male-centred world. She even questions the idea of God as a male entity; she does not accept the idea that God may be male. For her, it is men who appropriate themselves this idea so as to perpetuate their superiority to women. One understands her questionings through her conversation with the conjurer, “I am in search of God. Where is he? [...] what is he?” (Ibid. 26) To this question, the conjurer answers, “Our father”. “Why not our mother?” she retorts. (Ibid. emphasis mine) Besides, she questions the idea of priesthood and its restriction to men. The conjurer says, “To make a link between Godhood and Manhood, some god must become a man” (Ibid. 48). The conjurer wants to say that in order to relate the human world with the divine, there should be an intermediate individual, who should be for him a man. However, the black girl answers him, “Or some woman become God [...] That would be far better, because the god who
condescends to be human degrades himself; but the woman who becomes God exalts herself” (Ibid.). Cullen Murphy observes that the exclusion of women from priesthood is based upon the teachings of the Bible, which “has been interpreted over the centuries as forbidding a role for women in preaching and ministry” (Murphy, 1999: 13). The black girl suggests that the task of mediation attributed to man can only be a failure, whereas if women are given the chance to mediate between the human world and the divine things would be far better.

Still with regard to the religious aspect of the novella, one should not neglect the point concerning the harsh criticism directed towards the Bible and its teachings. It is the black girl’s dissatisfaction with the teachings of the Bible which leads her to look for the true God. One of the reasons why she is dissatisfied with the Bible is that it is man-centred. Women in the Scriptures are given a very inferior status. They are even despised because of the original sin, which is attributed to Eve, the first lady. The Bible teaches that women should be second-class citizens. Bernard Shaw’s ideas echo the task undertaken by Elizabeth Cady Stanton in the two volumes of her *The Woman’s Bible* (1895) to clean women from biblical stereotypes and free them from their maintained role of subordinates. Stanton writes,

> The Bible teaches that woman brought sin and death into the world, that she precipitated the fall of the race, that she was arraigned before the judgement seat of heaven, tried, condemned and sentenced. Marriage for her was to be a condition of bondage, maternity a period of suffering and anguish, and in silence and subjection, she was to play the role of a dependent on man’s bounty for all her material wants, and for all the information she might desire on the vital questions of the hour, she was commanded to ask her husband at home. Here is the Bible position of woman briefly summed up

(Stanton, 1985: 11-12)

The black girl is antagonistic towards the teachings of the Bible which maintain women as subject to the authority of men. In the Bible, one can read, “let wives be subject in every thing to their husbands” (Ephesians 5: 22-24 quoted in Murphy, 1999: 15).

It should be reminded that the black girl’s quest is a quest for the rights of women to participation in the public and political sphere. With the different crises that stroke the world in the early twentieth century, many men tended to perpetuate the gender categories. For instance, some “Britons sought to return to the ‘traditional’ order of prewar world order [...] based on natural biological categories of which sexual differences were familiar and readily available expression” (Kent, 1990: 287). The girl’s quest is also a stride to free women from the status of subordinate and to break the stereotypes associated to them. The traditionally inferior women started to have enlightenments as regards their real status. And the black girl is Shaw’s feminist voice through whom he calls for change.

**Shaw’s Defence of the Black Race**

It is maintained within the framework of this paper that Shaw’s novella embeds two *subtexts*: the previously developed feminist subtext and an anti-imperialist one. With respect to the latter, the novella is produced in a period when intellectuals were questioning Western values and world order as necessarily based upon the West as a metropolitan centre. Therefore, it challenges the white man’s mistaken beliefs of his own superiority over the black race. The way Shaw depicts his characters shows that he counters Victorian imperialist stereotypical and supremacist discourse. The Victorian imperial subject’s ethnocentric
representation of himself and his African ‘other’ is directly opposed in the novella. Shaw makes his heroine, black girl, strive to recover her people’s denigrated Self, identity and past.

To begin with, the black girl is a dynamic character that is capable of adopting various identities. She embodies the characteristics of a civilised being. She is pragmatic, intelligent and rational. She is capable of reasoning like the white man; she is capable of epistemological thinking. For instance, her encounter with a white scientific figure is most revealing of this. Her conversation with him encompasses her scientific enlightenment and her intellectual capacities. Besides, her scientific and pragmatic spirit lies in her adventures to search for God. Each time she meets a figure that pretends to be God, she makes a kind of scientific enquiry to confirm or infirm what is said to her. In fact, she never believes in things on the spur of the moment. It is only after experimentation that she makes up her mind. She does this by means of her aforementioned witty questions related to the origin of the world and its depravity. After gathering sufficient evidence about the falsity of any God figure she encounters, she decides to go away and start another adventure looking for the true God,

A God who cannot answer my questions is no use to me […] Besides, if you had really made everything you would know why you made the whale as ugly as he is in the pictures. (Shaw, 1932: 13)

The black girl’s intellectual capacities oppose stereotypes like the “irrationality” and “primitiveness” of the black race. When she meets, for instance, a group of Victorian explorers, she surprises them by her rationality. They notice that she is an exceptional native who is even capable of mathematic thinking. They have the pre-established ideas that Africans are not endowed with the faculty of reason. The mathematical lady of the “Caravan of the Curious” is astonished by the black girl’s capacity for mathematical thinking,

“Where does what grow?” said the mathematical lady. “The root you spoke of” said the black girl. “The square root of Mynas’s sex.” “It grows in the mind” said the lady. “It is a number. Can you count forwards from one?” “One, two, three, four, five, do you mean?” said the black girl, helping herself by her fingers. (Ibid. 38)

This conversation between the two women displays the black girl’s capacity to mathematic reasoning. This is surprising to the white woman because of her Victorian ethnocentric beliefs and prejudgements. This means that Shaw juxtaposes characters that represent the Victorian prejudiced thought with the black girl’s challenge of it in order to show that the black race is different from what it is maintained to be in stereotypical discourse. This oppositional reality comes to break away from the racial stereotypes and caricatures of colonialist discourse. Shaw’s new and positive representation of the black race is related not only to the black girl but to the other natives, as well. One of the Victorian explorers whom the black girl encounters is aware that the “natives are stronger, cleaner, and more intelligent” (Shaw, 1932: 35). This is a clear attack upon colonial discourses like Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, in which the natives are dealt with in negative terms like “dark human shapes” and “howling savages”.

The white man, however, is dealt with in negative terms and reduced in importance. In fact, all the white figures of the novella are, in one way or another, reduced in importance; each time she encounters one of them, the black girl defies his authoritative power, whatever its kind. Besides, some white subjects are clearly described in negative terms. The explorers of the “Caravan of the Curious” are “thoughtless, and waste much time quarrelling about trifles […] They ask questions for the sake of asking questions” (Shaw, 1932: 32). In this
In this context, an analogy can be drawn between Shaw’s depictions of the explorers with Chinua Achebe’s mock at the white man in Things Fall Apart, where “the Europeans […] are depicted as peculiar, incomprehensible, and even vaguely ridiculous” (Booker, 1998: 68). Shaw’s white men and women are ironically mocked on by both the black girl and the narrator. Their conversations are incoherent, for each one speaks obsessively of his own knowledge. The incoherence and inconsistency of their conversations can be deduced, for instance, from a passage which reads,

“I am a surgeon; and I know, as a matter of observed fact, that the diameter of the vessels which supply blood to the female brain is excessive according to the standard set by the male brain. […]”

“Your literary style is admirable, Doctor” said the first gentleman; “but it is beside my point, which is that whether the sun’s heat is the heat of pepper or the heat of flame, whether the moon’s cold is the coldness of ice or the coldness of a snub to a poor relation, they are just as likely to be inhabited as the earth

(Shaw, 1932: 37)

At the level of theme, Shaw’s work displays a harsh critique of the white man’s imperialist ideologies that are used to dominate the black race. For instance, Shaw reverses the doctrine of the “survival of the fittest” as it has been conceived in late nineteenth century. During this period, this doctrine has worked for the advantage of the white man’s imperialist aims in the non-Western world. It has been maintained that the white man is the fittest to survive and that his colonial domination over other races is justified by virtue of his superiority and the “inferiority” status of the other races. However, in Shaw’s novella, it is tacitly implied that this doctrine does not work on the behalf of the white man. It is suggested that the intellectual, cultural and biological “inferiority” of the black race is no longer grounded, so in the present state of affairs, the doctrine of “the survival of the fittest” cannot support any colonial domination. One of the explorers the black girl meets is aware of this,

It would throw them back on the doctrine of the survival of the fittest […] and it is not clear that we are the fittest to survive in competition with them [the blacks]. That girl is a fine specimen. We have had to give up employing poor whites for the work of our expedition: the natives are stronger, cleaner, and more intelligent.

(Shaw, 1932: 35)

History teaches that, contrary to what has been maintained in colonialist and racial texts, the black race has inalienable capacities. If ever they rise against the white man, it is tacitly believed that they will succeed. “I should really prefer to teach them to believe in a god who would give us a chance against them if they started a crusade against European atheism” (Ibid.), says another explorer.

Since for Shaw the black race is not inferior, he insists upon the ontological and metaphysical equality between the white and black races and opposes the West’s hierarchical ideologies. The deeply rooted hierarchy between the Western world and the non-Western one does no longer work. The novella is full of instances where the idea of equality is at issue. It is particularly emphasised in the black girl’s encounter with the “conjurer”. The latter is not a conservative white man who sticks on old-fashioned ideas and beliefs in the superiority of his race. He rather represents intellectual and ideological change. From the ontological point of view, he asserts that the idea of equality is self-evident by virtue of the fact that “We are members of the same body of mankind, and therefore members of one another” (Ibid. 28).
Besides, he advises the black girl not to “forget that two blacks do not make a white” (Ibid). From a metaphysical point of view, he adds, “Though you are black and I am white we are equal before God who made us so” (Ibid. 29). This equality is reinforced by the novella’s ending with the marriage of the black girl with a white Irish man. It is said that “They [the black girl and the Irish man] were married; and the black girl managed the Irishman and the children (who were charmingly coffee-colored) very capably” (Ibid. 57).

To explain Shaw’s insistence upon the idea of equality between the two races, a word about his communist stance is in order. A characteristic feature of Shaw’s life concerns his communist beliefs. These are epitomised in the speeches he made to the South African white community, in which he conjured them to “abandon race and class as markers of social difference and adopt in their place a revolutionary mode of thinking” (Newell, 2000: 70). In fact, he brought an egalitarian conception of human relations to South Africa, where the master-slave dialectic was prevailing between the white masters and their black slaves.

Another idea which displays Shaw’s defence of the black race is related to his challenge of the civilising mission ideology which was grounded on the myth of the Dark Continent, a myth that is challenged in the text. This is related mainly to its altruistic philosophy and the doctrine of paternalism which were associated with it. Shaw juxtaposes the white man’s resolute belief that he is a kind of saviour for the black race with a native’s direct attack upon this belief. One of the white explorers believes that “Our guns have saved you from the man-eating lion and the trampling elephant” (Ibid. 39). The black girl directly challenges this by saying,

Only to deliver us into the hands of the man-beating slave-driver and the trampling baas […] Lion and elephant shared the land with us. When they ate or trampled on our bodies they spared our souls. When they had enough they asked for no more. (Ibid.)

This means that the white man’s mission has by no means any basis since the black people have never been in need of it. Their life has always been in harmony with nature, so there is no need for Europe’s intervention under the pretences of the civilising mission. It is also clear that the black girl is aware of the white man’s false intentions in his supposed mission, which is rather the source of his exploitation of the natives.

The Black Girl displays many instances which openly condemn the imperial practices. This adds to Shaw’s criticism of the Victorian imperial ethos in Africa. This is to say that Shaw’s emancipation of the black race is not only grounded upon the aforementioned critical attitudes but also upon his open condemnation of the practices that follow the establishment and maintain of overseas empires. Such practices as the exploitation of the natives and their enslavement are first and foremost central to the novella. Both are harshly attacked by Shaw’s marxist voice in the novella, namely the black girl. As a Marxist thinker, Shaw is devoted to fight against all forms of exploitation, be it in relation to gender, class or race. With respect to race, the black girl openly struggles against the imperial system and its exploitative practices, slavery being the epitome of these practices.

To start with slavery, one should first shed light upon its historical encroachment in the colonial world. With respect to the African world, it was particularly deeply rooted. Throughout history, the black man had always been enslaved. For instance, slave-dealers in Western Africa were selling slaves to white men who were coming from the New World. This
slave trade was at its height in the 18th century. In the nineteenth century, slavery became a generalised practice throughout the colonial world. The natives were being enslaved by the colonisers for their own economic profits. This is, for example, related to Belgian ivory trade in the Congo region and British gold mining in South Africa. Concerning slavery in South Africa, Shaw made his explicit opposition to it in 1932, just a few months before writing and publishing his Black Girl. In February of this year, during a visit to this country, he “made a radio address to the nation […] in which he admonished his hosts to stop living off the work of slaves. The broadcast was significant politically” (Bertolini, 2004) for the reason that its purpose was to condemn slavery. The immediate response this address received from the white men in South Africa as well as in Britain, in a way, incited him to write the novella. The latter comes to confirm the position he takes in the radio address and to make his contribution to the campaign against slavery that was being underway in South Africa and elsewhere.

Shaw’s black girl is aware of the inhumane practice of slavery. She challenges the white man who still keeps on the idea that his presence in Africa is the best thing that has ever happened to the black man. “Our guns have saved you from the man-eating lion and the trampling elephant” (Shaw, 1932: 39), says one of the white explorers. The black girl retorts with a forceful answer by reversing the white man’s mission into a mission for the enslavement of the natives. “Only to deliver us into the hands of the man-beating slave-driver and the trampling baas” (Shaw, 1932: 39) she tells of the white man’s false mission. The black girl is conscious of the enslavement and the exploitation, from which her native fellows suffer,

You use your guns to make slaves of us. Then because you are too lazy to shoot, you put your guns into our hands and teach us to shoot for you. You will soon teach us to make the guns because you are too lazy to make them yourselves. You have found out how to make drinks that make men forget God, and put their consciences to sleep and make murder seem a delight. You sell these drinks to us and teach us how to make them. And all the time you steal the land from us and starve us and make us hate you as we hate the snakes.

(Ibid.)

It follows that black girl is aware that the imperial system is in her native land for economic profits through the enslavement of her fellows. This is why she even criticises its different hidden policies and techniques of exploitation and control. The black girl shows that these techniques are old-fashioned and will not prevail in the future because the black race is now a conscious people. For instance, she shows that the white man keeps control of the natives by “[putting] their consciences to sleep and make murder seem a delight” (Shaw, 1932: 39). This is achieved through putting alcohol within the general reach of the natives so as to lull them. Historically, such a subversive technique was being used by the British imperial powers in its overseas empires to ease the control of the natives. For instance, in India, the imperial powers referred in a similar way and for the same purposes to opium as a means to lull the natives and keep the system in place by avoiding the rise of nationalist consciousness on the part of the natives.

In addition to the novella’s anti-slavery position, from the foregoing quotation, one understands that it condemns all forms of exploitation of the black natives. The black girl explicitly condemns the territorial expansion over the African continent during the late Victorian period. This is related to the “Scramble for Africa” (1884), which marked the end of the nineteenth century. The white man is charged with stealing the black man. By stealing the
land, he also exploits its riches. This means that the white man is but a plunderer of “exotic” lands and an exploiter of the races that people these lands. “And all the time you steal the land from us and starve us” (Shaw, 1932: 39), she sums up the European economic and human exploitation of the African people. However, this will not last longer than the white man believes. The time has come when the natives’ consciousness is evident and can rise against any exploitation. “You will kill one another so fast that those who are left will be too few to resist when our warriors […] kill you with your own guns” (Ibid.). The white man’s strategies of domination are no longer effective in the face of the nascent power of the black race, no more than his imperialist ideologies which have for long provided support for his imperialism.

Conclusion

In conclusion, what should be kept in mind in the light of what has been said so far is that women and the black race had for years been denigrated in white male discourse. This, it has been observed, is harshly criticised by George Bernard Shaw in *The Black Girl*. His novella displays a sympathetic attitude towards women, for it portrays them in different terms. Through his female protagonist, the black girl, women are given voice thanks to which they speak out their dissent with the traditional status of subordinate they are attributed in both cultural artefacts and the Scriptures. In the same manner, the black race is given voice through the black protagonist. Thanks to the black girl, the black people are seen through a different and new perspective. What is important to notice is that these novelties concerning gender and race express the thought of a white male writer. This means that Shaw’s discourse can only be objective; it can not be biased, for it is not the discourse of a black or female writer.

Works Cited


