



Araştırma Makalesi • Research Article

The Crisis of Parent-Child Relationships in Bernard Shaw's Play *Mrs. Warren's Profession*

Bernard Shaw'ın Bayan Warren'ın Mesleği İsimli Oyunundaki Ebeveyn-Çocuk İlişkileri Krizi

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ÖZ

Bernard Shaw'ın Bayan Warren'ın Mesleği (1884) isimli oyunu, Viktoryen toplumun kalbindeki yozlaşmayı zekice betimlediği için takdir toplamıştır. Oyun, 19. yüzyıl Londra'sının ekonomik güçlükleriyle mücadele etmeye mecbur bırakılmış ve bu yüzden hayat kadını olmuş olan ve başarılı birkaç genelev işleten Bayan Warren'ın etrafında dönmektedir. Karakteri oluştururken Shaw, hem toplumsal yozlaşmayı ve ikiyüzlülüğü gözler önüne serer, hem de böyle bir mesleği yapmanın kişisel sonuçlarını irdeler çünkü Bayan Warren, kendisinin mesleği hakkındaki gerçeği öğrenen kızı Vivie'nin saygı ve sevgisini kaybeder. Bu makale, bu durumun, geleneksel ebeveyn-çocuk ilişkilerine zarar veren toplumsal sorunların ve olumsuz kişilik özelliklerinin bir birleşimi olduğunu iddia eder. Bu iddiayı desteklemek için, bu makale, Vivie'nin, oyunun çeşitli aşamalarında görülen, annesinin yaşadığı hayat tarzına karşı tepkilerinin örneklerini inceleyecek ve Vivie'nin, Bayan Warren'ı tekrar görmek istemediğine dair son kararı ile sonuçlanacaktır.

ABSTRACT

Bernard Shaw's play *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1894) is applauded for its astute view of the corruption at the heart of Victorian society. It centers on Mrs. Warren, who, forced by the economic hardships of the nineteenth century London, becomes a prostitute and runs several successful brothels. Through her characterization, Shaw exposes social corruption and hypocrisy, and explores the personal consequences of such a profession, as Mrs. Warren fails to gain respect and love of her daughter Vivie, who discovers the truth about her mother's occupation. The paper argues that it is the combination of social ills and negative personality traits that damage the conventional paradigm of parent-child relationships. To support the claim, the paper investigates into the epitomes of Vivie's reaction to her mother's way of living that are going through various stages throughout the play and culminating in Vivie's final decision not to see Mrs. Warren again.

1. Giriş

“Don't worry that children never listen to you; worry that they are always watching you” (Fulghum, 1993: 53). It is undoubtedly true that children are constantly watching their elder ones. Nevertheless, depending on social and personal circumstances, the outcomes of this lifelong surveillance might be quite paradoxical and often leading to tragic results for both sides involved in the process. The renowned mother-daughter conflict in Bernard Shaw's play *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1894) is no exception from the rule, as it

dismisses the traditional authority paradigm between parents and their children.

The play is applauded for its astute view of the corruption at the heart of Victorian society, as it “addresses immediate economic issues, slum landlordism and the exploitation of female workers as the basis of prostitution. Motifs here are presented openly, even crudely, allowing one to glimpse [...] things that are [normally] hardly to be seen” (Ganz, 1983: 80). It centers on Mrs. Warren, who, forced by the economic hardships of the nineteenth century London, becomes a

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prostitute and later runs several successful brothels. Through her characterization Shaw exposes the corruption and hypocrisy of the genteel class, as well as explores the personal consequences of such a profession, as Mrs. Warren struggles and fails to gain respect and love of her daughter Vivie who discovers the truth about her mother's occupation. The play serves as "a dramatic sermon and an exposé of a social condition and an evil which purists attempt to ignore" (Daly, 1905: 3). Alongside with that, the playwright gains a deep insight into the universal problem of parent-child relationships and emphasizes the fact that it is the social ills, which are social problems undesirable to many members of the society, and their various epitomes that challenge the concept of a family as the basic pillar of society. What is more, "the socialist dramatist and theorist seeks to lay the blame on the capitalist system and on a middle-class public" (Guy, 2010: 275) for instigating an irreversible cleavage between generations. As a consequence, "*Mrs. Warren's Profession* is no mere theorem, but a play of instincts and temperaments in conflict with each other and with a flinty social problem that never yields an inch more sentiment" (Shaw, 1905: 8).

The paper argues that it is the combination of social ills and characters' negative personality traits, brought into existence by maladies present in the society, that damage the conventional paradigm of parent-child relationships. To support the claim, the paper investigates into the epitomes of Vivie's reaction to her mother's way of living that are going through various stages throughout the play and culminating in Vivie's final decision not to see Mrs. Warren again. The article examines the unruly child attitude that Vivie adopts while still being a stranger to her mother at the beginning of the play and traces the change of attitude and the thaw in their relationship following a heart-to-heart conversation between the mother and the daughter towards the middle of the work. It analyzes the abrupt change of Vivie's opinion subsequent to the eye-opening talk with George Crofts – a co-owner of brothels throughout Europe together with Mrs. Warren, which results in the irrevocable separation of two women at the end of Act IV.

2. The Stages and the Legacy of a Distorted Mother-Daughter Relationship in *Mrs. Warren's Profession*

At the beginning of the play, Vivie, a Cambridge University student and "an attractive specimen of the sensible, able, highly-educated young middle-class Englishwoman, aged twenty two, prompt, strong, confident, self-possessed" (Shaw, 2010: 8), considers her mother to be more of an alien to herself, bonded to her by a matter of blood, rather than shared feelings and attitudes. Thus, Vivie She confides into Mrs. Warren's friend Praed, who makes a surprise visit to Vivie together with her mother at her Surrey cottage:

"Hm! My mother has rather a trick of taking me by surprise – to see how I behave myself while she is away, I suppose. I fancy I shall take my mother very much by surprise one of these days, if she makes arrangements that concern me without consulting me beforehand" (Shaw, 2010: 8).

The behavior of the daughter can be described as that of a rebellious teenage student, confident of her own self-

sufficiency, perfection and independence, and confronted by a sudden and an unplanned visit of an obliging, domineering and high-school-superintendent-like mother.

Being forced to live on her own, first in boarding schools and later in rented accommodation, due to Mrs. Warren's continual residence either in Brussels or Vienna, Vivie has rather a mere acquaintance and a rich sponsor than a real mother, who is confident that "children, like chairs, belong to the people in whose houses they live; she believes she can possess as she has been possessed – by the British pound sterling" (Gilmartin, 1977: 145). Vivie forms far-going, independent and quite brave plans for the future, which, according to Praed, might be very different from Mrs. Warren's ideal of an obedient, well-bred and securely married daughter. Hence, at the beginning of the play the relationship between mother and daughter is guided by formal regulations rather than genuine and intimate feelings.

Vivie's unawareness of Mrs. Warren's source of income, as well as the overall mystery and ambiguity surrounding her mother's life leave Vivie impotent to form a well-rounded opinion of her mother: "Why won't my mother's life bear being talked about?...I have no mysteries to keep up; and it seems she has. I shall use this advantage over her if necessary" (Shaw, 2010: 11). Thus, Mrs. Warren appears to be almost a stranger to her daughter, while the feeling of a profound emotional distance between the two instigates Vivie's boisterous resistance to the looming arrival of her parent. Mrs. Warren seems to know very well how to organize her daughter's life in economic terms, at the same time, judging from Vivie's words, she seems to be totally ignorant of her daughter's spiritual and immaterial needs. This fact emphasizes the idea that Shaw's plays are majorly "directed against greed for money, financial ardor [and false] human qualities, affectations, or pretensions" (Knight, 1898: 703).

In a way, the situation at the beginning of the play mirrors the attachment theory developed by the British child psychiatrist and psychoanalyst John Bowlby, dealing with negative effects of maternal deprivation. Bowlby defines attachment as a "a long lasting psychological connection with a meaningful person that causes pleasure while interacting and soothes in times of stress. The quality of attachment has a critical effect on development, and has been linked to various aspects of positive functioning, such as psychological well-being" (Bowlby, 2008: 13). When an inborn need of a child to be attached to one person, usually a mother, is not being satisfied, "it has negative consequences on development, causing depression, aggression, delinquency, and affectionless psychopathy (a situation in which one is not concerned about the feelings of others)" (Bowlby, 1998: 56). Indeed, Vivie's distanced attitude and lack of sincere affection towards her mother and friends at the beginning of the play, as well as her pronounced and nearly aggressive rebelliousness, make Miss Warren a typical representative of Bowlby's attachment theory. Vivie experiences an intrinsic need for an emotional bond with her mother, which she lacks, and which doesn't epitomize into anything beyond sponsor-sponsee relationship.

Mrs. Warren's arrival changes little or nothing in Vivie's stance towards her mother – a woman with limited sensibility and plenty of character, "practical and hard-headed in her business, peevish and possessive, sensual but realistic, proud

of her success but commonplace in mind, vulgar but easy-going, ‘a good sort’ but ‘a bad lot’” (Ganz, 1983: 92). Guided by the sense of over-protectiveness and authority, Mrs. Warren attempts to create an atmosphere of parenting though with a minute effect on her daughter: “Well, you shouldn’t go off like that without letting me know. How could I tell what had become of you? And night coming too!” (Shaw, 2010: 22). Later through the play she declares that “my little girl’s finger is more to me than your whole body and soul” (Shaw, 2010: 24). Nevertheless, the attempt proves to be powerless, as Vivie simply ignores the scolding, persisting with her own accustomed and independent ways. The fact that the two women have “a power of quick, precise, and ruthless calculation and self-confidence, [as well as] a ready point of view, bright and finished as a rapier, makes the drama resolve itself into a multiplex duel when they unsheathe their points and proceed to cross opinions” (Scott, 1913: 264). Thus, the distance between the two women is not only retained, but it transmutes into an almost unbreakable barrier hindering any chances of reunion.

The initial conflict between the mother and the daughter takes place in the middle of Act II, when Mrs. Warren is confronted, for the first time, with Vivie’s personal plans for the future:

“Vivie: Has it really occurred to you, mother, that I have a way of life like other people?”

Mrs. Warren: You and your way of life, indeed! What next? Your way of life will be what I please, so it will.” (Shaw, 2010: 27)

The sense of growing confrontation continues all through the act:

“Vivie: You claim the rights of a mother: the right to call me a 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. Before I give myself the trouble to resist such claims, I may as well find out whether they have any real existence.” (Shaw, 2010: 27)

The background for the clash gets set. Vivie seeks to “reject the social roles as defined by Victorian conventions and to refuse the normative standards of middle-class femininity” (Wilson, 2013: 56) in order to reach personal independence. Yet, Vivie seems to forget that her ability to “successfully perform the role of the New Woman is far more deeply indebted to her mother’s successful performance of middle-class femininity than she wishes to acknowledge” (Wilson, 2013: 56). Fostered by Vivie’s indignation and fury, such a stance leads to much graver consequences. The conflict lays foundation for the disclosure of truth about Mrs. Warren’s occupation, the morbidity and social repudiation of which does an irreparable harm to the mother-daughter relationship. The disagreement paves the way to the ultimate alienation of two women, which they are unaware of at the time of the clash.

Vivie’s resentment reaches its outmost peak when Mrs. Warren betrays her hesitation and possible unwillingness to disclose the identity of her daughter’s father: “I have the right to know; and you know very well that I have the right. You can refuse to tell me if you please; but if you do, you will see the last of me tomorrow morning” (Shaw, 2010: 28). As a

result, the unruly teenage-like behavior reaches its culmination, blazing the path to Vivie’s untimely maturity.

The impact of the disagreement, as well as Vivie’s overconfident claims about her innate right to choose the way of living “between being the Queen of England or Principal of Newnham [...] between ragpicking and flowerselling” (Shaw, 2010: 29) instigate Mrs. Warren to disclose the truth about the horrid circumstances of her daughter’s childhood. The mother confesses that it was the poverty and the hypocritical stance of the British society regarding the socially ‘accepted’ ways of making money that made her become a prostitute and later on run a score of ‘respectable’ brothels for well-off gentlemen:

“It’s only good manners to be ashamed of it; it’s expected from a woman. Women have to pretend to feel a great deal that they don’t feel. [...] What’s the use in such hypocrisy? If people arrange the world that way for women, there is no good pretending it’s arranged the other way. No: I never was a bit ashamed really. I consider I had the right to be proud of how we managed everything so respectably.” (Shaw, 2010: 32).

Mrs. Warren’s monologue echoes Bernard Shaw himself who incessantly “made brave and plain-spoken attempt[s] to drag the public face to face with the nauseous realities of prostitution” (Mair, 1911: 244) and raised his voice against the ‘accepted’ evils of society, against the silent approval of their gruesome ills and hypocritical nods at immorality.

Vivie becomes fascinated by her mother’s strength to face difficulties and not to succumb to the doom set by the wickedness of society. She is enthralled by Mrs. Warren’s unparallel ability to make choices and to take responsibility, to look in the face of evil, and to collect all the existing means to create a better future for her daughter. Hence, Vivie reaches the point of pure *hamartia*, thus proclaiming: “My dear mother: you are a wonderful woman: you are stronger than all England [...] You have got completely the better of me tonight, though I intended it to be the other way. Let us be good friends now” (Shaw, 2010: 31).

For some time, the two women develop an almost ideal model of a mother-daughter relationship. Thus, Frank, Vivie’s lover present at the cottage at the time of Mrs. Warren’s visit, observes the two walking together in the garden: “Look: she actually has her arm around the old woman’s waist. It’s her right arm: she began it. She’s gone sentimental, by God!” (Shaw, 2010: 34). Confronted by Frank’s obnoxious remarks regarding Vivie’s change of behavior, the young lady is not hesitant to give a serious warning: “You were making fun of my mother just now when you said that about the rectory garden. That is barred in the future. Please treat my mother with as much respect as you treat your own” (Shaw, 2010: 36). The similar stance is maintained later through the act: “You are wrong: you know nothing about her. If you knew the circumstances against which my mother had to struggle” (Shaw, 2010: 37). Consequently, Vivie seems to be relieved that her mother belongs to the same sort of people as she does – a true workaholic and a stark supporter of human choice, self-realization, independence and responsibility for one’s actions. The daughter is comforted by the idea that she is ‘ideologically’ supported by someone as close as her parent.

However, the almost idyllic situation is to change radically with the appearance of George Crofts, who discloses the remaining details about Mrs. Warren's identity, claiming that she continues to be his "business partner" (Shaw, 2010: 40) in "a high-class" (Shaw, 2010: 40) brothel industry, and that the business is not "wound up" (Shaw, 2010: 40) as Vivie tends to believe. Crofts reveals her mother's role as a "managing director" (Shaw, 2010: 40) in the Europe-wide brothel industry, emphasizing the fact that it is the revenue from the trade that enabled Miss Warren to attend such expensive colleges as "Newnham and Girtons" (Shaw, 2010: 40). George continues his narration by bringing to the forefront the despicable stance of the society enabling the creatures like him to increase in numbers:

"The world isn't such a bad place as croakers make out. As long as you don't fly openly in the face of society, society doesn't ask any inconvenient questions; and it makes precious short work of the cads who do. There are no secrets better kept than the secrets everybody guesses." (Shaw, 2010: 41).

Appalled by the outward filth and hypocrisy of the world, Vivie feels more and more shocked and "sickened" (Shaw, 2010: 40) by the horrid truth about her mother's specialization and the vile atmosphere of contemporary existence. "Moral passion spells indignation against an immoral world – against hypocrisy and lying, prostitution and slavery, poverty and dirt and disorder" (Dukes, 1923: 44). As a consequence, she cannot think of anything but a relief in the form of "some sharp physical pain" (Shaw, 2010: 42). The utter disgust with the extreme hypocrisy and lack of morals on the part of both, Mrs. Warren and Crofts, makes Vivie pronounce her decisive condemnation of the two:

"I hardly find you worth thinking about at all now. When I think of the society that tolerates you, and the laws that protect you! When I think of how helpless nine out of ten young girls would be in the hands of you and my mother! The unmentionable woman and her capitalist bully!" (Shaw, 2010: 41).

Yet, Vivie seems to forget that it is not only Mrs. Warren and Crofts who are 'in' the abominable business, but it is her as well, who "has always been in her mother's 'business' since it supported her [education] (Ganz, 1983: 95). Moreover, one might deduce that all of the society is in it as well: "If you are going to pick and choose your acquaintances on moral principles, you'd better clear out of this country, unless you want to cut yourself out of all decent society" (Shaw, 2010: 41). Thus, Crofts' confession sows the seeds of trouble, while the disaster will surface in a matter of time.

At the beginning of Act IV, some time passes after the hasty departure of Mrs. Warren and Crofts, and Vivie is engaged in an ardent conversation with Praed and Frank. The discussion, clearly referring to the persona of her mother, reminds Miss Warren of the subject believed to be forgotten. The extent of the impact is such that Vivie expresses nothing but sheer loathing:

"Sit down: I'm really not ready to go back to work yet. You both think I have an attack of nerves. Not a bit of it. But there are two subjects I want dropped, if you don't mind. One of them is love's young dream in any shape or form; the other is the romance and beauty of life, especially Ostend and the gaiety of

Brussels. You are welcome to any illusions you may have left on these subjects: I have none. If we three are to remain friends, I must be treated as a woman of business, permanently single and permanently unromantic." (Shaw, 2010: 48)

Thus, Vivie seems to be desperate to free herself from the hypocrisy of being romantic in the very cities of sin and corruption, 'operated' by her mother. What is more, she is dismayed by the emptiness of Praed's "Gospel of Art" (Shaw, 2010: 48), in which he advocates the power of art in a world, which is, nonetheless, deeply submerged in filth and vice.

Miss Warren seems to be unable to upkeep her self-demeanor tormented by the two-facedness of social norms controlling our existence, so she attempts to inform the gentlemen of the shocking truth regarding her mother's occupation: "The two infamous words that describe my mother are ringing in my ears and struggling on my tongue; but I can't utter them: the shame of them is too terrible for me" (Shaw, 2010: 56). Yet, Vivie is unable to pronounce the words, being over-horrified by the morbidity of facts to be disclosed. As a consequence, to inform her friends about the nature of Mrs. Warren's business in Europe, she chooses to write down the truth on a piece of paper.

Vivie reaches an apotheosis of desperation when she snatches back the paper with the two abominable words describing her mother and "tears it to pieces; then seizes her head in her hands and hides her face on the table" (Shaw, 2010: 56). Thus, she fails to control her emotional state of mind. Yet, the aptitude of Vivie's logical thinking and decision making remains as lucid as ever, as the heroine proclaims that she "need[s] much more courage than that when [she tells her] mother that [they] have come to a parting of ways" (Shaw, 2010: 56). As a result, Miss Warren becomes fully determined to pursue her aim of ultimate separation from her mother.

The sudden appearance of Mrs. Warren makes Frank realize the full gravity of the mother-daughter conflict and the extent of Vivie's wrath: "My dear Mrs. Warren: suppose you were a sparrow – ever so tiny and pretty a sparrow hopping on the roadway – and you saw a steam roller coming in your direction, would you wait for it?" (Shaw, 2010: 58). The question sounds like an implicit warning to a mother who is unaware, or seems to be so, of her daughter's reaction to the nature of her occupation, emphasizing the absurdity of one's existence in the epoch covertly instigating the spread of two-facedness and corruption. Hence, Vivie puts forward her final decision of complete separation with her parent: "From this time I go my own way in my own business and among my own friends. And you will go yours. Goodbye" (Shaw, 2010: 59). "Only a very venturesome young lady would be strong enough to break off relations with her mother" (Wasserman, 1977: 171). The heroine explains that it is the continuous concealment of the shameful reality regarding Mrs. Warren's employment that made her make the radical choice. At the same time, keeping in mind the fact that Vivie was brought up as an institutional child, devoid of motherly love and strong family attachments, her decision to separate may be also rendered as an act of simple egoism, rather than personal hate. Indeed, "the ability to love has to be learned and practiced. Wherever this opportunity is missing in childhood, all later relationships will develop weakly, will

remain shallow. The opposite of this ability to love is not hate, but egoism” (Burlingham and Freud, 1944: 27).

As an attempt to restore her relationship with Vivie, Mrs. Warren presents arguments justifying her still being in the business, which very much sound like “Crofts’ philosophy of life” (Shaw, 2010: 61) elaborated in the middle of the play:

“You think that people are what they pretend to be: that the way you were taught at school and college to think right and proper is the way that things really are. But it’s not: it’s all only a pretence, to keep cowardly slavish common run of people quiet. Vivie: the big people, clever people, the managing people all know it.” (Shaw, 2010: 60).

She claims that it is her constant desire to work, to make money, as well as her being “fit for it and not anything else” (Shaw, 2010: 61) that discourages her from quitting. Thus, Mrs. Warren displays the irreparable corruption of her mind, resulting in her inability to break free from the hypocrisy of the system based on the Machiavellian-like ‘the end justifies the means’ principle, and to develop a sober view on the surrounding reality.

Vivie is shocked by the degradation of her mother’s moral values and reaffirms her decision to part forever. In addition, Miss Warren refuses to remain a part of the pretence game implicitly propped up by the society:

“No: I am my mother’s daughter. I am like you: I must have work and must make more money than I spend. But my work is not your work, and my way of life is not your way. We must part. It will not make much difference to us: instead of meeting one another for perhaps a few months in twenty years, we shall never meet: that’s all.” (Shaw, 2010: 62).

Thus, Miss Warren openly reiterates the fact that the wound received is hardly ever to be healed, and the only working medicine at hand is their ultimate separation.

The atmosphere of antagonism is further reinforced by Mrs. Warren’s violent screams forsaking her daughter “[who is] the only one that ever turned on [her]” (Shaw, 2010: 8): “Oh, may you live to have your own daughter tear and trample on you as you have trampled on me. And you will: you will. No woman ever had luck with a mother’s curse on her” (Shaw, 2010: 62). As a consequence, in the grip of emotion Mrs. Warren renounces her child, taking the confrontation between the two to the highest point. Possibly driven by the slight feeling of guilt, or, simply, by the implicit desire to demonstrate kindness to the parent never to be seen again, Vivie makes an attempt to shake hands with her mother, which is, nevertheless, refused by the latter. The play closes with a visualization of Vivie’s facial expression “break[ing] up into one joyous content; her breath [going] out in a half a sob, half laugh of intense relief” (Shaw, 2010: 63). The final scene signifies the potential success of Miss Warren’s intention to shatter the prevailing artificial morality that

“All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of man; not self-will, and government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others [...] that it is their duty and in their nature to live for others; to make

complete abnegations of themselves, and to have no life but in their affections.” (Mill, 1972: 444).

Vivie breaks away from the stereotype of a conventional dramatic heroine in order to attain her ideal: “a woman as an independent individual with the same political and social rights as man” (Lorichs, 1977: 110). She makes a brave attempt to detach herself from the corrupted and hypocritical system of society, and to take a personal control of her life and her destiny. Vivie “has changed from being primarily an element in the plot to being primarily an element in the thought of the play” (Watson, 1977: 115). Yet, as the play comes to a close at the very moment of Vivie’s victory, it is hard to say whether her present accomplishment will be permanent or not, keeping in mind the overall degradation of moral values in the society.

3. Conclusion

Instigated by the deep social hypocrisy and two-facedness of the system, the conventional paradigm of parent-child relationships gets damaged in the course of the play. As a result, Vivie’s attitude to her mother, Mrs. Warren, undergoes several transmutations, materializing in the rebellious teenage behavior at the beginning of the play, aiming to question the authority of a stranger-like mother; in the unquestionable support of her parent following Mrs. Warren’s confession about the nature of her occupation; and, ultimately, in the feelings of disgust, shame and outrage caused by the discovery of the deceit on behalf of Mrs. Warren with regards to her genuine attitude towards the nature of the business that she is involved in. The play shows that it is the social ills and degradation of morals that shatter the very foundations of society, destroy its mechanisms and penetrate as deep down as the level of interpersonal relations. Hypocrisy, in its turn, is the ultimate enemy, able to undermine the trust which forms the foundation of parent-child relationships. Once it is detected, the bond between the two will never be the same, no matter how skillful the reparations are. Therefore, there is nothing more challenging for a parent than the idea of ‘being constantly watched’ by an offspring.

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