

نقد أدبي وعسكري لمسرحية "الإنسان والسلاح" لجورج برنارد شو

George Bernard Shaw's Arms and the Man: Literary and Military Critique

د. سنوسي زكريا موسى آدم: أستاذ مساعد، كلية اللغات، جامعة القرآن الكريم والعلوم الإسلامية، السودان.

Dr. Sanosi Zakaria Musa Adam: Assistant Professor, School of Languages, University of the Holy Quran and Islamic Sciences, Sudan.

Email: sanosizakaria@yahoo.com

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المخلص:

تتناول هذه الدراسة تأثير مسرحية "الإنسان والسلاح" للكاتب المسرحي الإيرلندي جورج برنارد شو على تصورات القراء تجاه الحرب والشخصيات العسكرية، وذلك من خلال تقييم ما إذا كانت أفكار الكاتب مستندة إلى تجارب شخصية أم أنها مجرد بناء فني. تعتمد الدراسة على المنهج الوصفي التحليلي، وتستند إلى مقابلات أجريت مع ثمانية أساتذة جامعيين متخصصين في الأدب في ولاية الخرطوم. تم استخدام برنامج SPSS لتحليل البيانات، وقد أظهرت النتائج أن الأعمال الأدبية تؤثر بشكل كبير على تصورات القراء تجاه الفئات المجتمعية، بما في ذلك المؤسسة العسكرية. وتشير النتائج إلى أن تصوير "شو" للجنود، لا سيما مقولته الشهيرة بأن "تسعة من كل عشرة جنود وُلدوا حمقى"، يفتقر إلى الأساس التجريبي، وقد يسهم في تشكيل تصورات منحازة. تسهم هذه الدراسة في النقد الأدبي من خلال مساءلة التصويرات غير الموثقة في الأعمال الأدبية، والتأكيد على أهمية الدقة التاريخية والتجريبية في الأعمال الدرامية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: جورج برنارد شو، الأسلحة والرجل، الدراما الواقعية، نقد الحرب، السخرية، النفاق الاجتماعي، الرومانسية، صراع الطبقات، الحب الحقيقي، المثالية مقابل الواقعية.

Abstract:

This study examines the impact of George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man* on readers' perceptions of war and military figures, evaluating whether the playwright's ideas are based on personal experience or mere artistic construction. The research employs a descriptive-analytical methodology and utilizes interviews with eight university professors specializing in literature in Khartoum State. The study employs SPSS for data analysis, revealing that literary works significantly influence readers' perceptions of societal groups, including the military. The findings indicate that Shaw's portrayal of soldiers, particularly his assertion that "nine out of ten soldiers are born fools," lacks an empirical foundation and may contribute to biased perceptions. This research contributes to literary criticism by challenging unverified literary representations and emphasizing the need for historical and experiential accuracy in dramatic works.

Keywords: George Bernard Shaw, *Arms and the Man*, Realist Drama, War Criticism, Satire, Social Hypocrisy, Romanticism, Class Conflict, True Love, Idealism vs. Realism.

1. Introduction:

Literature often reflects both the personal experiences of the author and the historical context in which it was produced. An author's background—including gender, nationality, and socio-economic status—deeply informs their worldview and artistic expression. Literary works are not created in isolation; they are responses to specific moments in time and carry cultural and ideological imprints.

George Bernard Shaw, an Irish playwright and political commentator, is an example of a writer whose personal ideologies permeate his literary works. Shaw's drama is intellectually charged, politically conscious, and often critical of social norms. His 1894 play *Arms and the Man* presents a satirical critique of war, romance, and class. It provides a lens through which we can understand the power of literature not only to reflect society but to shape perceptions about key social institutions—like the military.

In this context, the intersection of literature and lived experience becomes vital. When authors like Shaw portray institutions such as the military, their artistic liberties can inadvertently shape how entire sectors of society are viewed—often without firsthand knowledge of their inner workings. Literature is a double-edged sword: it can illuminate truths, but it can also perpetuate stereotypes under the guise of critique. Shaw's satire, while clever and thought-provoking, runs the risk of reducing complex human experiences into easily digestible caricatures. This paper seeks to bridge the gap between literary theory and practical understanding, focusing on how literature both reflects and distorts the world it claims to portray.

Furthermore, the study situates *Arms and the Man* within the broader discourse on realism versus romanticism in late 19th-century literature, highlighting Shaw's unique contribution to dismantling idealized images of

war and heroism. The play's enduring relevance lies in its capacity to provoke critical reflection on how cultural narratives influence collective memory and societal attitudes toward institutions like the military. By engaging with Sudanese academic perspectives, this research expands the scope of literary criticism beyond Eurocentric frameworks and fosters intercultural dialogue on the ethical implications of satire. The introduction thus sets the stage for a detailed examination of the interplay between literature, ideology, and social perception, aiming to enrich the reader's understanding of Shaw's work and its multifaceted impact.

Despite Shaw's literary prominence, his portrayal of the military raises important critical questions. Does *Arms and the Man* provide an accurate depiction of soldiers and warfare, or does it merely reflect Shaw's personal biases and satirical style? This study examines how Shaw's portrayal of the military influence's readers' perceptions, particularly in cultures with a strong military tradition. Given the author's lack of personal military experience, the study questions whether his depiction is historically and socially justifiable or if it contributes to misconceptions about military life.

2. Problem of the study:

Although George Bernard Shaw is acclaimed for his literary achievements and contributions to drama and critical thought, some of his depictions—especially of soldiers—raise questions about the fairness and accuracy of literary representation. In *Arms and the Man*, Shaw satirically reduces soldiers to “fools,” challenging romanticized ideals of war. However, this portrayal may lead readers to adopt an unfair and overly simplistic view of the military.

Given the researcher's background in both literature and military service, this study seeks to interrogate whether Shaw's representations are

grounded in credible experience or if they risk promoting distorted perceptions.

3.Objectives of the Study

- To analyze Bernard Shaw's potentially inaccurate depictions of soldiers in *Arms and the Man*.
- To evaluate how readers, especially scholars, interpret these depictions.
- To assess the extent to which such portrayals may result in unfair societal judgments.
- To provide academic insight into how literature can shape or distort social realities.

4. Hypothesis of the study

- Some writers present their own point of view through their writings.
- The writer's idea has great role in convincing some readers.
- Some of the ideas that the writer presents are wrong because they are not the result of his personal experience or observation.

5. Importance of the study

This research addresses the intersection of literary critique and social ethics. By examining the influence of Shaw's satirical representation of the military, it sheds light on the responsibilities of writers and the importance of critical reading. It also represents one of the few studies in the Arab world to evaluate *Arms and the Man* through both a literary and military lens, combining qualitative research with theoretical analysis.

6. Theoretical Framework

Literary criticism serves as a crucial tool for analyzing and evaluating literary works, offering insight into the ideological, social, and

psychological dimensions of texts. This study employs reader-response criticism to examine the impact of George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man* on audience perceptions of war and the military. Reader-response theory, as formulated by scholars such as Stanley Fish (1980) and Wolfgang Iser (1978), argues that the meaning of a text is not fixed but rather emerges through the interaction between the text and its readers.

In the case of *Arms and the Man*, Shaw challenges traditional notions of heroism, honor, and war, portraying soldiers in a satirical and often unflattering light. His depiction of Captain Bluntschli as a pragmatic and cynical mercenary, in contrast to the idealistic and naïve Bulgarian officers, forces readers to reconsider their assumptions about war. However, as reader-response theory suggests, the interpretation of this portrayal varies depending on the cultural background and experiences of the audience.

Additionally, this study considers New Historicism, a critical approach advanced by Stephen Greenblatt (1988), which emphasizes the importance of historical and cultural contexts in literary interpretation. Given that *Arms and the Man* was written in the late 19th century, a period marked by European imperialism and shifting military doctrines, it is essential to examine how Shaw's work reflects or distorts historical realities. By integrating reader-response criticism and New Historicism, this study evaluates whether Shaw's portrayal of soldiers is a fair critique of war or a misrepresentation of military life.

7. Previous Studies

Several studies have addressed the political and ideological underpinnings of Shaw's plays. Orwell (1985) highlighted Shaw's commitment to dismantling bourgeois myths, including the romanticization of war. Frezza (2007) noted Shaw's technique of using paradox to

challenge cultural norms, while Tanitch (2007) positioned Arms and the Man as a cornerstone of anti-romantic theater.

Rosenthal (2007) examined how Shaw's satire influenced post-war theatergoers, particularly those critical of nationalism. Despite these rich analyses, there is limited Arabic-language scholarship assessing Arms and the Man from a military-critical perspective. This study fills that gap by incorporating responses from Sudanese professors with both academic and cultural insight.

Background and Summary of Arms and the Man:

The Meaning of "Man" in Shaw's Arms and the Man.

The title Arms and the Man draws directly from the opening line of the Roman epic The Aeneid by Virgil:

> "Arma virumque cano" – "I sing of arms and the man."

Shaw uses this reference ironically. While Virgil's line glorifies heroic warfare and noble warriors, Shaw's play satirizes these ideals. The "Man" in Shaw's title can be interpreted in two overlapping senses:

a. "Man" as a Male Soldier or War Hero.

This reflects the classical and military meaning, as in Virgil's phrase.

Shaw's protagonist, Captain Bluntschli, is the anti-hero, who contrasts sharply with romantic notions of war and masculinity.

This interpretation supports a literal reading: "Arms and the (military) man."

b. "Man" as Humanity or the Human Condition.

Shaw was a humanist and social critic, and his play questions not only war but also societal illusions, romantic ideals, and class structures.

The title can thus be seen as referring to the relationship between war (arms) and humanity at large, including both men and women who are affected by war and societal norms.

This wider meaning aligns with Shaw's deeper philosophical intention.

c. Duality of Meaning:

This dual interpretation is part of Shaw's literary strategy:

He borrows the grandeur of the classical phrase.

He subverts it to challenge and mock the outdated ideals it represents.

Shaw's *Arms and the Man*, first performed in 1894, emerged during a period when European powers were still steeped in the glorification of war, nationalism, and heroic ideals. Shaw's play undermines this worldview by mocking the romantic notions of warfare prevalent in late 19th-century literature and society.

Set during the Serbo-Bulgarian War, the play opens in the bedroom of Raina Petkoff, a young Bulgarian woman engaged to the war hero Sergius. When Captain Bluntschli, a Swiss mercenary fighting for the Serbs, seeks refuge in her room, he debunks Raina's romantic fantasies about war. He admits he carries chocolates instead of bullets—a symbol of pragmatism over idealism.

The romantic illusions held by Raina and Sergius unravel as the play progresses. Raina grows disillusioned with Sergius's posturing and is drawn to Bluntschli's honesty. The play ends with a reversal of social and romantic expectations: Raina chooses the rational, middle-class Bluntschli over the aristocratic Sergius.

The historical background of the play is also significant. Shaw uses the relatively obscure Serbo-Bulgarian War to highlight the absurdity of

glorified nationalism. His use of a neutral Swiss soldier to challenge the ideologies of both sides demonstrates his broader anti-war message.

Symbols and Motifs:

a. Chocolate Creams.

Symbolize Bluntschli's realism and the absurdity of romanticized warfare. They replace bullets and serve as a humorous but potent metaphor for practical thinking in place of heroic posturing.

b. Petkoff's Coat.

Represents deception and the collision between public duty and private life. The coat is passed around and misused, illustrating the arbitrary boundaries between soldierly valor and personal insecurity.

c. The Library.

A critique of bourgeois pretensions; symbolizing unused knowledge and empty pride.

d. Raina's Photograph.

A token of idealistic affection that changes meaning, symbolizing the evolution of identity and romantic disillusionment.

e. Sword and Epulettes.

Represent the outdated ideals of honor and bravery, which Shaw systematically dismantles throughout the play. These items become ironic relics of a crumbling romantic vision.

These motifs reveal that Shaw embeds critique not just in dialogue but in symbolic detail. They underscore how easily appearance can mislead perception—whether of love, class, or courage.

Critical Reception:

Shaw's play was lauded for its humor and moral insight. George Orwell (1985) regarded it as one of Shaw's most technically flawless comedies. Critics praised its wit and subversion of military glorification. However, others questioned the fairness of its portrayal of soldiers, especially the statement: "Nine out of ten soldiers are fools."

1. Literary Analysis of Arms and the Man

The strength of *Arms and the Man* lies in its fusion of comedy and critique. Shaw dismantles the heroic image of war perpetuated by traditional narratives. Bluntschli, who rejects the glamour of battle, becomes the moral center of the play. His perspective contrasts with Sergius's hollow theatrics and reflects Shaw's realist convictions.

This analysis supports the hypothesis that writers often use literature as a vehicle for ideology. However, the risk lies in oversimplifying complex social roles—like that of the soldier—through satire.

Shaw's *Arms and the Man* presents a satirical critique of war and romanticized heroism, contrasting idealistic and realistic perspectives on battle. The play subverts traditional war narratives by portraying the "chocolate-cream soldier" (Bluntschli) as more competent and rational than the romantic war hero (Sergius). This thematic reversal aligns with Shaw's broader criticism of Victorian-era glorification of war. Here the main themes:

a. Satirical Treatment of War

The title *Arms and the Man* is derived from Virgil's *Aeneid*, a Roman epic that glorifies military valor. Shaw's ironic use of this reference signals his rejection of heroic war myths, portraying war as futile and absurd rather than noble and honorable. Bluntschli's admission that he carries chocolates

instead of bullets symbolizes a pragmatic, survivalist approach to war, contrasting sharply with Sergius' reckless romanticism.

Shaw's critique extends beyond the battlefield to social structures. Through characters such as Raina and Catherine, the play explores how romantic ideals of war are perpetuated by non-combatants—those who admire heroism from a distance but remain unaffected by its brutal realities. The Petkoffs' concern for social status over military competence further emphasizes the absurdity of military prestige based on illusion rather than skill.

b. Romantic Love and Social Class

While *Arms and the Man* satirizes war, it also critiques romantic love as a social construct. Raina initially idolizes Sergius as a noble war hero, but as the play progresses, she recognizes his hollow bravado and becomes drawn to Bluntschli's honesty and intelligence. This shift reflects Shaw's rejection of romantic idealism in favor of realism. Similarly, Louka's defiance of class expectations—choosing to pursue Sergius despite being a servant—demonstrates Shaw's challenge to rigid social hierarchies.

2. Military Critique of *Arms and the Man*

While Shaw's satire effectively exposes the irrational glorification of war, his portrayal of soldiers raises critical questions about accuracy and bias. This study examines several military inconsistencies in *Arms and the Man* from a professional military perspective.

a. Chocolates vs. Ammunition

Shaw's depiction of a professional soldier carrying chocolates instead of bullets is a powerful satirical device, but it overlooks military practicality. In reality, a trained soldier carries at least 120 rounds of ammunition, with variations depending on mission requirements. The idea

that a mercenary soldier would prioritize chocolates over cartridges contradicts standard military discipline even if the chocolates stand for food. In the war ammunition is more important than the food. Ammunition will save life in the field while a trained soldier can survive without food for days.

b. Military Leadership and Decision-Making

Shaw implies that military officers, such as Sergius, achieve rank through reckless bravado rather than strategic competence. While historical accounts confirm that some promotions in 19th-century European armies were influenced by class rather than merit, professional military leadership requires tactical intelligence, discipline, and experience. By portraying Sergius as both foolish and incompetent, Shaw oversimplifies the complexity of military command.

c. Home as a Military Command Center

In the play, Major Petkoff plans military operations from his home, discussing troop movements in a domestic setting. While this adds to Shaw's satire, it misrepresents military protocol. Military planning is typically conducted in secure command centers, separate from family and civilian life. This blurring of military and domestic spheres in *Arms and the Man* undermines the real-life professional discipline of military officers.

d. Soldiers' Emotional Detachment

Shaw's suggestion that soldiers are indifferent to human life, as implied by Raina's remark that "a man who has been killing for years cannot care," is a misconception. While professional soldiers are trained to be disciplined and objective, they are also deeply affected by the psychological toll of combat. Modern military psychology confirms that

soldiers experience emotional and ethical conflicts, particularly in prolonged wars.

These historical and military critiques highlight areas where Shaw's dramatization, while effective in satirizing romantic war myths, diverges from military reality.

Methodology:

This study employed a descriptive analytical method with qualitative interviews. The aim was to explore how Sudanese literature scholars perceive Shaw's portrayal of war and military ethics.

1. Location

Khartoum State, Sudan (Khartoum Locality)

2. Participants

Total: 10 university professors

Gender: 8 males, 2 females

Sample

Interviewed: 8 professors

Gender distribution: 6 male, 2 female

Interview & Data Analysis

Key Questions and Agreement Rates

Question	Agree	Disagree	Neutral	% Agree
Q1–Q10	Avg 6	Avg 1	Avg 1	~60–75%

Statistical Summary (SPSS Analysis)

Item	Relative Weight (%)	Chi Value	Mean
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Q1 75% 7.48 2.6

Q2 75% 7.48 2.6

Q3 62% 6.44 2.5

Discussion:

The data gathered through interviews with Sudanese university professors provided a rich and nuanced view of how literature—and particularly satire—can influence readers’ perceptions of real-world institutions such as the military. A central insight was that literary portrayals, when shaped by satire, can sometimes blur the lines between critique and caricature. This is particularly true in Shaw’s *Arms and the Man*, where Captain Bluntschli’s humorous pragmatism is set in contrast with the exaggerated posturing of romantic heroism embodied by Sergius. Such literary juxtapositions, while entertaining and thought-provoking, can leave lasting impressions that reduce complex human roles—such as that of a soldier—to mere stereotypes.

A key point that emerged is the ethical responsibility of authors. Shaw, as a skilled satirist, likely intended to challenge dangerous romantic ideals rather than belittle the military itself. However, as several interviewees observed, readers who lack nuanced understanding or who come from different cultural contexts may interpret the satire literally. This phenomenon supports the Reader-Response theory, particularly Gianni Vattimo’s argument that readers reconstruct textual meaning through personal and cultural lenses. In a region like Sudan, where military service is both common and socially respected, portrayals that ridicule soldiers—even in jest—may be perceived as offensive or dismissive.

The discussion also revealed how Shaw’s work, while progressive for its time, did not exist in a vacuum. His anti-war sentiments were shaped by

contemporary European ideologies, especially Fabian socialism. Some professors noted that while Shaw critiques war, he does so from a position of intellectual privilege, far removed from actual battlefield experiences. This detachment raises questions about the authenticity of his representations. It also reinforces one of the study's core hypotheses: that authors may project strong opinions without adequate experiential grounding.

Another important thread in the discussion was the transformative power of literature. Several interviewees emphasized that Shaw's play succeeds in provoking debate, even when one disagrees with its conclusions. They argued that such discourse is essential in societies that rely on literature for moral and ideological guidance. The professors also reflected on the importance of including regional perspectives in literary criticism. Too often, Western texts are analyzed solely through Western frameworks, without accounting for how those same texts resonate—or clash—with non-Western cultural values.

Finally, the discussion underscored the need for critical pedagogy in literary education. Educators should guide students not just in appreciating the artistic merits of a play but in interrogating its assumptions, biases, and socio-political consequences. This involves equipping readers with tools to distinguish satire from fact, and ideological framing from objective representation. When done well, this approach can empower students to become discerning readers who can appreciate literature's beauty while remaining alert to its potential distortions.

In summary, the discussion validates the study's premise that literary portrayals—particularly in satirical works like *Arms and the Man*—can significantly influence public perception, for better or worse. It also affirms

the value of culturally grounded criticism, which allows diverse voices to engage in global literary conversations on their own terms.

Findings:

- a. Literary Influence: 75% of participants agreed that writers greatly shape public opinion.
- b. Unjust Representation: Over 60% believed that Shaw's portrayal of soldiers lacked fairness.
- c. Reader Susceptibility: Respondents noted that general readers might accept these portrayals uncritically.
- d. Value of Criticism: Professors emphasized the need for critical engagement with ideological content in literature.

Conclusion:

This study has critically examined George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man* through the lenses of literary criticism, reader-response theory, and military analysis. The findings reveal that while Shaw effectively challenges romanticized war narratives, his depiction of soldiers and military operations lacks historical and experiential accuracy. The study also confirms that literary works significantly shape public perceptions of the military, often reinforcing biased or oversimplified narratives.

From a reader-response perspective, the play's interpretation varies based on cultural background and military knowledge. Readers unfamiliar with military structures may accept Shaw's satirical portrayal as an accurate critique, while those with military expertise recognize its exaggerations and misrepresentations.

By integrating New Historicism, this study has demonstrated that *Arms and the Man* must be contextualized within 19th-century European military history. While Shaw's critique of heroism and war remains

relevant, the play does not fully account for the strategic complexities of military leadership and the psychological realities of soldiers.

Future research could expand this analysis by comparing Shaw's anti-war themes with those of other playwrights, such as Henrik Ibsen or Bertolt Brecht, or by investigating how contemporary audiences interpret *Arms and the Man* in the context of modern warfare.

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