George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) devoted himself completely to the cause of theatre in the 1890s (after trying his hands unsuccessfully in fiction writing and quite successfully as a critic of art, music and drama) and finally proved himself a man of theatre *par excellence* – one who is not only a philosophical thinker, a committed Fabian socialist, but primarily a tireless experimenter in the idiom of theatre required for his new concept of the drama – i.e. the drama of debate. His contribution to the advancement of the English theatre is significant, particularly in respect of his success in inventing new dramatic techniques and dramatic idiom in keeping with the new ideas propagated in his plays. Shaw develops his own distinctive ‘idiom’ of theatre which incorporates both the verbal and the non-verbal components. Shaw’s devotion to theatre as a playwright, director and producer remains unchallenged for so many decades. Somerset Maugham in *The Summing Up* (1938) comments that Shaw “has succeeded on the stage not because he is a dramatist of ideas but because he is a dramatist” (qtd. in T.F. Evans 23-24). Maugham has rightly emphasized Shaw’s dramaturgic powers rather than his much talked-about ‘ideas.’

Critics often glibly refer to Shaw’s plays as ‘talk drama’ or ‘dramatised conversation’, implying that ‘action’ (which constitutes the essence of all drama) is sacrificed for the sake of ‘discussion’ of ideas or philosophical views on the stage. But what is ‘action’ on the stage? Does it mean physical bustle only, with two or more persons demonstrating emotional excitement by jumping around the stage, slamming doors, pulling down a house to the sound of guns, or showing other forms of violence? The Norwegian playwright, Henrik Ibsen, has meanwhile demonstrated to “the theatre-going world that action may be a state within as well as a row without”; that two persons Nora and her husband Helmer (in *A Doll’s House*), standing quietly together and talking in ordinary, every-day tone, “may give us a sense of stressed emotional values in human life such as no frenzied mob at its highest howl can secure” (Richard Burton 250). Thus, in
modern drama, and more so in Shavian drama, action is anything on the stage that enables the audiences/readers to enter into the psychologic tension of the characters.

To achieve the multiple effects of dramatic action on the stage Shaw has developed and perfected a theatre idiom of his own. Therefore, the chosen title of my dissertation is “The Idiom of Shavian Theatre.” The subject includes the whole range of verbal and non-verbal components of drama — dialogues spoken by the characters, words and expressions used in them, the gestures, modulations of voice and physical movements of the characters, non-verbal forms — such as, various sounds including music, projection of light/darkness, silence, items of stage-setting, spectacle and backdrop landscape, et al. I have also taken into account the performative aspects of his plays. However, the main focus of my approach has been the verbal components of Shaw’s theatre idiom. First, because theatre is the most ephemeral of all the literally genres: the written text with its verbal and non-verbal components comes to life when it is performed, and with every production its final impact or the audience-response may vary. Thus, the same dramatic text may have a history of dramatic performances with a record of variable responses and final impact. Keeping in view this ephemerality of theatre production, priority is given to the written text. Secondly, the text of a drama with its dialogue as a vehicle of thought of its characters, and stage-directions with details or hints about the venue or other aspects, serves as the web of original signifiers and the primary/authentic source of authorial intention, though the dramatist is ‘dead’ and banished from the text. Moreover, any research on drama based on the dramatic text entails an in-depth observation of the possible configuration of visual and concrete images of action, which might not be expressed/presented during a performance. Records of production of a play may or may not explore the possibilities inscribed in the text, which may be the permanent source of inspiration for all concerned with theatre. That is why facts or data regarding production and responses of the audience have been used selectively in this study, wherever these are relevant and integral to my study of Shaw the dramatist.
Words as the verbal component of theatre language occupy a great place in Shavian dramaturgy, for Shaw gives meticulous attention to the use of words in his plays. This is clear in one of his comments:

> Learn everything and when you know it, stick to naturalism, and write every word as if you were on your oath in a witness box. (qtd. in Crompton VIII)

Shaw pays much attention to the semantic and sonoric qualities of any word used in a given dramatic situation and also to its intended impact on the audience. He very often says that Shakespeare's magic as a dramatist is created by the beauty and charm of his word-music. Shaw's passion for music has been translated into his verbal expressions. Music as a stage-prop is highly significant in Shavian dramaturgy. Shaw himself states that his method, system and tradition are founded essentially upon music. This is true in respect of his own theatre. Shaw says in his article "Shakespear: A Standard Text":

> I have to write melodies without bars, without indications of pitch, pace, or timbre, and without modulation, leaving the actor or producer to divine the proper treatment of what is essentially word-music. (144)

In this connection, one may recall T.S. Eliot's comment acknowledging Shaw's contribution to dramatic language in the form of a distinctive prose style and also in creating powerful rhythms of conversation. He says in his lecture on "Poetry and Drama" (1951):

> Our two greatest prose stylists in the drama . . . are, I believe, Congreve and Bernard Shaw. A speech by a character of Congreve or of Bernard Shaw has — however clearly the characters may be differentiated — that unmistakable personal rhythm which is the mark of a prose style, and of which only the most accomplished conversationalists — who are for that matter usually monologuists — show any trace in their talk. (Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot 133)

In this context we may refer to modern criticisms's view of language. According to this view, language is layered, containing various modes of thought, feeling and perception formed out of the experience of ages; and poetry is the literary form which exploits this language in depth. But we know, as Bruce R. Park comments, "to Shaw the best poetry is prose" (Park 47). To an ordinary modern man language as a communicative medium is one-dimensional, since his thought is limited. But to Shaw, whose dramaturgy is
imbued with the philosophy of the Life Force and the Elan Vital, language is properly multi-dimensional, requiring rationalization. That is why he advised W.B. Yeats to make his poetry "strip and go naked" (qtd. in Park 49). Shaw himself turned the prose dialogues in his plays powerfully poetic in essence. Shaw's choice of words in his plays will reveal that there is, in each play, an underlying pattern of thought made up of selective, significant words, and this fabric of words will lose its coherence or melody if any one of these words is removed or changed. Such meticulousness is the product of his experiment with the impact of words and their regulated repetitions in dramatic speech. Abraham Tauber describes him as an amateur philologist: "GBS was from his earliest days an amateur philologist, as reflected in his own writings" (XIX). Shaw's interest in language is not only about its philological and phonological content but also about its potential as a sociological instrument, by which the social and cultural differences between classes of people can be determined. Shaw utilises this knowledge of language in his drama and develops a distinctive and powerful theatre idiom. Berst rightly comments:

Each major play is an aesthetic unit significant both for its uniqueness, which indicates the flexibility and scope of the Shavian idiom, and for its particular artistic resonance, which sounds forth the depth of the Shavian talent. (313-14)

In the Shavian system of language, words are very often recurrent and repetitive, and thus surpass the particular contextualized meaning and add more meaning to the entire situation. For instance, we may say that the major portion of the Shavian language is built on patterns of repetition (Shaw persistently repeats such words as 'fool' and 'understand,' as in Candida); rather these patterns add much vitality and potency to the language of theatre itself through his use of wit and humour, antithesis, epigram and paradox. These linguistic resources make the lengthy discussions dramatically enthralling and rhythmic. This is how he proves to be a great artist who creates a theatre both musically resonant and philosophically profound.

Theatre as a performative art binds both the actor and the spectator into a bond of relationship. Theatre language has a synergic character, bringing together
verbal expressions and visual theatre effects. Each theatre-performer has to use his or her expressive resources — voice, gesture, movement and even body language — to bring forth a fictional participation of the audience in the sequence of stage action. All these constituent elements collectively make what is known as theatre language. Language is sign-based, and in a stage performance 'signs' have a great role to play. They construct the typical idiom of the theatre. The words and actions of any performer are, to a large extent, controlled and modulated by theatre signs or symbols. In the main body of my analysis I have incorporated all these aspects to highlight the distinctiveness of Shaw's theatre.

In analyzing the various aspects of the idiom of Shavian theatre, one must pay attention to the performative side of his plays. Production is a means of making any play both verbally and visually effective, because on the stage 'seeing is believing.' Shaw directed productions of many of his plays, attending to minute stage effects. In the main body of my dissertation I have mentioned some of the famous stage performances of such plays as, Candida, Man and Superman, Heartbreak House and Pygmalion. These plays are regularly performed today with great success in different Shaw festivals. Shaw was an ardent supporter of the festivals "because they are markets for my plays" (West 253-254). He took a comprehensive approach to production — from script to casting, to costume and set design. Martin Meisel has finely summed up the position of Shaw as a director-producer:

Up to 1920, Shaw was his own director. The extensive descriptions of character and the parenthetical characterizations of almost every speech in his printed text were attempts to reproduce for the reader all that Shaw as director would bring out of the play. Shaw genuinely lamented the lack of a musical-rhetorical notation which could send his plays to posterity as he conceived them. (56)

In agreement with Meisel, we may well conclude that not only up to 1920, the director's eye of Shaw was never closed, for the purpose of making his theatre both publicly entertaining and philosophically thought-provoking. For our general convenience we may refer to Shaw's 'Note For Technicians' in A.C.Ward's edited text of Pygmalion. Here he directs which parts are to be
performed and which should be left for its film version, solely on technical ground. Such meticulousness is peculiarly Shavian.

The novelistic instinct of Shaw makes him ‘tell’ a lot of things in the drama, and his theatrical passion leads him to ‘show’ them on the stage. Thus, the idiom of Shavian theatre is a combination of ‘telling’ and ‘showing.’ The constitution of such an idiom is helpful both to the reader and to the audience. Because of all these technical innovations almost all the plays of Shaw have records of stage success. For instance, we may say that even a play like *Man and Superman* which is overcharged with serious ideas and which has elaborate stage setting, has been successful in different theatre houses with many revivals. Granville Barker’s Tanner, Patrick Campbell’s Eliza and Janet Achurch’s Candida had been unforgettable to the Shavian audience.

Bernard F. Dukore has examined Shaw’s work in the theatre and his use of theatre in his book *Bernard Shaw, Director*. Dukore views: “While Shaw’s drama is frequently studied, his drama in the context of his own theatre practice is not” (flipkart.com). My discussion on the individual plays focuses on Shaw’s theatre practice. I have tried to show how Shaw has used different methods or techniques in his texts which are helpful for their stage performances. Again, the screen versions of his plays create a different idiom. I have shown how it happened in case of *Pygmalion*. When we find most of the critical and research works centring on the evolution of his ideas, and not on his dramaturgic methods, it is clear that the real Shaw remains unexplored. So, I have tried to study Bernard Shaw as a man of theatre. Richard Burton has justly said:

> In the critical treatment of Shaw up to the present time, emphasis has been laid, upon the whole, too much upon Shaw the thinker, at the expense of Shaw the artist. Important as an intellectual arouser he certainly is, but equally true is that he is a fine artist of the theatre and the tendency to minimize or deny his skill and overlook his significance in the modern development of the playhouse on its technical side is to be deplored (11-12).

Shaw wrote plays with his eyes on the stage, as he could visualize stage situations while writing dialogues for his characters. I have given emphasis on the Shavian stage effects in course of discussing his idiom of theatre.
On the basis of my survey of the critical output on Shaw by major critics, I have seen that his plays have been analysed, in all these years, mostly from social and political perspectives. And naturally therefore, his contribution to the world of English theatre in terms of language and theatre idiom has not been adequately explored. Only a few critics and commentators have tried to locate the special quality of the Shavian theatre language. Perhaps Shaw himself has advanced this line of socio-philosophical criticism by declaring that just for art’s sake alone he would not write a single line at all. Eminent critics of Shaw like A.C. Ward, G.K. Chesterton and H.C. Duffin have judged him as a social playwright whose main purpose had been to impart ‘new’ messages to the audience. As an advocate of the doctrine of ‘Plays of Ideas,’ Shaw is mainly interpreted as a playwright preaching the theory of Creative Evolution with a vision for man’s social progress, and not so much as a playwright having special interest in the language of theatre. He is also said to have used his drama as a medium for propagating not only socialist political ideas, but also the ideas of Lamarck, Bergson, Samuel Butler, Nietzsche, et al. But my proposition is to assert the organic unity of his theatre.

Chesterton’s George Bernard Shaw (1909) is an early attempt to ascertain the position of Shaw as a philosopher-playwright. Much later the same tradition is continued in Leon Hugo’s Bernard Shaw: Playwright and Preacher (1971). This South-African critic has supported Shaw’s stance as a propagandist:

It may be asked whether propaganda for the great propagandist is still necessary in the 1970’s. I think it is, partly because I am a South-African and hopeful enough to believe that Shavian thought and art could beneficially influence the economic, social, political and cultural situation in my country, and partly because in the English-speaking world at large there still seems to be a good deal of antagonism to and ignorance about Shaw. (8)
Martin Meisel presents him as one mostly dramatising ideas, but of course with a verbal mode of articulation which is "thrilling, startling and electrifying" (434). Jean Reynolds speaks of Shaw’s "new speech" developed from his "far-ranging intellect" (422). As a result, we get a prose style that contains paradoxical qualities and ranges from radicalism to conservatism, humorousness to seriousness, reverence to blasphemy. Eric Bentley describes this feature as "the Shavian inclusiveness" (qtd. in Reynolds 422) in his attitude to life. But this inclusiveness has "a linguistic dimension" which many readers of Shaw have been slow to discover. Jean Reynolds observes that much of the freshness of Shavian "new speech" arises from Shaw’s struggle to "include the excluded" – to make readers and audience aware of ideas suppressed in everyday language (422).

The contemporary approach to Shaw is not restricted to the popular belief or rather a disbelief of Shaw as a mere propagandist. Nicholas Grene finds no justification why Shaw’s characters should be taken up as "little more than walking ideas manipulated by a preacher/propagandist" (IX). It is Gareth Lloyd Evans who particularly studies Shaw’s use of language in drama and points out some basic features of the Shavian language system. But the underlying beauty and charm in Shaw’s systematic use of word-pattern in individual plays has not been given due attention by this critic also. However, he offers a fine analysis in positioning Shaw as a great advocate of the reform of stage vocabulary in so many directions.

III

"A downstart and the son of a downstart" (Complete Prefaces, 659 hereafter CP), Bernard Shaw was born and brought up in a family of poverty and want. He had to leave school at the age of fifteen and became a clerk. His mother
Elizabeth emigrated in 1873 to London with her two daughters in pursuit of her career as a music teacher, leaving her husband and son behind in Dublin. Shaw inherited from his wayward father a unique sense of comedy and from his mother a rare gift of musical passion. His mother’s music teacher George Vandaleur Lee, deeply influenced young Shaw and initiated him into the world of Wagner and Beethoven. Shaw had to leave Dublin and go to London in search of a career in 1876. It is quite startling to know that the man who asserted that he would educate London, himself could not receive any college or university education at all. As a complete ‘outsider’ he came to London to eke out a livelihood, but soon became an ‘insider’ with an “honesty of purpose” to be the ‘king’ in the realm of language and culture. What can be more authentic than to quote his own statement in the Preface to Immaturity:

London was the literary centre for the English language, and for such artistic culture as the realm of the English language (in which I proposed to be king) could afford. (CP 674)

Just a little later he again asserts:

If my subject had been science or music I should have made for Berlin or Leipsic. If painting, I should have made for Paris: indeed many of the Irish writers who have made a name in literature escaped to Paris with the intention of becoming painters. For theology I should have gone to Rome, and for Protestant philosophy to Weimar. But as the English language was my weapon, there was nothing for it but London. (674)

Truly as a ‘king’ of language he ruled in the kingdom of drama for more than seventy years where he modified and refined his dialogue through tireless experimentation with language as a most artistic idiom of the theatre.

We know that Shaw worked as a journalist, critic of art, then of music, and then of drama in London. That is to say, he came to drama after initiation in music, and so he felt Mozart, Wagner and Beethoven to be his masters as much as Moliere and Shakespeare. R.J.Kaufmann says:

Shaw is great because all his vast social involvement, all his hectoring gospel urge, all his fanatic curiosity was most alive for him, as for us, in the plastic terms of dramatic art. As in a fugue, social themes are observed, blurred, lost and then recovered in the progression of a single, artfully crafted scene. His
mastery of experience is most complete in the great ensemble numbers in his plays, as in the opening scene of Man and Superman, the final sequence of Major Barbara or the Inquisition in Saint Joan, when lyric opinions he advocated or cherished are made to hold their own in the strenuous polyphony of alien views. (12-13)

What Kaufmann implies here is that philosophical ideas or thematic issues raised in the plays are transformed into 'lyric opinions' or poetic/dramatic imagery. This aesthetic transformation is achieved through the magic of Shavian dramaturgy.

IV

Actually, the area of my study of Shaw’s plays spans over a period of about three decades. Starting with his Unpleasant plays, such as, Widowers’ Houses (1892) and Mrs Warren’s Profession (1893), my study extends to Candida (1894) and Arms and The Man (1894), two Pleasant plays, and then to Man and Superman (1903), the unique blending of comedy and philosophy, which leads to another more entertaining comedy on poverty, politics, socialism and power, i.e. Major Barbara (1905), and also to Pygmalion (1913), the most popular expression of Shaw’s linguistic preoccupations. This study then includes Heartbreak House (1916), which aesthetically blends deep anxiety for modern man’s destiny in the face of the devastation of the First World War with the philosophy of Creative Evolution, and finally, his most successful tragedy on martyrdom, Saint Joan (1923), which blends political history of England and France (such as, Hundred Years’ Wars/Wars of the Roses) with the history of Christianity and the Church politics. I have chosen not to extend the range of the analysis of Shaw’s theatre language beyond these plays – first, because inclusion of other plays would have blurred the main focus of my project and also made the study unmanageable, and secondly, because the rich variety and power of
Shaw’s theatre idiom have been adequately highlighted in the four plays under my special purview.

In this dissertation I have chosen to analyse mainly four important plays of Shaw: *Candida* (1894), *Man and Superman* (1903), *Pygmalion* (1913), and *Heartbreak House* (1916). My choice for these plays is related to the exposition of the artistic quality of Shaw as a man of theatre, with special emphasis on his use of theatre idiom. For the purpose of my critical study I have divided my dissertation into five main chapters, besides an additional concluding chapter. In the first chapter entitled “Shaw and the Language of Theatre,” I have discussed Shaw’s treatment of the language of theatre, and explained the theoretical perspective of my dissertation. For this purpose, I have given here a brief analysis of some of his plays — *Widowers’ Houses* (1892), *Mrs Warren’s Profession* (1893), *Arms and the Man* (1894), *Major Barbara* (1905) and *Saint Joan* (1923) — to illustrate and highlight the various aspects of Shaw’s theatre idiom. In the second chapter entitled “Candida: The Mystery of Language: The Language of Mystery” I have taken up *Candida: A Mystery* in an attempt to show how the Shavian ‘mystery’ of language works to heighten the inner strength and power of the new woman who deals with the two male contenders in love in an inverted domestic comedy situation. Shaw here weaves a fine pattern of words with distinctive connotations for driving his point home. I have chosen *Candida* from the category of the Pleasant Plays, particularly because it introduces the element of Ibsenian “discussion” and also the Ibsenian concept of the New Woman. I have also focused attention on the production side of the play, which at first appeared to be a rather ‘risky’ business for the theatre managers, but later it became highly successful in stage production. The play also propagates the Shavian concepts of feminism. It can also be a fine case-study for the socio-linguists in determining gender relationships, where the woman has the ‘power’ not only to win the battle of wills, but also to nurture and guide a young poet to come to terms with life. All these collectively heighten the mystery of Shaw’s theatre language. The third chapter entitled “Man and Superman: The Language of Philosophy and Comedy” deals with the most
famous play of Shaw, *Man and Superman*. Here Shaw is more philosophical than in *Candida*, but the intrinsic ‘comedy’ of the play is never marred by its philosophical overtones. It is a blending of comedy and philosophy, aided by Shaw’s adaptation of the theory of Creative Evolution presented through a nice blend of such non-verbal stage props as light, music and dream, and verbal components as wit and humour, lengthier discussions on philosophical issues. A new critical approach has been adopted to evaluate the Dream scene of the play. I have shown how this scene is perfectly theatrical in incorporating such theatre idiom as dream and fantasy in its theatre-within-theatre form. Some shades of feminism can be discerned in the language of the play which also postulates the theory of Marxian social evolution. My analysis shows how theatre language facilitates these theoretical connotations without destroying the play’s comic flavour which makes it universally appealing to the audience interested in seeing Tannerism on the stage. The fourth chapter entitled “*Pygmalion*: Language as Instrument of Social Transformation” is the most important one in my study of Shaw’s theatre language. Here I have tried to show how language has been wielded as an instrument in determining sociological and intellectual transformation. In *Pygmalion*, Shaw utilises language as a means of removing class-barrier. Here the Shavian idiom of theatre is more congenial for dramatic success. While analyzing the play, I have found out how the postcolonial theoretical lens can be applied to the theatre language of Shaw. The dialectical relation between the two main characters (Higgins and Eliza) is akin to the theory of postcoloniality in which language plays a vital role. In the fifth chapter entitled “*Heartbreak House*: The Language of Fantasy and Reality”, I have shown how the Shavian language has been utilised to dramatise an extravaganza that *Heartbreak House* essentially is. Shaw here utilises fantasy more widely and artistically than in *Man and Superman*. In this play the action takes place in a kind of ship-house which, presented as a stage prop, becomes a metaphor for the ship of state in the turmoils of the high seas, that is, the political and social upheavals of the time (including the First World War). This play also demands attention from modern linguistic approaches and so the use of deictic
elements has been pertinently located to denote human relationships on some broader aspects. Shaw's power of using word and silence has been dealt with in some detail to give a foretaste of the surrealistic-impressionistic bias of the playwright. The Shavian language-game here is much effectively realised to represent the fear and anxiety of a group of characters who suffer the existential crisis under the shadow of the First World War. The concluding chapter is an attempt to sum up all the findings of the dissertation.

Though in some of his early plays (e.g. *Widowers' Houses*) Shaw started with theatrically arranging a story, that is to say, with a conventional plot, he proceeded to defy the Aristotelian concept of the plot being the soul of the drama, as he created an utterly different kind of theatre. In his plays Shaw allowed the characters to change the plot. Unlike characters in a Well-Made play, those in a Shavian play are not 'conventional' – because they do not behave according to the expectations of the theatre audience, but according to the laws of psychology. Eric Bentley rightly says that “Shaw’s first contribution to the drama was: more active characters” (61). By ‘active characters’ is meant not simply characters who are violent, but those who “made decisions which affected the course of events” and also “on the basis of their own nature, not of the spectator’s” (61).

This emphasis on creating active characters is one of the elements of dramaturgy which enables Shaw to make his theatre into an ‘integral theatre’ combining humour and vision, anticlimax and philosophy. His theatre is far beyond a ‘dramatic parable,’ but becomes almost a concrete, tangible and living poetic metaphor. Margery M. Morgan says:

> The total structure of the individual work defines the ideas it contains. In the complex metaphor which any Shaw play is, what Comte, or Lamarck, or Samuel Butler, Schopenhauer, or Nietzsche may have supplied becomes part of the imagery.(6)

Shaw’s language of the theatre contributes the most to the process of integration, of turning all the elements, including the philosophic messages, into the living metaphor which a Shavian play is.
Methodology and Approach

In this dissertation I have followed the research methodology of searching primary and secondary materials on Bernard Shaw — his plays in particular, his novels, prefaces, letters, essays, reviews done by him on drama and music, his autobiographical writings; different critical books and articles on Shaw, and a comparative analysis of them. Obviously, the mode of analysis followed by me is eclectic. I have followed the stylesheet given in MLA Handbook (sixth edition) in respect of the format of writing and documentation, referencing and citing sources.

Notes and References

Notes

1. Shaw's own spelling 'Shakespear' in all his writings is retained here as elsewhere. This article "Shakespear: A Standard Text" was originally published in T.L.S. 17 March 1921, and later included in Shaw on Theatre, ed. E.J. West, New York, 1958.
Works Cited


