CHAPTER EIGHT

THE BLACK GIRL IN SEARCH OF GOD.

The Black Girl in Search of God, as we have it today, was first published by Constable & Company Limited, London, a leading publishing house, in 1932 under the original title The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God. It is an excellent tale, virtually presenting the summation of what Shaw has already stated in his plays. It also throws, now through a story, considerable light on the religious ideas of Shaw. Shaw tries to present his ideas very intelligently through the character of the Black Girl. Thus, it is something like a traveologue clothed in interesting narrative. It is a commentary on the practical relevance of the Bible in man's day-to-day life. It is also a commentary on the conception of God. The so-called 'scientific' attitude towards God is being jeered at, by showing the Professor, the man of science, as a laughing stock worthy to be pitied. It also lays bare the inherent hollowness behind the scriptural writings.

The tale cannot be thrown away as a cock-and-bull-story. It is an express commentary on the religious beliefs of its writer. What God really is, the potent question before the Black Girl, who makes a frantic search for God. She has the

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Bible at her disposal. It does not help her. It fails to give her proper guidance at the most crucial moment of her spiritual crisis. At some demanding moments when she opens it she finds some of the pages being transformed into powders which fly away at the simple blow of the wind. It has its symbolic importance so far as the Shavian attitude to the Bible is concerned. Shaw has already stated his views on the Bible on some specific points in the preface to the play, Androcles and the Lion. But, there seems to be a great deal of difference between the author of Androcles and the Lion and the author of Black Girl in Search of God. In Androcles and the Lion his criticism of the Bible centred round only some specific points as we already discussed in the fourth chapter of this work. In the preface to Androcles and the Lion the author did not totally ignore the importance and relevance of the Bible. But, in the Black Girl tale he appears to be totally disillusioned about the Bible. He does not find any relevance of the Bible in a man's day-to-day life. The Bible does not even provide a reasonable explanation as to what God really is. The Black Girl is shown to have thrown away the Bible finding it absolutely useless.

The tale marks the progression of the various images of God. In the preface to the tale Shaw clearly declares:

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"I take it that the missionary lifted her straight out of her native tribal fetishism into an unbiased contemplation of the Bible with its series of Gods marking stages in the development of the conception of God from the monster Bogey Man, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace."¹

The adventure of the Black Girl is basically an adventure of the creative spirit to understand the absolute reality. She meets different Gods having different philosophies. None of them could satisfy her.

The first God was more brutal. He wanted her to bring the blood of her first-born baby along with a thousand rams and sheep etc. as offerings to him.

The second one was interested more in arguing than in anything.

The third one did not claim himself to be a God. He was a Greek Prophet, resigned from mundane life. According to the Greek Prophet, one should not bother about God. It is his deep-rooted belief that there is nothing beyond : ¹

Black Girl - I am in search of God. Can you direct me?

Greek Prophet - Do not trouble about that. Take the world as it comes; for beyond it there is nothing. All roads end at the grave, which is the gate of nothingness, and in the shadow of nothingness everything is vanity. Take my advice and seek no further than the end of your nose. You will always know that there is something beyond that; and in that knowledge you will be hopeful and happy.

Black Girl - My mind ranges further. It is not right to shut one's eyes. I desire a knowledge of God more than happiness or hope. God is my happiness and hope.²

The Greek prophet also firmly believes that in order to know God one has to be God himself. The black girl is partially satisfied at this statement. Shaw also holds the similar view regarding his attitude to God. The black girl says: "Thank you, we who are young are the wise ones; I have learned from you.

that to know God is to be God. You have strengthened my soul."

Then, the black girl meets another God, Micah, who was nothing but anger. Micah did not believe in the creative purpose of the cosmic force. He suggested: "Walk humbly and God will guide you. What is it to you whither He is leading you?" The black girl was not satisfied with this belief. Nun, she believes, cannot completely detach himself from his own self. He has to be himself. She states: "He gave me eyes to guide myself. He gave me a mind and left me to use it. Now can I now turn on him and tell him to see for me and to think for me?"

Micah's only reply was a fearful roar. Micah represents intolerance. Shaw evidently does not like it.

Then, the black girl meets the Professor, a man of science. He has spent twenty years of his life carrying on an experiment on dog's spittle. As a man of science he does not believe in God. For him there is no God. Because, God is not a product of experimentation. According to him, "God is an

3. Ibid, p.39
4. Ibid, Micah, p.41
5. Ibid, Black Girl, p.43
unnecessary and discarded hypothesis. The universe is only a gigantic system of reflexes reproduced by shocks."\(^6\)

The Professor does not believe in soul. Nor in the damnation of the soul. He argues: "Can you demonstrate the existence of the organ you call a soul on the operating table or in the dissecting room? Can you reproduce the operation you call damning in the laboratory?"\(^7\)

Shaw makes him appear ludicrous by showing him sitting on a sleeping crocodile. Even as a man of science the Professor could not detect it. He mistook the sleeping crocodile as a log of dead wood. Hence, Shaw's attitude to such man of science is crystal clear.

The black girl later finds a Roman soldier standing before a cross. As a representative of Shaw's anti-Christian characters she also hates the very sight of the cross. She thought it a great pity that Jesus had not died peacefully and painlessly and naturally. The Cross, according to Shaw, symbolises man's cruelty, and the extremity of his animalish instinct. So, the cross does not have anything religious or sacred about it.

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6. Ibid, Professor, p-46
7. Ibid, Professor, p-47
Next, the black girl happens to meet the Conjurer. She was thirsty, and wanted to scoop up a little water from the nearby well. The Conjurer produced a cup from nowhere.

She drank the water with thanks. Gave the cup back to him. He made it disappear once again. An interesting discussion takes place between the two:

EG - I am in search of God. Where is he?
Con - Within you. Within me too.
EG - I think so. But what is he?
Con - Our father. 8

The black girl made a wry face and thought for a moment and retorted: "Why not our mother?" 9

The black girl wants to call God as her grandfather rather than her father.

Con - That need not prevent us loving one another like brother and sister. We are members of the same body of mankind, and therefore members one of another. Let us leave it at that.

EG - I cannot, base-God tells me that he has nothing to do with bodies, and fathers and mothers, and sisters and brothers......Is it not a terrible tyranny?

8. Ibid. P. 50
9. Ibid. P. 51
Love is a devouring thing. Can you imagine heaven with love in it?

Con - In my heaven there is nothing else. What else is heaven but love?

Ey - It is glory. It is the home of God and of his thoughts; there is no billing and cooing there, no clinging to one another like a tick to a sheep.

Shaw has the firm belief that God has nothing to do with what we ordinarily call 'love'. For him heaven is something above the sentiment we call love. So is his idea about God.

Regarding the Commandments Shaw's attitude is clear when the black girl says: "It is the other one turned inside out. Neither is a rule to live by. I tell you these care—all Commandments of yours are like the pills the cheap jacks sell us; they are useful once in twenty times perhaps, but in the other nineteen they are no use. Besides, I am not seeking Commandments. I am seeking God." 10

The black girl next meets the fisherman, who was carrying a paper cathedral on his shoulder. He is being followed by many others, each carrying a paper cathedral over his shoulder.

10. Ibid. 80. 53 - 54.
shoulder. Everyone claims his church to be the true one. This results in quarrel and stonethrowing at one another. This is definitely a pointer to the existing tussles among the different churches. Shaw was an observer of all such inter-church brick-battlings.

The black girl leaves all of them in disgust. She thought she should not find God to her taste among them. That is to say, an organised form of Christianity under different churches could satisfy her. Shaw in most of the plays on religion has expressed his disregard towards the institutionalised form of Christianity. He has already made a specific point on this issue in the play, *Saint Joan*. In certain respects the character of the Black Girl is an improvement upon the character of Joan. Both the girls are unattached to any form of the church. Both of them are simple, honest and sincere in their pursuits. Nothing could dissuade them from going to their end. Joan, however, paves the road to Protestantism, while the Black Girl does nothing of that kind. She simply wanted to find God. She is absolutely free. Even from shame. She goes naked from the beginning to the end. Her only dress being her birthday suit. She does not have any pull from any school of thought. The act of presenting a character in the nude is nothing new in this tale. Shaw has already

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presented some of the Ancients in the title in *Back to Methuselah*. Thus, nudity is symbolic of unalloyed honesty, sincerity, and absolute purity.

Next, the Black Girl happens to meet the "Caravan of the curious." The caravan consisted of many people naturalists, fundamentalists, conservatives, reactionists, abstractionists, ethnologists etc. Each one had his or her own explanation of God. For one God is a fable. And for another God is nothing but the "square root of minus one."

The Black Girl tells them at the top of her voice:

"...... you serve false Gods. You are heathens and savages.
You know neither how to live nor let others live. When I find God I shall have the strength of mind to destroy you and teach my people not to destroy you and teach my people not to destroy themselves."\(^{11}\)

Her encounter with the Jew is also interesting. The encounter between the Black Girl and the Jew makes it abundantly clear that Shaw did not believe in the second coming of Jesus Christ. The Jew had the firm conviction that Jesus would come back and save all the people from damnation in the near future. This second coming has been promised by the

\(^{11}\) Ibid. P. 64.
Saviour as we find in the Bible. The Jew also believes that the moment the Saviour comes back to the world everything will be alright. The Black Girl does not believe in such unreasonable expectations: "If you wait for other people to come and set everything right you will wait for ever." 12

Her encounter with the Arab and the Imagemaker, who is fond of making images, is also interesting. He has made countless images of countless Gods in different forms and under different names. This could not satisfy the Black Girl.

The Arab, she happens to meet along with the Imagemaker, virtually lays bare the inherent hollowness of the scriptural writings. According to Shaw, the scriptural writings basically project the mind of the writer of the scriptures and not of God. The Arab is against the idea of making images: "But who could conceive the greatness of Allah in a bodily form?" 13 For him only "writing is useful". As a writer he paints the heaven and the hell and the God in his own way: "so when I have to deal with them I am no longer inspired, and have to rely on my own invention and my own wit. For them I write terrible stories of the Day of Judgement, and of the hell in which evil-doers will suffer eternally. I contrast these horrors with enchanting pictures of

12. Ibid, P-56
13. Ibid. The Arab, P-67

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the paradise maintained for those who do the will of Allah. Such a paradise will tempt them, you understand: a paradise of gardens and perfumes and beautiful women." 14

When the Conjurer asked: "And how do you know what is the will of Allah?" 15 the Arab replied: "As they are incapable of understanding it my will must serve them for it instead." 16

Such lines undoubtedly throw much light on the Shavian disregard for the Scriptural paintings and messages. He perhaps identifies the Arab with Mahomet, when the Arab made some self-revelatory statements: "Yet in my youth I was proud to be the servant of a widow and drove her camels. Now I am the humble servant of Allah and drive men for Him." 17 This is obviously Shaw's dig at Mahomet.

The inner urge of the Black Girl could not be satisfied. She found a galaxy of Gods. But none could satisfy her: "I have found many Gods. Everyone I meet has one to offer me; and this imagemaker here has a whole shopful of them. But to me they are all dead." 18

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14. Ibid., P-68-69
15. Ibid., The Conjurer, P-69
16. Ibid., The Arab, P-69
17. Ibid., P-69
18. Ibid., P-72
In this connection, although a little bit irrelevant, we can point out the fact that nowhere Shaw has ever made any direct reference to Hinduism.

The Black Girl was restless until she happened to meet the wisened old gentleman, who made the suggestion: "Come in. I have found after a good deal of consideration, that the best place to seek God is in a garden. You can dig for Him here." The old gentleman also wants to point out that: "Many people who have found God have not liked Him and spent the rest of their lives running away from Him." He refers to the tragic story of Jupiter and Semele. Jupiter fell in love with Semele. But, he appeared and behaved like a man to her. Semele wanted Jupiter to appear before her as God with all the greatness of his Godhood. She went on insisting. He complied. But, she could not bear the presence of God before her." She shrivelled up and cracked like a flea in the fire." The Old Gentleman also adds: "We shall never be able to bear His full presence until we have fulfilled all His purposes and become God ourselves. But as His purposes are infinite, and we are most briefly finite, we shall never, thank God, be able

20. Ibid, Old Gentleman, R-77.
to catch up with His purposes. So much the better for us. If our work were done we should be of no further use; that would be the end of us; for He would hardly keep us alive for the pleasure of looking at us, ugly and ephemeral insects as we are. Therefore, come in and help to cultivate this garden to his glory. The rest you had better leave to Him." 22

This is certainly a self-projection of Shaw's attitude towards God. For God is something infinite. He is nothing but the cosmic power. The Life-Force. He has already explained his ideas about 'Life-Force' in the plays like Man and Superman and Back to Methuselah in greater detail. It is certainly no use searching after that cosmic power. Mere understanding of that power is enough. The socialistic attitude of Shaw has also to be taken into consideration. By sincerely cultivating the field one can serve God best. By getting the black girl married to the socialist cultivator Shaw reinforces this point of view.

Unlike the white Europeans, the Black Girl is completely free from the ageold pseudo-Christian beliefs. Her whole mental make-up is free and unattached to any conventional belief. She is sincere in her search. The Bible

22. Ibid. Old Gentleman, P-80.
gifted to her by the young missionary does not explain and solve her problems. In all her critical moments she opens the Bible, and finds the pages being turned into powders. Later on, she throws the Bible away.

In the course of her search she meets different Gods. Every second God was an improvement upon the first. Every God marks a process of development in the conception of God.

The Old Irish Gentleman changes her attitude towards God. As a matter of fact, she converts herself to the Shavian belief. She starts believing that God is nothing but the cosmic force. He is infinite. He is creative. In order to find God one has to be God himself. But, this does not necessarily mean that we are to be completely unattached to God. Our supreme duty is to fully dedicate ourselves to the will of that elemental power, and lead a creative and purposeful life with full awareness about our duties and responsibilities. So, our conception of God must change. The Bible is not the full explanation of what God really is; and religion should in no case be mistaken for rituals. In the Bible Shaw finds more literary value as he has already stated in the preface...

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to the play, *Androcles and the Lion*. Otherwise, the Bible basically represents the will of the writer who wrote it as we are told in the story of the Black Girl. Thus, the tale, *The Black Girl in Search Of God*, explores a new area of Bernard Shaw's attitude towards the Bible in particular and God in general.