

Question:

Explain the significance of Act I.

Answer:

The focus of Act I is to replace a romantic view of warfare with a more realistic one. Shaw uses humour to deflate notions of chivalry and bravery. Raina is determined to see Sergius as a knight in armour and the Swiss intruder seems vulgar to her. A mercenary and professional soldier, the Swiss or Captain Bluntschli describes Sergius' heroic charge as an act of suicide, except that the Serbian guns did not work. It is only the young soldier who is romantic and brave; the old soldier is a realist and it is what keeps him alive. Experienced soldiers carry extra food rather than extra ammunition. In fact, *"You can always tell an old soldier by the inside of his holsters and cartridge boxes. The young ones carry pistols and cartridges; the old ones grub."*

Primarily Shaw was known for writing plays of ideas where certain characters represent ideas or philosophies that clash with each other. As the characters or philosophies confront each other, illusions are shed and motives are clarified. The audience goes away

thinking freshly about the subject. Bluntschli stands for realism and Rain for romanticism. Shaw means to place romanticism as an outdated and unhelpful view of life. It supports war, class distinction and inequality with its medieval view of chivalry, knights and ladies, and lower classes that don't come out.

Raina sees herself and Sergius as a part of the elite who can appreciate lofty ideas and look down on others. Snobbery, one of the major themes is highlighted in Act I. The snobbery of the Petkoff consists in having exaggerated respect for social position or wealth and being ashamed of socially inferior connections. Raina while assuring the fugitive that he was safe in their home highlighted their social position. She says "*We go to Bucharest every year for the opera season; and I have spent a whole month in Vienna.*" She also mentions that they are "*Bulgarians of really good standing*" and can therefore "appreciate" delicacies like washing hands. Raina has adopted certain idealistic attitude towards life which she has learned from art and through social conditions. But it is in Act I itself that the dichotomy in her character is highlighted. Shaw

gives his readers plenty of clues about the real Raina beneath the mask from the very beginning. It is Bluntschli who will finally force her to remove that mask of romantic heroine later in the play. Her doubts regarding the validity of her romantic ideals are voiced in Act I itself: "*Our heroic ideals. I sometimes used to doubt whether they were anything but dreams.*" Her natural intelligence provokes her into thinking that she had heroic ideals because she was so fond of reading "Byron and Pushkin".

So anti-romantic elements have been introduced from the onset of the play. They have been further accentuated by means of position and contrast. The interaction between Catherine and Raina in Act I presents a view of heroism, while that between Raina and Bluntschli presents another. Raina and Catherine's celebration of war is set against Bluntschli's realism- hunger of soldiers and savagery of the enemy. Sergius' reported achievement in war is heroic in the eyes of many but madness to Bluntschli.

The primary purpose served by the opening act of any play is that of exposition and 'The

Arms and the Man' is no exception. The opening act of this play is a true exposition of the male and female protagonists and also that of the themes of the play. The opening act also highlights the different aspects of Raina's character. It is surprising that Raina lacks physical longing for Sergius; "*She does not kiss it for press it to her breast, or shew it any mark of bodily affection; but she takes it in her hands and elevates it like a priestess.*" But Bluntschli's fear and weariness rouses her maternal instincts. When faced with danger, Raina shows herself to be a courageous young woman; the threats of the fugitive do not scare her. When the Russian officer wishes to search her room, she confronts him boldly. The Swiss describes her action as "noble", "heroic" and "angelic", which it truly was. While her romantic notion may have gleaned from opera and books, it took real courage to help an enemy soldier. The warmth of her character shines through the façade of the romantic heroine.