



Critiquing War and Power in *Arms and the Man* and *the Leader*: A Reading in Political Satire

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Article Info

ISSN (online): 2583-8261

Volume: 04

Issue: 05

September – October 2025

Received: 11-07-2025

Accepted: 12-08-2025

Published: 04-09-2025

Page No: 56-59

Abstract

This study explores the political dimension in two plays from different cultural contexts, *Arms and the Man* by Bernard Shaw and *The Leader* by Mustafa Moharram. Both plays belong to a tradition of satirical theatre that critiques war and authority, not through direct confrontation but through irony. The research adopts postmodern theory as a framework to understand the relationship between representation, satire, and the deconstruction of power symbols. The study focuses on the portrayal of war in Shaw's play and political authority in Moharram's, analyzing key characters such as the soldier Bluntschli and the actor who becomes a leader. It argues that satire is used to undermine notions of heroism, leadership, and prestige, exposing the falseness of official discourse. The methodology follows comparative textual analysis, incorporating historical and cultural context. The study proposes that political satire is no longer merely entertainment, but a subtle form of resistance that questions submission and promotes public awareness. It aims to fill a critical gap by comparing two plays rarely studied together and offering a contemporary political reading of both.

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.54660/IJSSER.2025.4.5.56-59>

Keywords: Arms and the Man, The Leader, Bernard Shaw, Mustafa Moharram, Postmodern Theory

1. Introduction

Shaw the Bulgarian society is pictured as feudal class structures that Europe was slowly moving from it. During this period, George Bernard Shaw was writing his plays. In this period, the great changes occurred in advanced countries such as improvement of slums, factory condition, greater representation of lower classes in government gestured the dramatic reform, and working classes had gained the vote and right to education. It also was a time of rising power of the middle class. George Bernard Shaw wrote *Arms and the Man* in the Victorian era. He was a keen socialist and had any ideas about classes that exist in Europe. There were some class struggles taking place in Britain as a new wave of socialist ideology. Even if the country was industrialized, workers and low classes were paid low salaries and had little security. There were several workers' movements that drew the artists' and writers' attention, such as George Bernard Shaw. In this case, he became a socialist. And joined the Fabian Society, where he wrote social documents. He believes in the equality of all people and humbles distinctions based on social class. (Fatemeh 7) In times of conflict and political change, theatre often turns to irony not just to make people laugh, but to confront them with tough questions about war, power, heroism, and submission. Political satire becomes both an artistic tool and a critical stance. This is clear in *Arms and the Man* by George Bernard Shaw and its counterpart in the Egyptian context, *The Leader* by Mostafa Moharram, which mocks political leadership and the illusions of public worship. Both plays use satire to challenge symbols of war and authority. So, how do Shaw in *Arms and the Man* and Moharram in *The Leader* use political satire to deconstruct the language of war and power within postmodern contexts?

The importance of this study lies in how satire has grown beyond being just a source of humor. It has become a thoughtful tool to reveal political and social contradictions. Especially in postmodern contexts, political satire does not offer solutions. It asks questions. It tears down dominant narratives. This kind of theatre does not preach. It laughs at what people treat as sacred. That's why understanding satire in these plays matters not just to literature or drama scholars, but to anyone questioning power, war, and public discourse in times of political manipulation.

Today's political language is full of contradictions, empty slogans, and fake heroism. These are not new issues. Shaw wrote *Arms and the Man* in 1894, while *The Leader* came out in the 1990s. But both plays share one thing: they mock public lies, patriotism as deception, and the false glow that power creates around itself. We now live in an age ruled by images and slogans, not values. As military and authoritarian regimes repeat themselves across the globe in both East and West there is a need to revisit plays that make us laugh but also show us how fear is built, how power is shaped, and how people either accept or resist it. This research offers a fresh reading of two plays from different times and cultures, united by one question: How can theatre turn irony into soft resistance?

This paper focuses on analyzing both plays as models of postmodern satirical discourse. It aims to:

- Show how political satire is used to break down the image of war and power.
- Compare the satirical techniques used in each play.
- Understand the connection between theatre and its audience in shaping critical awareness.

Political satire and postmodern theory don't follow one strict method. They are more of an attitude: constant doubt, endless criticism of power. Postmodern thought, found in both philosophy and art, rejects absolute truths, grand heroes, and final messages. Everything can be questioned. Every power can be taken apart. So, political satire fits this way of thinking. In *Arms and the Man*, Shaw presents war with irony. There are no brave armies or great leaders' only hungry soldiers and shallow officers. War is not glory. It's organized nonsense. Shaw uses irony to highlight the gap between what people say about war and what really happens in it (Shaw 45). In *The Leader*, satire hits the idea of leadership itself. The "leader" is just an actor who looks like the president. He's forced to play the role. The tragedy is not only his but the public's, who believe, cheer, and fear. Moharram shows power as a performance, not truth this is a core idea in postmodern thought (El-Samman 202).

Both playwrights offer critical views that break down symbols and images. Bluntschli in Shaw's play doesn't want to be a hero he wants chocolate, In the *Leader* the main character has no power but becomes a fake symbol of it in a grand comic drama. Looking at the cultural context, Shaw wrote *Arms and the Man* shortly after the Serbo-Bulgarian War. At the time, national pride was high, but Shaw was upset by what he saw as false glorification. The play was harshly criticized at first for mocking war heroes (Innes 113). Yet Shaw insisted that "the theatre must not serve illusion it must expose it" (Shaw 10). *The Leader* came from a time when strongmen were rising, media was full of propaganda, and politics was full of double meanings. The play reflects

Egyptian life shaped by images of worship and charismatic power. The "leader" in the play is a man-made image empty, yet terrifying in the public eye. This kind of satire doesn't just mock individuals. It attacks the entire system that allows an ordinary man to become a feared figure.

Regarding the audience as part of the play's message, both texts show that people are not innocent. In Shaw's play, the female lead falls in love with the heroic image of an officer, only to later realize that such love is built on lies. She ends up falling for the honest, simple soldier. Shaw here invites the audience to rethink what values they admire (Ousby 284). In *The Leader*, it's the audience who forces the character to become a leader. Fear doesn't only come from the top. It's also built by people who accept the performance and help keep it alive. This idea echoes Michel Foucault's view that "power is not just something used from above. It is reproduced through us" (Foucault 94). Theatre here mocks not just rulers, but also those who help the lie survive.

On the level of technique, Shaw uses sharp and witty dialogue. His characters speak in short, funny lines that say a lot. He uses irony to show the contrast between words and actions. Moharram, by contrast, depends on visual performance, repeated leader slogans, and the gap between appearance and reality. Both writers create political satire in different but powerful ways. Despite the cultural and time differences, *Arms and the Man* and *The Leader* share a key goal: exposing illusions. The first shows the lie of war. The second, the lie of power. Both use humor that makes us laugh but also leaves us uncomfortable. That might be the true power of such theatre: not to comfort, but to disturb. Through this reading, we don't look for clear truths or final messages. Postmodernism rejects all that. What we try to uncover is trickery, contradiction, and manipulation of symbols. Theatre becomes a hall of mirrors. The audience sees itself and laughs.

2. Methodology

This study uses a comparative analytical approach, guided by postmodern theory to deconstruct political and authoritarian discourse through theatrical satire. The method focuses on analyzing *Arms and the Man* by George Bernard Shaw and *The Leader* by Mostafa Moharram. It explores how irony and satire work in both plays not just as comedic devices, but as tools that expose power and challenge its false symbols.

3. Discussion

In reading George Bernard Shaw's play *Arms and the Man*, one should pay attention to the difference between characters of social class and gender or sex. George Bernard Shaw pictures gender roles in the characters Louka, Catherine, Sergius, and others. There is masculinity in Louka's character while annoying Nicola. She reveals her control through her interaction with Sergius. Mrs. Petkoff also shows masculinity in controlling household works in the absence of her husband, Mr. Petkoff. In the first act of the play, Raina is threatened by Bluntschli, who runs and escapes from soldiers. He threatens a defenseless woman with his gun and allows her to hide him behind the curtain. (Fateme 8)

Irony in *Arms and the Man* begins in the very first scene, when the Swiss soldier Bluntschli escapes from the battlefield. He's hungry, tired, and instead of acting like a brave warrior, he asks for chocolate. This moment alone

dismantles the traditional image of the military hero. Shaw doesn't give us a classic hero. Instead, he introduces an ordinary man who doesn't believe in war and has no interest in dying for slogans. This challenges the myth of heroism and redefines what "courage" means in modern warfare. The irony is not blunt; it comes through the contrast between public ideas about war and the reality the play presents (Shaw 42). In *The Leader*, irony also appears from the very start through the identity of the main character a stage actor who happens to look like the president. He is forced to impersonate the real leader. The shift from acting to real power becomes a key source of irony, suggesting that leadership is just a role that can be performed. The difference between truth and illusion fades, echoing a key element of postmodern storytelling (Hutcheon 91). Moharram creates a satirical world where authority becomes a copy, and the audience can't tell the original from the image. This relates to Baudrillard's idea of "hyperreality" where the image overtakes the original, and reality gets buried under layers of repetition (Baudrillard 6).

Both plays rely on irony, but they use different styles. Shaw uses sharp, witty dialogue and verbal contradictions to expose how real war differs from its glorified image. Bluntschli, for example, calls war a "ridiculous murder party" and mocks soldiers who die for the pride of their officers. The humor breaks apart the military rhetoric that glorifies war. Characters like Raina, who first idolizes the romantic officer and later sees through him, reflect a shift in awareness from admiring appearances to questioning them. Shaw rewrites the love story within a satirical frame, where the heroine falls for the realistic man, not the heroic one. This shift is not just personal but also a political statement against war and its false ideals.

In *The Leader*, irony is less in the dialogue and more in the stage situation. The main character has no political plan or opinion; he just looks like the president. Yet this is enough to make him the de facto ruler feared, obeyed, and worshiped. The irony here reveals how fragile the idea of leadership is. It exposes the mechanisms that make people believe there's a difference between the real and the fake leader. The play suggests the public doesn't care about policy or substance only image and authority. This is a deeply postmodern idea: form matters more than content, and the representation becomes more real than the truth (Jameson 19). What connects the two plays is that neither offers a trustworthy hero. Bluntschli is not a hero he's anti-heroic. The leader is not a leader he's a mask. Both plays leave the audience in a strange space: laughing at the lie, but not given a clear alternative. This aligns with postmodern values: rejecting grand narratives, avoiding moral preaching, and favoring doubt, deconstruction, and play (Lyotard 24).

The irony targets everything, characters, language, scenes, and events. In *Arms and the Man* war is not epic it's silly. In *The Leader* politics is not serious it's absurd. But this humor also turns the mirror back to the people. In both plays, the other characters accept the lies they clap, they obey, and they romanticize. Raina learns only after being shocked. The people in *The Leader* follow someone who offers nothing but appearance. This raises an ethical question: are we victims of power, or are we helping it survive? Though the techniques differ, the aim is similar. Shaw uses fast, ironic dialogue funny but unsettling. Moharram uses a more realistic acting style, but with deeply ironic meaning. Shaw critiques war,

Moharram critiques leadership. Both tears down public symbols and rebuild awareness. Theater, in both cases, doesn't give us "truth". It uncovers the fake truths we accept. This reflects the postmodern view that even "truth" is a product of discourse, shaped and reshaped by those in power (Foucault 95).

Another shared trait is how both writers treat their audience. They don't preach or explain as if the audience is ignorant. Instead, they treat them as part of the system. Shaw's irony doesn't assume the audience already knows the truth it invites them to think again. Moharram does the same, making viewers laugh at themselves, their fear, and their blind applause. This kind of theater doesn't offer solutions. It opens the door to questions. It brings down the glow of authority without glorifying resistance. That's what makes political irony different from direct criticism. It's trickier, less obvious, but more powerful over time. Language becomes a tool for this irony, but it carries serious weight. When Bluntschli describes the war as stupidity, he sums up Shaw's view of military thinking. And when the fake leader in *The Leader* delivers empty yet loud speeches, the text mocks how official language manipulates people. Language is no longer a tool for clarity; it's used for control. This reflects the postmodern idea that language itself is tied to power, not just communication (Derrida 112).

In the end, the irony in both plays differs in form but aligns in purpose. It doesn't just make us laugh. It forces us to face a twisted reality. War isn't glory. The leader isn't a saint. The public isn't always aware. These messages aren't handed out in obvious terms they are built through contradictions, strange events, and characters who are neither heroes nor victims, but ordinary people revealing the lies by simply existing.

4. Conclusion

When we laugh at war or political leaders, we're not escaping reality we're exposing it. That's the core of political satire in *Arms and the Man* by George Bernard Shaw and *The Leader* by Mustafa Muharram. Neither play was written purely for entertainment. Both challenge traditional ideas about heroism, military honor, and political leadership. Satire here is not an act of aggression but a tool to dismantle authority built on fear, illusion, and performance. This study began with a simple question: how do the two playwrights use political satire to break down narratives about war and power? Through comparative analysis, we showed how Shaw strips the romantic image of the heroic soldier and reveals the absurd logic behind militarism. Meanwhile, Muharram presents the leader as a public illusion, a crowd-manufactured mask. Shaw's satire is mainly in language and character behavior. Muharram's is built into the structure and representation. Yet both rely on the core tools of theater dialogue, staging, visual symbols, and irony to deliver their critique.

Although these plays belong to different time periods, they share a similar stance toward authority. Shaw wrote during the rise of the British Empire when war was framed as a patriotic duty. Challenging that narrative was, in itself, a form of rebellion. Muharram wrote in an Arab context that had elevated the leader to near-mythical status. His satire doesn't just target political content it mocks the very shape of leadership as empty spectacle. This confirms that theater can be a space for resistance, even when dressed in humor or

absurdity. Through a postmodern lens, we find that satire in these two works doesn't aim to offer clear alternatives. There's no true "hero" in either play. Neither Bluntschli in Shaw's text nor the actor-turned-leader in Muharram's play represents an ideal. This apparent emptiness is part of postmodern thought, which rejects grand narratives in favor of doubt, deconstruction, and multiple meanings. War in Shaw's play is not a noble calling it's a messy, confusing act. Leadership in Muharram's play isn't power it's a joke in costume. It's as if theater itself admits that truth can't be spoken directly. It must be mocked, mimicked, and turned on its head.

One key outcome of this research is the understanding that political satire isn't just about content it's also about form. Humor doesn't come from words alone. It comes from how a character is presented, how a scene unfolds, and how the audience reacts. In postmodern theater, form and satire are tightly linked. That's what makes both plays unique and relevant in their use of satire as a political tool. Also noticed that the audience is not just passive. Both plays include an "inner audience" within the story like Raina in *Arms and the Man* or the public in *The Leader* who either support or resist the lie. This reminds us that power is not only enforced from above. It's also produced from below, through applause, obedience, and repetition. Theater here doesn't just laugh at power. It laughs at those who help maintain it.

What makes political satire in these plays so effective is that it doesn't preach. It creates symbolic space. We don't hear propaganda or slogans. We see cowardly soldiers or fake leaders speaking with biting honesty. These symbolic images are stronger than direct statements because they force the audience to think instead of just listen. This is what makes theater a form of resistance not through loud speeches, but through skeptical laughter. In the end, this study invites a postmodern reading of political theater not to find solutions, but to understand how lies are built and how we help keep them alive. Theater doesn't change the world alone. But it can shift our perspective. It can reveal contradictions. It can make us face uncomfortable questions. This kind of satire isn't nonsense it's a serious tool to rethink power through a medium that looks playful but speaks deep truths.

The reading offered here doesn't close the door. It opens a new path to think about how art and authority interact, especially in a world overloaded with images and starved of truth. Political satire in theater is not dead it has simply changed. Postmodernism gave it the space to grow without needing direct confrontation. In a time when societies are run by slogans and symbols, satire may be the clearest way left to uncover what's real.

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