



Candida: the Myth of Traditional Woman Exploded

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ABSTRACT

The late nineteenth century witnessed a growing dissatisfaction on the status of woman. Later, this problem became known as the "Woman Question" and after 1860 came more into focus. The women in England were not granted a franchise until 1918; but by 1882 married women had acquired legal capacity to own and dispose of property Shaw attacked the ideals and practice of Victorian drama in many ways. An important feature of nineteenth century drama had been the heroine of rosy type charming and of innocent girlhood. Shaw was disappointed by this lifeless romanticization. The new type of dramatic heroine may seem natural enough today but in 1893 it was significant of a dramatic revolution. In Candida, Shaw exploded the myth of traditional woman by showing that it is the man and not the woman, who is the doll in the house.

Keywords :realism, myth, romantic, illusion, traditional woman

PAPER TEXT MATTER

By Shaw's time, a change in the literary conception of women had begun to take place. Earlier there was lack of interesting women in literature and the reason was lack of sympathy and familiarity. The male writers would imagine moods and adventures of male characters by imagining themselves how such a man might feel in that particular condition. But writing about women they had to imagine artificially. They were familiar with lives of women in their household. But the change takes place during Shaw's time because of a shift in emphasis which turned many novels from outward adventures to inner consciousness.

Shaw has always showed interest in the question of woman's status and her relation to man. He displayed heroines who represent the idea of independent womanhood. One of the main social features of Victorian England was its boasted home life. For an ideal home people needed a submissive, dependent wife. According to them wife should be dependent on her husband. But in the role of mother or mistress of the household she might be a capable or independent woman. The greatest creation of a woman's character in Mr. Shaw's early work is Candida.

Candida is displayed as a supporter not of her children but of her husband. She is far above the old ideals of the good wife of Victorian convention. She is independent in mind and not affected by the snobbish type of feminism. Candida fully identifies the faults and weaknesses of the man whom she is married, still she loves him like a noble woman. It is on her husband Morell's part that for a moment he is afraid that Candida would choose sentimental poet, Eugene Marchbanks. But to the extent of surprise Candida continues to love her husband. She understands the problem honestly and due to her strong will she succeeds in obtaining the right solution.

The new ideals of feminist independence were beginning to take form. These new ideals of feminist independence produced a good wife, Candida. A.E. Morgan (1932) says:

Candida is not the ultra-feminist, not the "strong-minded" spinster. Mr. Shaw is a sufficiently sound biologist and psychologist to know that it is as mate and mother that woman can best attain her full stature. (p. 62)

According to Shaw whatever instinct it is that guides woman in dealing with their sons and lovers, might guide them also in ruling the world. Thus the practical and life-conserving qualities of the mother-woman led Shaw to believe in her saving skill. Candida, Major Barbara, Lady Cicely, and the calming wives and mistresses in the later plays - all show a sensibility of women which men do not possess. The conventional saving woman of eighteenth century literature is known by her innocence and idealism whereas these Shavian saving women are known for their firm realism. Candida is Shaw's ideal woman. Shaw (1932) wrote to Ellen Terry, "Candida is the 'Virgin Mother', and none else." (p. 623)

The play has a love triangle. A young intruder presents his challenge into a happy marriage and then he departs leaving the husband and wife to take up their relationship on a new basis of understanding. Shaw has chosen to analyse the actual role of woman in contemporary English Society. Though Candida is unconventional, she possesses all her feminine charm while the post-Ibsen women are unconventional at the cost of their womanly charm. According to Shaw (1932):

She is like any other pretty woman who is just clever enough to make the most of her sexual attractions for trivially selfish ends; but Candida's serene brow, courageous eyes, and well set mouth and chin signify largeness of mind and dignity of character to enable her cunning in the affections. (p. 413)

Shaw has presented the maternal aspects of the woman and her influence over the man and the dependence of man on her strength, instead of presenting her as a puppet of man. The play shows that in the real typical doll's house it is the man who is the doll.

Candida's husband, James Mavor Morell, is esteemed in society as highly respectable gentleman and in private life he is an ideal and devoted husband. But, later, on, it is revealed to him in the course of normal incidents that he is a parasite on his wife's work. His wife has to do all the irritating drudgery of the household to keep him fit and to give him leisure for his noble mission of preaching Christianity and Socialism. He is neither an oppressor nor an exploiter by nature or principle. He is the noblest of men and most affectionate of husbands. The dramatist wants to say that marriage is unsound from

the socialistic point of view. He demonstrates this not through the portraiture of a tyrannical, idle, do-nothing husband but through one who is himself a devout Christian and an ardent socialist.

Morell firmly believes it to be so, and just in the course of a single day his status changes from happy married man to shattered man, full of doubts. Morell has a clergyman's false ideals about his wife because he believes that happiness is the proper goal of mankind whereas Marchbanks has a poet's false ideals about Candida.

When Marchbanks remarks poetically, "Your feet should be beautiful on the mountains". (Shaw, Bernard, 1931, p. 111). Candida brings him down from the world of imagination to the world of reality by replying. "My feet would not be beautiful on the Hackney Road without boots". (Shaw, Bernard, 1931, p. 111).

Thus Shaw juxtaposed the romantic and realistic points of view and he left the conclusion to the readers. Candida is practical in her approach; she knows very well that people cannot be made good merely by preaching. Moreover, once their moral sense is satisfied, they pursue their worldly, materialistic activities with greater ruthlessness moreover, such places are not open on Sundays and even if they were, people would not like to be seen going there on a Sunday. She further remarks that the main reason why the women form the majority of the congregation is because they all have "Prossy's complaint".

Oh, I know. You silly boy: you think it's your Socialism and your religion; but if it were that, they'd do what you tell them instead of only coming to look at you. They all have Prossy's complaint". (Shaw, Bernard, 1931, p. 114).

Prossy, like all the women, is in love with Morell. That's why she serves him at a much lower salary than what she was getting elsewhere. Candida's charm compels the sensitive poet to love her. But Candida understands the need of Eugene's heart. She knows about his past where no one cared for him, not even his mother. This is the reason which made him to feel desolated. His want of affection made him an emotional, romantic and nervous type of man. It was Candida who had understood his state of mind and heart and she comes forward as his true defender and mother. She invests courage and love in him. In this way she defends him from emotional disturbances.

Candida is a responsible and sincere woman. She knows that if she scolds him or tries to drive him away, it can lead him to take shelter in the arms of a bad woman. At the same time she cannot let him to indulge with her feelings. Her conventional morality demands that she should expel the poet from her house instead of surrender her chastity. But she has practical and unconventional acknowledgement of morality. Her saving instinct compels her to speak in favour of Eugene. Candida does not believe in old worn-out conventions. She has freed herself from the traditional conviction of morality and also the illusion of physical purity of women.

When the poet Marchbanks tells Morell about his love for Candida, Morell does not remain the same man of Act I. Gone is the self-satisfied, robust, confident individual who is sure

of his capability to hold attention of the people. Candida tells everyone that Morell has helped her in becoming an independent woman and further she says

It works beautifully as long as I think the same things as he does. But now! Because I have just thought something different! Look at him! (Shaw, Bernard, 1931, p. 139).

Morell is shocked because Candida dares to express some unconventional views. According to her it is not immoral to give love to the poet who is in need of it. She thinks she should protect him if she can. But Morell does not tolerate it and he gets desperate.

Candida says: "Oh, you are only shocked; is that all? How conventional all you unconventional people are". (Shaw, Bernard, 1931, p. 141).

She thinks that in spite of the propagation of socialistic ideology a woman can never be truly independent of her husband. The man can give freedom to woman up to a certain extent and after that she has to be pulled back by the reign of male superiority.

The greatest weakness of Morell is his complacency. Shaw scolds him for it when he makes Morell tell Marchbanks: "It is easy - terribly easy - to shake a man's faith in himself". (Shaw, Bernard, 1931, p. 139). Morell is caught first time in such a critical situation, where his complacency and strength is challenged. He discovers that he is nothing; he is dependent on his wife. It is a shattering blow to his "unquestioned assumption of strength and self sufficiency". Candida says, Eugene has been used to live without love therefore he can adjust to an independent existence without any emotional nourishment. But Morell has been pampered and spoiled by everyone.

Candida tells Eugene that Morell's mother and sisters spoiled him with their love and care. Now she takes care of Morell like a nurse, wife, sister and mother. She manages all household work to provide Morell time to carry out his mission of preaching Christianity and Socialism. Candida, thus, is indispensable for Morell. She goes on his side because she knows that he cannot live without her and also she loves her. Candida understands that she completely depends on her husband for the attainment of her individuality. She does not look for freedom because she knows that it would give nothing but isolation and incompleteness. She understands very well that there is certainty in life with her husband; she can be his wife, mother and sisters whereas life with Eugene Marchbanks would be insecure and dangerous.

On knowing Candida's decision, Marchbanks prepares to leave. Candida asks to make a little poem and to repeat it whenever he thinks of her. She wants him to make a poem out of line: "When I am thirty, she will be forty-five, when I am sixty, she will be seventy five". (Shaw, Bernard, 1931, p. 141). In this way Candida wants him to remember the wide difference between their respective ages.

Thus Candida is a saving woman with motherly instincts howsoever fraudulent and immoral she may appear to be but at heart she is Shaw's middle class ideal woman who is fully alive towards her duty to her husband, to her society, her lover and her own self.

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