

REVERSAL OF MALE HEGEMONY: BERNARD SHAW AS A FEMINIST IN THE DRAMA *CANDIDA*

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ABSTRACT

The Drama Candida (1894) is particularly focused in this article to analyze and explore the reversal of male dominance. George Bernard Shaw's portrayal of a strong, independent female protagonist who beats all the odds of a patriarchal society. The reversal of male hegemony in George Bernard Shaw's Candida reflects and brings out the societal change in patriarchal conventions. This study prominently demonstrates the traditional gender dynamics by analyzing specific aspects of the drama, such as her dialogues and interactions with her husband, Reverend James Morell, and Marchbanks Eugene, the young poet. Candida, being given the choice to choose between James and Eugene, exhibits the power dynamics and shift, which displays the breaking of norms of female submission, which is simply a vivid example of her autonomy. By using a critical feminist lens, this article explores how dialogue, characterization, and the idea of survival or living, which are repetitively represented in Shaw's writings, collectively make Candida as a figure of female strength and agency. The findings illustrate how Shaw has criticized male-centric power structures by developing a female character, Candida. She, as a woman, advocates the idea of women exercising their authority without violating moral limits and revealing another side of a relationship for better understanding. The play conveys the reconstruction of a home by a female, breaking all the established power hierarchies and using all of her emotional intelligence and freedom. Shaw questions male authority and cherishes the transformation of women and society's traditional role division by illuminating Candida's subjectivity and free will.

Keywords: Feminism, Drama, New Women, Patriarchy, Male Hegemony, Role Reversal

INTRODUCTION

Candida (1895), included in George Bernard Shaw's Plays Pleasant collection, exemplifies Shaw's transition from the melodrama of the 19th century to the "theatre of ideas." Known for his advocacy of equality and social reform, Shaw frequently challenged patriarchy and gender roles in his works. While feminist tendencies pervade his writings, *Candida* holds particular significance in feminist discourse due to its nuanced portrayal of a strong, independent female protagonist.

By depicting its titular character as a woman with agency over her relationships and identity, *Candida* subverts the conventional romantic triangle. *Candida* exercises decision-making power traditionally reserved for men during the Victorian era, thereby challenging patriarchal assumptions. Through her interactions with Eugene Marchbanks, the sensitive young poet, and Reverend James Morell, her idealistic but repressive husband, Shaw critiques the constraints of traditional gender roles and introduces progressive ideas of female empowerment.

Feminist theory revolves around core concepts such as sex, gender, race, discrimination, equality, difference, and choice. Systems and structures often perpetuate inequity based on these attributes, working against individuals and societal equality. Research within critical paradigms assumes that exploring these inequities in the social order can reveal hidden truths. More importantly, such exploration can raise awareness of oppressive systems and create platforms for diverse voices to speak for themselves (Egbert & Sanden, 2019).

This study examines *Candida* through a feminist critical lens to analyze how Shaw redefines the domestic sphere as a space of female agency rather than oppression. Shaw juxtaposes Morell's patriarchal stance, Marchbanks' proto-feminist beliefs, and *Candida*'s modern feminist outlook to reflect shifting perceptions of gender and power. *Candida*'s pivotal

decision to stay with Morell is not an act of submission but a deliberate assertion of her autonomy, representing a redefinition of traditional gender dynamics.

Through humor, irony, and a rejection of melodramatic tropes, Shaw critiques societal norms while emphasizing women's intellectual and emotional capabilities. This article explores *Candida* as a significant work of feminist literary criticism, focusing on how the play connects Victorian gender conceptions with emerging feminist philosophy. By analyzing Shaw's portrayal of *Candida* as a precursor to modern feminism, the study aims to underline the play's enduring relevance to themes of gender equality and the dismantling of male hegemony.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The main aim of this study is to highlight the significant role of women in Bernard Shaw's works, particularly in *Candida*, where Shaw challenges the conventional view of women as inferior to other genders. The researcher seeks to investigate how women are portrayed in the drama *Candida* through a feminist lens.

In the context of feminist theory, Shaw, as a male writer, introduced female characters deeply associated with feminist ideas. According to Watson (1964: 14), "the relationship between male writers and the female characters they create, as Shaw does, sufficiently develops the feminine characters. It has nearly always been a bizarre one, fused by a lack of personal compassion." Shaw emphasizes the distinctive qualities of the New Woman, setting his plays apart from those of other playwrights of his time.

Furthermore, Shaw's portrayal of female characters provides an interesting perspective as they vocalize the struggles and aspirations of Victorian women fighting for liberation. Shaw's dramas, though often controversial, struck "at the backbone of Victorian England" by presenting "an unladylike heroine" (Purdon, 1963: 14).

The researcher extends the analysis by exploring the concept of the "New Woman," who was independent, educated, physically active, and dressed logically. She sought job opportunities, smoked, and pushed for the elimination of gender-based discrimination. This New Woman was a stark contrast to the "ideal" Victorian woman, providing both a target for criticism and a means to express societal anxieties about changing norms (Punch and the *Pall Mall Gazette*, 18 April 1848).

Incorporating these references strengthens the research by illustrating how *Candida* serves as a manifesto for Shaw's vision of progressive women. *Candida* is regarded as one of the finest plays of the 20th century, offering a blend of humor and poignant moments. "*Candida* is a critique of Victorian society that focuses primarily on the home," asserts Morgan (1972: 65).

Moreover, George Bernard Shaw is considered by some scholars as a proto-feminist author and social reformer who laid the foundation for modern theatre. In *Candida*, Shaw critiques marriage and the economic system, the most dominant social institutions of his time (Kayalvizhi, 2012: 11). Shaw's liberal approach highlights that women are not bound by marriage but instead freely choose relationships based on mutual love and respect. He suggests that women, like *Candida*, should embrace their free will to achieve equality in domestic roles and responsibilities.

Shaw "valued women, showing through his plays that they were not only to be loved but revered, even feared. Life with women was as vast a subject to him as religion," notes Purdom (1963) with accuracy. These pieces of evidence support the researcher's investigation and validate its authenticity.

The researcher aims to explore Shaw's feminist approach in *Candida* and analyze how the role of women is portrayed. Although Shaw addresses various themes in the play, such as domestic problems and the nature of problematic plays, the primary focus of this study is to examine Shaw's concept of the New Woman in *Candida*.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To investigate the representation of women's roles in Shaw's *Candida* and how they challenge standard gender stereotypes.
- To examine Shaw's portrayal of the "New Woman" through dialogue and character relationships in *Candida*

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study, which is based on an interpretivist paradigm, examines women's identity and agency in George Bernard Shaw's *Candida* from a feminist standpoint. Shaw's criticism of traditional gender conventions is examined through a textual analysis of the play's dialogue and character interactions. To expose Shaw's feminist philosophy, secondary sources such as scholarly articles and journals are carefully chosen and reviewed for descriptive analysis.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Feminist theory aims to critique and understand the unequal power dynamics between genders, focusing on the social, political, and cultural structures that sustain patriarchy. This theory encompasses various strands such as liberal feminism, radical feminism, and socialist feminism, each addressing different aspects of gender inequality (Tong, 2009). Feminist theorists seek to expose the gendered systems that perpetuate oppression, while also advocating for equality and autonomy for women (Beauvoir, 2011).

Core Tenets of Feminist Theory

- **Equality and Autonomy:** Feminist theory challenges the notion of inherent gender hierarchies, advocating for equality across all spheres of life (Butler, 1990). It encourages a reevaluation of traditional gender roles that restrict women's freedom and self-expression.
- **Critique of Patriarchal Systems:** Feminists critique how societal institutions, cultural norms, and economic structures perpetuate male dominance and gender inequality (Smart, 1993).
- **Agency and Representation:** Feminist thought emphasizes the importance of women's agency, calling for authentic and diverse representations of women in literature and media (Showalter, 2009).
- **Intersectionality:** Contemporary feminist discourse recognizes how gender intersects with race, class, ethnicity, and other identity factors, shaping experiences of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989).

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Briefly, *Candida* is a great feminist work that is a destruction of Victorian ideas of femininity and gives homage to the "New Woman." *Candida* is a self-reliant and self-aware person who negotiates social expectations on her terms; she thus plays an important role in the development of feminist fiction. Other than that, the play also lends a timeless remark about the need for gender equality, as well as offers insight into roles among the women in the era in which the play takes place.

Candida as the "New Woman:

It is evident that *Candida*'s character in Shaw's works is at the forefront of a group of women who seek to explore avenues that were never considered by society. New women mean seeking

independence, disregarding social stereotypes, and rejecting subordination. *Candida*'s statement, 'She means that she belongs to herself' (Act III, line 45), serves as an affirmation of her rebellion against accepting the society and the male authority. It suggests that the Victorian Woman Concept of the 'Angel in the house' suffragette has been left behind; she was only restricted to the standing of a figurative mother. Shaw employs *Candida*'s dominance while conversing to further depict her liberated nature. For instance, in Act III, *Candida*'s words comprise 29% of the entire speech. In a conversation with her husband Morell and the young poet Marchbanks, she actively rejects advice about being modest and passive. *Candida*'s resistance more often condones her taking up an active role alongside her husband. When Marchbanks tries to "save" her from domesticity, *Candida* says, "And pray, my lords and masters, what have you to offer for my choice?" (Act III, line 92) This answer touches on her humor and awareness of herself as well as derides her male counterparts, who, in their competition for her personality, use her.

Critiquing Patriarchy Through Interpersonal Dynamics:

The struggle between *Candida*'s self-imposed choices and male-oriented expectations is embraced by the encounters with the male characters. *Candida* is viewed as the consummate wife without selfishness by Morell, or the stereotypical male figure most would predict. He says, 'I am the master of the house' (Shaw, 1960, p. 233), yet his wife negates his statement through her actions and use of language. 'He wants to know,' she says, 'what it costs to be James's mother and three sisters and wife and mother of his children all wrapped into one.' Yes, what it costs to be the builder of their home life they both seem to enjoy. Here I make him into a master (Shaw, 1960, p. 233). This recognition tells Morell about her importance in managing their home and does away with her unreasonable beliefs.

From Marchbanks' perspective, seen by the perfectly beautiful, innocent girl *Candida*, having a forced, unexciting life. That is why when, in his description of her life, he turns her into a romantic hero, leaving no space for complexity and depth, he appears only too young. His declaration of love is met with a clever and perceptive reply from *Candida*: "I meant that and a good deal more, Master Eugene," as both of you will find out shortly." (III, v, 95) *Candida* proves herself to be the more emotionally developed character and fires a reminder of Marchbanks' independence by turning on her with an odd mix of mothering and teasing.

Challenging Victorian Ideals of Womanhood:

A critique of the Victorian "Angel in the House" ideal, which restricted women to submissive and self-sacrificing positions, can be found in *Candida*'s speech and deeds. "Oh! I am to choose, am I?" was her crucial statement. James, what do you bid? (Act III, line 101) ridicules the male characters' attempts to "own" her will by framing her choice as an auction. This scene highlights her independence and challenges the viewer to consider the constrictive social constraints that are placed on women. *Candida* is a perfect example of striking a balance between traditional roles and personal agency by continuing to have control over her relationships and home role.

Shaw's application of speech act theory emphasizes *Candida*'s autonomy even further. Her instruction to Morell, "Take care, James," demonstrates how she uses language to exert control over circumstances without resorting to violence. I asked you to go. Are you leaving? (Line 88, Act II). Her ability to set standards and shape behavior without resorting to violent stereotypes is demonstrated by this calm yet authoritative tone.

Feminist Significance and Shaw's Vision:

Shaw uses *Candida* to challenge sets of cultural rules regarding male dominance and females' submission in the society. Thus, *Candida* is considered a postmodern heroine because of her language success, her ability to disobey traditional gender roles, and her ability to violate male

power. She showed herself as a women's activist who fights for women's rights in social and personal life, which were consistent with late nineteenth-century feminism.

In other words, *Candida* is a fierce statement of feminism that kills off all those Victorian mainlines and applauds the 'New w Woman.' Thus, Shaw is prominent in the construction of the genre of female fictional texts as the play depicts *Candida* as an assertive and self-aware subject who mediates her social representation. Thus, the play also gives a comment for the generation of gender equality apart from representing the changing positioning of women in the tender of the play's generation.

DISCUSSION

George Bernard Shaw's play *Candida* reforms the representation of womanhood and responds positively to the development of the "New Woman" in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century. Shaw makes *Candida* society's traditional image of women from a different perspective so while her character has all the necessary feminine traits, she stands as an educated, independent woman who makes her own decisions and does not seek a man's help. *Candida* also gets to manage conversations and relationships, and refrain from compromising her independence while isolating the men around her, which is proof of Shaw's believe in equality for women. She is the focus of her home and embodiment of Shaw's rather revolutionary motto, not just a doll like housewife or an object of male adoration.

Shaw masterfully presents *Candida*'s idea of the woman who is able to govern her life which refers also to the gender issue discussed at the turn of the 20th century. Thus, the liberal agenda of his hero as a man of reason and passion, who retains control in a world dominated by a patriarchal husband, becomes a precursor to the later realistic theme of female emancipation as a reaction to Victorian values. For example, Mad. *Candida*'s line, "She means that she belongs to herself", opposes the predator's view and gives women their due right of property. In modern discourses on the issues of gender equality, the intent to equalize the rights of women to men remains the focus of this postmodernist feminist perspective.

Shaw's ideology may be described as highly progressive and feminist through ideas that are presented by *Candida*, and his ideas are far from irrelevant to society that is still fighting for equal rights for women. Contemporary spectatorial reception of the play triggers discussions about New Culture debates regarding gender roles and expectations. Each one revolves around the element's education, independence and personal integrity and even today the lessons that Shaw provides are invaluable for the enhancement of feminism and society as a whole.

Nevertheless, Shaw's portrayal of *Candida* as a "New Woman" was still a revolutionary theory if measured with the limited social expectations under which she functioned. Analyzing Shaw's play against the background of the contemporary feminist production, including Elizabeth Robins' *Votes for Women* and Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, it is possible to conclude that Shaw did present a quite powerful and convincing image of a woman. Such comparison can offer more features for understanding the development of feminist discourse in theater when compared to *Candida*.

Moreover, with *Candida*, this paper examines how gender and power dynamics affect change in the social fabric. The following research topics might be explored; how Shaw's play interprets modern theatrical works on modern gender concerns or how Shaw's feminist tropes fit into postmodern feminism. Future studies might also discuss the underlying themes of Shaw's progressive though not absolutely radical ideas of women's liberation by comparing the pedagogy of his plays to that of more explicit feminists' works or by evaluating the role of Shaw's plays in the development of subsequent phases of feminism.

Candida is a call for feminism and a call to arms for women's liberation in the face of all that has said otherwise. Some of Shaw's enduring insights into what constituted feminism are therefore already prefigured here, in his refusal to lodge women simply into supporting roles in relation to men. His depiction of the 'New Woman' remains a school in the way we talk of equality and representation and a vital point of reference for any understanding of the evolving gender roles throughout time. That makes Shaw's feminism sustainable and allows for probing further for future generations.

George Bernard Shaw's *Candida* stands as a compelling testament to his progressive feminist ideology, portraying a nuanced and empowered vision of womanhood that challenges traditional gender roles. Through *Candida*'s independence, intellect, and refusal to conform to patriarchal norms, Shaw not only critiques Victorian values but also anticipates future feminist discourses. His portrayal of the "New Woman" transcends his time, offering enduring insights into gender equality and societal change. As feminist thought continues to evolve, *Candida* remains a pivotal work that underscores Shaw's commitment to reshaping perceptions of women, making his contributions to theater and feminist literature profoundly relevant today.

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