The “New Woman” in George Bernard Shaw’s *Candida: A Mystery*

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**Abstract**

Feminist theory is both a political stance and a theory that focuses on gender as a subject of analyses when reading cultural practices and as a platform to demand equality, rights and justice. Feminism’s key assumption is that gender roles are predetermined and the woman is trained to fit into these rules. This means that roles like ‘daughter’ and ‘mother’ are not natural but social because the woman has to be trained to think, talk and act in particular ways that suit the role. When we go through the human history, the fact that women are given only secondary status can be made out. This discrimination led to the birth of feminist revolutionary movements. Actually, the main objective of feminism is to create equality among men and women and not to gain supremacy. In modern times, women changed the society and established their position as a strong and independent magnitude of today’s world. Woman occupies a prominent role to reform society in her own realm. One of the most highly revered English dramatists of nineteenth century, George Bernard Shaw ruled the English theatre for more than sixty years. The fundamental aim of Shaw’s plays was to reform the society by highlighting its falsity. *Candida: A Mystery* is considered as the mother play by Bernard Shaw. He opines that this play induces audience to its deepest level of fraternity; embodiment of romance with an infatuated boy and a questioning marital relationship with her husband. *Candida* is a domestic play that focuses essentially on the home. It refers mainly to the decent conducts and standards of everyday life in Victorian England. The theme of marriage and openness especially in reverence of love, romance and human relationship and the theme of freedom of a domestic woman in Victorian period rejuvenate the plot and take the discussion to a higher note.

**Key Words:** Feminist theory, Gender, Victorian England, Human relationship, Equality.

Feminism questions the dominant, male, phallocentric ideologies. It attacks patriarchal attitudes. Feminism originated in the late eighteenth century. The most remarkable works are Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), John Stuat Mill’s *The Subjection of Women* (1869) etc. The movement gained prominence across three phases or waves. The first wave began in the US and the UK as a struggle to gain equality and property rights for women. Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) is a notable text of this phase. The second wave of feminism (1960s/1970s) was actually a critique of patriarchy. It focused on creating cultural identity of woman. In the *Second Sex*, Simon de Beauvoir states that the woman is not born as woman, but the patriarchal society shapes her into a woman. This shows the status of woman as the ‘other’. ‘The personal is political’ is the famous motto of this phase.
Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* (1969) is one of the famous works of this wave. The third wave of feminism focused on the academia as it connected feminism with Marxism, Psychoanalysis, Post-structuralism, etc. Feminism, in the contemporary time, tries to gain a better world for women. It takes different forms, such as, liberal feminism, radical feminism, black feminism etc. It is connected with arts, literature etc.

George Bernard Shaw’s *Candida: A Mystery* is considered as his “Mother Play”. The play was written in 1894 and was first performed in the Royal Court Theatre, London in 1897. It was published in 1898. The title, ‘Candida’ is taken from Voltaire’s novel *Candide* which was published in 1759. In that novel, Candide is the male protagonist. The title signifies white, pure, frank and honest. The meaning of the word is ‘optimist’. Candida is an optimist who is clean in her actions. That is why she decides to selects her own husband who is the weak of the two. She is pure as she never thinks negatively. She is open-minded also. Candide in Voltaire’s novel is also an optimist who as the play ends, decides to lead a simple life.

*Candida* is indeed a domestic play that discusses homely matters. It clearly describes the Victorian society. The everyday life of Victorian England is well portrayed in the play. Marriage, love, romance, freedom, human values are the main themes discussed in the play. Shaw’s prime aim is to show the importance of women in the society. He vividly asserts women should be given the freedom and rights that they deserve. Even though, Morell is thirty five and Marchbanks is eighteen, Candida shows motherly love and care towards them. This makes the readers remember of ‘Madonna and Child’ concept. She treats two of them like Mary cares Jesus.

Shaw questions the narrow mindedness of the patriarchal society. He asserts that the skepticism towards women has to be completely destroyed. Candida can be equated with Jaya, the protagonist of Shashi Deshpande’s *That Long Silence* which was published in 1988. In that play, Jaya never forgives her love towards her husband. Morell is a handsome public speaker and a successful minister. He is a staunch believer of Christianity who is extremely proud of his married life. He embodies conventional moral values. But poet Marchbanks is an idealist. Morell never shows any hostility towards Marchbanks when he comes to know the reality. It is difficult to believe that the typical conventional husband Morell offers freedom to his wife to choose between the two men.

Candida’s fondness for Marchbanks is evident from her words, “I have grown fonder and fonder of him all the time I was away…though he has not the least suspicion of it himself, he is ready to fall madly in love with me?” 564. Candida is conquered by Marchbank’s poetic excellence. He is extremely romantic unlike Morell. Shaw’s admiration towards women is clearly exhibited in the play. “I give myself to the weaker of the two.” (591) This statement proves Candida’s purity. The two men assign Candida to choose between them. She selects the weaker of the two, Morell because she finds the fact that he is the one who
needs her really. Here, Candida becomes the true wife. When Marchbanks tells Morell that, “I love your wife.” (540), the depth of Marchbank’s love towards Candida becomes clear. Marchbanks tells Candida, “No, not a scrubbing brush, but boat: a tiny shallop to sail away in, far from the world, where the marble floors are washed by the raion and dried by the sun… a Chariot: to carry us up into the sky, where the lamps are stars, and don’t need to be filled with paraffin oil every day.” (558), in act one. This shows the escapist nature of Marchbanks. He dwells in a romantic world. Marchbanks sings in act three, “Candida, Candida, Candida, Candida, Candida. I must say that now, because you have put me on my honour and truth; and I never think or feel Mrs. Morell: it is always Candida.” (575) This shows how madly he loves Candida. Morell and Marchbanks’ love towards Candida is not similar. When Morell comes to know about Marchbanks’ love towards Candida, he says, “Everybody loves her: they can’t help it. I like it.” (541) Both of the men appear as little boys before Candida.

Candida never stops being a dutiful wife. She never forgets her duties as a wife and a mother. Morell, at first, appears as a powerful oratore. But his other traits are revealed as the play progresses. Shaw goes deep inside the characters. Psychological study of characters is possible. The conflict that occurs in the minds of all the characters is well exposed. Shaw makes the readers understand that it is pointless to choose strong men. Unlike other women, Candida prefers her husband without thinking about the benefits that she may get from her relationship with Marchbanks if she chooses him. This makes the play anti-romantic. Shaw indirectly states that women should have the right to choose their own way of life.

This play offers the readers a very powerful insight to understand better about male-female relationships. Candida makes the readers ponder on the freedom given by parents, husband and children to women. She is the ‘new woman’ who is unlike the Victorian women. Shaw firmly believed in gradual reformation rather than revolutionary change in the views on women in the patriarchal society. Shaw tried to release women from their double- marginalized status. Like most of his plays, Candida also aims at the reformation of society. The play is significant even in the present context.

**Works Cited**
