

# Shaw's Iconoclasm in *Candida* : Busting the Conventional Stereotype of 'Married Woman' in 'Domestic Comedy'

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**Abstract:** This research paper delves into George Bernard Shaw's play "Candida" to explore the iconoclastic elements embedded in the narrative. Focusing on the depiction of the 'married woman' within the context of domestic comedy, the paper seeks to unveil Shaw's revolutionary approach to challenging conventional stereotypes. The analysis incorporates literary, historical, and feminist perspectives to shed light on how Shaw's work contributes to the redefinition of gender roles and relationships in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

**Key Words:** George Bernard Shaw, *Candida*, domestic comedy, marriage, gender, 19<sup>th</sup> century drama.

George Bernard Shaw, a towering figure in the world of literature and drama, remains celebrated for his incisive wit, social critiques, and groundbreaking plays. Born in 1856, Shaw witnessed a transformative period in history, marked by significant shifts in societal norms and gender roles. As a playwright, critic, and polemicist, Shaw utilized his art to challenge established conventions and provoke thoughtful reflection on the prevailing ideologies of his time. One of Shaw's seminal works, "Candida," emerges as a pivotal exploration of domestic dynamics and challenges the conventional portrayal of the 'married woman' within the context of domestic comedy. As the late 19th century gave way to the early 20th century, societal expectations regarding gender roles and marriage underwent considerable scrutiny. Against this backdrop, Shaw's "Candida" serves as both a mirror reflecting societal norms and a hammer shattering preconceived notions, especially in the realm of domestic comedy.

*Candida*, a domestic play and a 'critique of the Victorian society', focuses primarily on the home. It refers to the respectable manners and values of everyday life in late Victorian England. The action is centralized to a love triangle, and we have a young intruder challenging a happy marriage and departing, leaving husband and wife to continue their relationship on a new basis of understanding. In *Candida*, Shaw analyses the actual role of woman in contemporary English society. He later pointed out that, *Candida* presents an antithetic view to that of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*: '... the play is a counter blast to Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, showing that in the real typical doll's house it is the man who is the doll'. Shaw emphasizes the woman's maternal aspect, who is not an immature plaything of man, but exerts her influence over men and they in turn are dependent on her strength. 'The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world' was not a revolutionary conclusion in itself; neither was it 'any reason to support the cause of female emancipation – as long as the question of how well or ill the world was ruled was kept obscure'.

The patriarchal pattern of the Morell household is transformed to a matriarchal one due to *Candida*'s latent aggressiveness exercised over the two men in her life. The cause of the upheaval is the introduction of Marchbanks in the family for which the wife never forgives the husband; the later is drawn to the effeminate youth, who in turn is drawn to the wife who mothers them both. The young man is probably jealous of the blissful domestic scene and wishes to replace the man of the house. Discussing Shaw's treatment of the storyline in *Candida* Valency comments:

'Shaw set up a plot – situation so preposterous that it can hardly be taken seriously. To make the striking effect, it was necessary for him to pose the contrast between the poet and the preacher in the most unmistakable fashion. The consequence is an unequal content between an effeminate youth and burly parson of forty, over a woman who seems temperamentally suited to neither'.<sup>(1)</sup>

So instead of a play of intrigue or love and hate, which the plays before Shaw had dealt with, we have a play revolving round strength and weakness. Shaw, we know, definitely did not regard the woman as the 'weaker sex', which the playwrights before him had done. The erring woman had to hear her husband's verdict on the decision of her fate. She usually was either left to continue the illicit relationship or was thrown out by her lord and master. Eric Bentley elaborates Shaw's new treatment of the state theme:

'... instead of the little woman reaching up toward the arms of strong man, we have the strong woman reaching down to pick up her child. It is remarkable how far Shaw's thought is from the standard 'advanced thinking' of his generation with its prattle of equality and commandership. He is closer to Nietzsche' <sup>(2)</sup>.

Valency says that '*Candida* was a venture into domestic comedy in the manner of Ibsen'. *Candida* is very similar to *A Doll's House* in its treatment of an intelligent woman, who wants to be emancipated from, the traditional bonds of marriage. But whereas Nora begins her journey with the slam of the house door, *Candida*'s journey starts by staying at home. It is the lover who leaves the house with the 'secret' in his heart which is supposed to constitute the 'mystery' of the sub-title. Shaw decided to name her heroine '*Candida*' which means 'frank' or 'truthful' or 'candid', and the character is true to her name: She is a radiant figure of domestic purity, above suspicion. *The Oxford Dictionary of Christian Names* identified CANDIDA, as specifically the name of a first century saint, with BLANCHE. Margery M. Morgan finds the co-relation between the two names and says:

'The entry under BLANCHE includes the statement: 'There is ...some evidence that St. Candida was known in England as St. Wyte....' It seems that Shaw may have been strongly aware of what there was in common in the conceptions of three of his heroines – Blanche Sartorius, Candida Morell and Ann Whitefield' <sup>(3)</sup>.

*Candida* is Shaw's ideal woman: a woman of real grace and beauty who inspires Marchbanks to compare her with Titian's principal figure in *The Assumption of the Virgin*. Shaw wrote to Ellen Terry, '*Candida* is the Virgin Mother, and none else', who was charming and irresistible to Shaw. According to Valency, 'It is characteristic of this charming figure that those she loves best cannot be hers. The young poet belongs to the night'. *Candida*, the central figure of the mother in the play, has to choose between 'a wretched little nervous disease' and a 'pig-headed parson'. She is a distinguished figure and deserved nothing less than divinity. She looks for it in Morell, but to her dismay, she has discovered long back, that he is not the father, but only another child. Marchbanks is capable of playing neither the father nor the son. *Candida* knows that it is her destiny to be a mother and to raise children; therefore Marchbanks seems useless to her; and she has to sacrifice him and opt in favour of Morell. The real question is not which of the two men needs her most, but which of them she needs in order to perform her function as a woman. Marchbanks is a lover, a disturbance in the well-ordered domesticity. His function in this triangle is to create a turmoil. Valency remarks:

'Shaw plays, generally demonstrates that in a triangular situation the woman will always be drawn to the poet and dreamer, but that she will invariably choose for her mate the man of action.' <sup>(4)</sup>

*Candida* has poetry in her and her father nostalgically recalls that he used to tell her fairy stories 'when she was only a little kiddy not that igh'? But the prose in her advises her to stay at home and not leave it. The 'auction scene' has Morell bidding for her in these words:

'I have nothing to offer you but my strength for your surety, my ability and industry for your livelihood and my authority and position for your dignity. That is all it becomes a man to offer to a woman'.

Marchbanks bids against this:

'My weakness. My desolation. My heart's need.' <sup>(5)</sup>

*Candida* chooses Morell, the weaker of the two: the Morell marriage is saved, and it may never face the threat of ruin. Frank Harris in his biography on Shaw says that Morell 'hasn't the least inkling that *Candida* possesses a soul'.... So little conception, indeed, has her husband of his wife's mind and heart, that he closes his offer by saying, self-confident in his man philistinism: 'That is all it becomes a man to offer a woman'. Ibsen's *A Doll House* has the same theme, where Helmer has no inkling of the fact that Nora has her own soul. Ibsen makes the wife leave her husband when she makes the discovery. *Candida* on the other hand chooses her husband because he has more weaknesses and needs her more. Eugene Marchbanks discovers that he is in fact the stronger man who 'has learnt to live without happiness'. He goes away with a secret in his heart. Chesterton comments on this turning point of the play:

‘Even among the plain and ringing paradoxes of the Shaw play this is one of the best reversals or turnovers ever effected .... The reversal is the whole idea of virtue; that the last shall be first and first last ... The writer touches certain realities commonly outside his scope; especially the reality of the normal wife’s attitude to the normal husband, an attitude which is not romantic, but which is yet quite quixotic; which is insanely unselfish and yet quite cynically clear sighted. It involves human sacrifice without in the least involving idolatory’.<sup>(6)</sup>

Shaw’s critics accused him of being anti-domestic. But Chesterton thinks that he is:

‘almost madly domestic. He wishes each private problem to be settled in private, without reference to sociological ethics’.<sup>(7)</sup>

Candida voices this attitude, ‘let us sit and talk comfortably over it like three friends’. Purdom says that:

‘...it is noteworthy that it is the women who usually take the initiative in Shavian drama, not only in love but in everything else’.<sup>(8)</sup>

Problems are discussed, a solution presented without any hard feelings on any side. This was done intentionally as Shaw ‘resolved to build a play not on pathos, but on bathos’. The three characters sit down to discuss the issue: Morell, significantly sits in the children’s chair; Candida takes the easy chair beside Morell, though a little behind him, it is an indication of who is to dominate the scene in the Morell household in the future. Eugene rightly takes the visitor’s chair. Candida resolves the problem between the three of them ‘like three friends’. Shaw derived this form of entertainment from *A Doll’s House*. He wrote in the enlarged version of *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*:

‘Formerly you had in what was called a well-made play an exposition in the first act, a situation in the second, an unraveling in the third. Now you have exposition, situation and discussion, and the discussion is the test of the playwright. The discussion conquered Europe in Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, and now the serious playwright recognizes in the discussion not only the main test of his highest powers, but also the real centre of his play’s interest’.<sup>(9)</sup>

Candida starts talking at length and explains the truth about their married life to the windbag of a husband and her reason for remaining with him. Eugene, she says, has been used to life without love and can, therefore, adjust to an independent existence without any emotional sustenance. But Morell has been pampered and spoilt by everyone:

‘...my boy! Spoiled from his cradle. We go once a fortnight to see his parents... Ask James’ mother and his sisters what it cost to save James the trouble of doing anything but be strong and clever and happy. Ask me what it costs to be James’ mother and three sisters and wife and mother to his children all in one ... I build a castle of comfort and indulgence and love for him and stand sentinel always to keep little vulgar cares out. I make him master here, though he does not know it, and could not tell you a moment ago how it came to be so.’<sup>(10)</sup>

It is a voice of conjugal complaint; ‘Complaint of sisters and mothers, of all women who suffer onions, tradesmen, and other drudgeries and trails of domesticity so that their James may be strong and clever and happy.’

Candida rejects the ‘marble floors’ and ‘beautiful green and purple carpets’ offered by Marchbanks and opts for the boots which she knows Morell will give her for walking on Hackney Road. There is certainty in life with her husband, she can be his wife, mother and sisters, whereas that with the poet would be insecure and dangerous.

In *Candida*, Shaw creates a woman who makes her husband realize his weakness and his folly in having thought himself to be a strong man. Shaw’s world has a large place for women. C.B. Purdom says that:

‘Shaw honoured women, showing in his plays that they were not only to be loved, but respected, even feared. Life with women was as large a subject to him as religion’.<sup>(11)</sup>

Valency too is of the same view and says that in his plays Shaw:

‘seems to have been deeply identified more often with his women than with his men.’<sup>(12)</sup>

The play is different from the traditional domestic drama in which the women were the passive types. Candida is by no means passive and can engage people’s affections. ‘Candida is quite conscious of her desirability as a woman and is therefore not above coquetry’. She flirts with Marchbanks and frightens him away. She shatters Morell’s self-confidence as in the end reigns supreme, having taught the men in her life a lesson or two. In comparison with the men in her life, she appears what Valency calls, an ‘opaque character’. ‘She has no conflict and is put under no strain. She remains objective, immutable, and mysterious throughout the action, and her participation in the passions she arouses appears to be minimal’.



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