

**Candida's Feminine Complexity: A Comparative Study of  
Gender Roles in George Bernard Shaw's Play**

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**Abstract**

George Bernard Shaw's play "Candida" presents a vivid exploration of the female image through the character of Candida and her exchanges with the male characters, in special regard Reverend James Morell. This research paper focuses on the importance of women in the play, represented by Candida. In addition, Shaw's play introduces an analysis of the female's challenges of her traditional gender roles and societal expectations. Gender roles in the Victorian age are going to be highlighted in some parts of the paper due to its authentic relation to the core idea of the title and the feminist undertones within the play itself.

Feminist literary theory is going to be applied in this paper. It is applied because it represents the raw material for studying Candida's behaviors and Morell's reactions to them. Through this theory, Candida's character is given much interest to explore her challenges or conforms to traditional feminist principles and how this affects her female image in a patriarchal society.

**Keywords:** Feminine Complexity, Comparative Study, Gender Roles.

## **Introduction**

George Bernard Shaw's play, "Candida," is considered a challenging play that explores various themes, including gender roles, societal norms, marriage and many other themes. More importantly, the themes portrayed by the female protagonist, Candida, unfolds a great significance to this paper. The playwright envisages Candida as multilayered and complicated character. This female character challenges the traditional norm in the society during the Victorian era. It is set in comparison with the masculine character represented by Morell. This paper aims to explore the evolution of the female image in "Candida" and analyze how Candida's character subverts gender norms and empowers herself within a patriarchal society.

### **Candida: A Feminist Exploration**

Through following her character in the play, Candida challenges traditional gender roles of the Victorian era, emphasizing her independence, agency, and intellectual prowess. In more than one situation, she appears independent and self-assured. Her strong concept of independence and self-assuredness is no secret in multiple evidences in the play. The tone of her charismatic and attractive personality is clearly heard in her speech:

"I take my own line. I can't help it; and, to speak plainly, I don't see why I should help it. I don't consider myself bound to please you, or papa, or James, or anybody but myself. It's my right to please myself, isn't it?" (Act I)<sup>1</sup>

According to her viewpoint in the abovementioned quotation, Candida's knowledgeable capacity and engagement experiment the stereotype of women as solely domestic beings. This character sets her away from the society she lives in. In this way, she proves herself as

intellectually astute. She addresses Prossy and belittles him. "Why, Prossy, I know a great deal more about Socialism than you do. It's quite a hobby of mine." (Act I) In this quotation, she shows off of knowing more about movements than Prossy does. This way of thinking enables her to be a sufficient agent of change.

Candida is considered an agent of change. Her influence goes beyond her circle of relations; she represents a factor of change in all those around her. This notion is vivid in her question: "Oh, men like to improve their wives, I know. But why shouldn't wives improve their husbands?" (Act II) The theme that is implicit in this question is not about being an agent of change only, but it foreshadows the roles of both men and women in the play.

In George Bernard Shaw's play "Candida," the exploration of gender roles is a central theme. Shaw uses his characters to challenge and subvert traditional Victorian gender expectations. He introduces Candida's character as one who appears quite oppositely of what expected at that time. She challenges the inactive, submissive role given to women of her age. She asserts her intellect, independence, and feminine power. In his attempt to embody some traditional masculinity, Reverend James Morell displays emotional defenselessness and compassion that disturb conventional gender standards. In the course of the play, the exchanges between Candida, Morell, and the lovesick young poet Eugene Marchbanks climax the significance and validity of gender roles. This, in its turn, questions societal prospects and advocates for more egalitarian associations. Shaw's "Candida" introduces a raw material for studying the situation of going beyond the traditional limitations imposed by societal restrictions. It also inspires a reevaluation of the standard dynamics between male and female powers.

Candida's exchanges with male characters, particularly Morell

and Marchbanks, show her ability to navigate power dynamics as she expresses in the second act "I never tried to make him better: he always wanted to make himself better. I loved him: that's all." In her speech, she reveals both her love and power. This shows a kind of comparison between her female character and the male one. She, representing females in her time, embraces complication and influence. Candida prefers to be envisaged as a strong separate entity rather than being simplified into idealized one, second to men themselves:

"Why should a woman listen to you men turning her into an idol on a pedestal? I won't be a pedestal: I'll be a woman; a wife; a mother; a person." (Act III)

The notion of rejecting objectification is repeated. In her dialogues, Candida resists being objectified and challenges the notion of being placed on a pedestal. In act three she mentions this fact:

"You will have to choose between your pedestal and your paradise. I have not made my paradise: it is my husband who has made it for me. As to my pedestal, the man who loves me will be on it all day long."

Throughout her speeches, Candida advocates authentic love. She advocates for a more authentic and balanced approach to love and relationships. "You cannot give me more than yourself. And you must not expect me to give you more than myself." (Act III) The feminist call is so vibrant in the play, and it is in harmony with the feminist stream at that time. The Victorian woman is expected to perform the classic role of females. The challenge is how to change women's domestic position of being mothers and daughters only.<sup>i</sup>

Candida's feminine role in the play is marked by her confidence, refusal to obey others, and her role in challenging the existing societal norms. Shaw introduces this character to embody his

liberal opinions on gender roles. In addition, he emphasizes the significance of mutual esteem and the empowerment of women. Through her character, Shaw critiques the violence and limitations imposed on women by society and presents an alternative vision of femininity in the Victorian society.

In some respect, Candida follows the Victorian ideal system of womanhood by being a devoted wife and mother. She manages the household and takes care of her family's needs. This aspect aligns with the common Victorian perception of a woman's chief obligation and the traditional role of women which was largely shaped by societal expectations and prevailing cultural norms. When reading the Victorian society, it can be easily detected that there is a division of gender roles; women were generally assigned to a restricted traditional roles within the family and society at large. Thus, in his play, Shaw presents the character of Candida with certain aspects of the Victorian woman, at the same time, he challenges and subverts traditional gender roles and societal expectations of the time.

Shaw writes his play in a time when the primary role of women was seen as being a wife and mother. Women's foremost obligation was to create a very comfortable and well-maintained home for their husbands and children. They had to perform all domestic tasks, such as child-rearing, cooking, and cleaning. These things were essential for them. In addition, their maternal life depends on their ability to find a suitable husband because they were expected to marry. The Victorian era stressed the notion of the "angel of the house," a term coined by poet Coventry Patmore. This term envisaged women as kind, selfless, and devoted to their families. In this way their sole role is restricted to the house atmosphere, which is considered a weak passive role in the society. They had to obey and be "inferior" to male powers. On the contrary of what the reality of the

situation, Shaw handles us a new version of the feminine 'power'. He does not translate the reality of his society in his play, yet he suggests the future one. It is no secret that Candida resists being inferior to men. She questions this point in more than one instance: "Why should a woman listen to you men turning her into an idol on a pedestal? I won't be a pedestal: I'll be a woman; a wife; a mother; a person." (Act III) She loudly refuses being a pedestal; she assures her identity as person. Mark H. Sterner writes in his article "Shaw's Superwoman and the Border of Feminism: One Step over the Line" That:

"he [Shaw] presents a woman who is a "vital genius" with a strong maternal bent and a talent for domesticity, a woman who displays the raw courage, strength of character, presence of mind, intellectual talent, and sheer determination to demand the best man for the job: the man she loves, the man who will help create a race in the evolutionary direction of the Superman."<sup>iii</sup>

Thus, Shaw employs an example of the woman who is a combination of powers with " with a strong maternal bent"<sup>iv</sup> She confirms her identity as having a separate entity; not having a fewer position.<sup>v</sup>

Introducing such an example, Shaw challenge his societal norms. Victorian society positioned a quality on women's modesty and virtue. They were expected to behave in a reserved and morally decent manner. Improper behaviors or scandalous ones could lead to social ostracism.

Women, in that age, were expected to follow severe social conventions and etiquettes. This mirrors the rigid class structure of Victorian society. In order to maintain their social position, they had to follow proper manners in speech, dress, sitting and looking. Rejection of submissiveness could find no way in their life. However, and despite her conformity to certain domestic roles, Candida subtly

rebels against the Victorian status quo. She challenges the idea of being a passive and submissive wife by asserting her independence and questioning traditional gender norms.

Legally speaking, women had limited rights in the Victorian era. For example, after marriage, a woman's property and incomes often were transformed to her husband's possession. Similarly, divorce was exceptionally difficult to obtain. *Candida* tackles an important issue of the nineteenth century i.e. the 'women question' in which women asked for equal rights with men.<sup>2</sup> *Candida*'s character demonstrates a level of agency that was not commonly associated with Victorian women. She makes important decisions independently and plays a pivotal role in shaping the lives of the male characters in the play. This could be evidently seen in her interactions with Morell or even Marchnaks.

As a result, it is important to note that these societal expectations and roles were predominant in Victorian England. They were affected by the values and norms of that time.

However, not all women conformed to these traditional roles. In addition, there were various grades of refusal and attempts to challenge these norms throughout the era. Thus, Shaw introduces us how the Victorian period worked in being a period of complex social change and transition, and the roles of women began to progress as the century advanced.

### **Morell in the play: A Fragile Influence**

George Bernard Shaw's draws his characters from multiple strata of society. In play "*Candida*," Reverend James Morell serves as a central character whose role is critical. Morell's major appearance presents numerous themes, including love, marriage, masculinity, and societal prospects. His personality is a multi-dimensional one, and his interactions with other characters, predominantly *Candida* and Eugene

Marchbanks, add to the progress of the play.<sup>vi</sup>

Morell's character embodies certain traits and behaviors that challenge traditional notions of masculinity, thereby taking on what could be considered a "feminine" role in certain aspects. Morell displays a level of emotional sensitivity and vulnerability that defies conventional expectations of Victorian masculinity. In his question, "Must I choose, Candida? It's too hard." (Act III) the feminist trait is apparent. He appears to be hesitant in his choice. As audience, we expect this question to be asked by Candida more than Morell himself. In his sentence "I think I am the weakest man I ever met," (Act III) he does not show hesitation only, but weakness which suits Candida's feministic persona. This case challenges traditional gender norms in the play.

Morell's emotional reliance on Candida for validation and emotional support is just another example of challenging traditional gender norms. In his questions: "And you do love me, don't you? You think I am a good man, don't you? Tell me I am good," (Act II) Candida's feministic weakness wins over Morell's masculine power. In the play, Candida provides emotional support to her husband. She listens to him, offers comfort, and acts as a confidante, which was a typical expectation of Victorian wives.

However, Morell's interactions with Candida and his willingness to engage in introspection and self-doubt contrast with the dominant and assertive image of masculinity. He confesses her dominance and power over him. He tells Candida that she seems "so confident;" and that he is "full of doubts and uncertainties." (Act III) Thus, as a female character, she appears to be more powerful than males characters.

Morell values the emotional depth and connection in his relationship with Candida, displaying a level of emotional engagement



uncommon in traditional portrayals of masculinity. "It's because I have such faith in your love that I dare talk to you like this." (Act II) However, this evaluation is paralleled with a kind of jealousy. Morell's confrontation of his own jealousy and insecurity in his relationship with Candida challenges the notion of unwavering masculine confidence. He addresses Candida "I would rather you were dead than his. I would rather you had never been born than that." (Act III) In this quotation, Morell's jealousy reinforces his masculine power, and his fear of his wife.

Morell's willingness to spread the idea of role reversal in relationships further shapes traditional gender limitations. "Ah, you think you will work the domestic dodge and be the henpecked husband yourself, do you?" (Act I) In the context of the story, the Duchess seems to be creating a sarcastic or critical comment about avoiding responsibilities. She may be suggesting that someone is pretending to be submissive or avoiding taking charge in domestic situations, possibly to escape duties or to employ others to do the work.

The term "henpecked husband" refers to a man who is perceived as being overly controlled or dominated by his wife, often depicted as meek or submissive in the relationship. So, in this quote, the Duchess might be accusing someone of trying to evade responsibility by assuming a role of submission or weakness, much like a henpecked husband might do to avoid conflict or responsibilities.

Morell's final gesture of wearing Candida's shawl can be considered as an evident example of the symbolic relinquishment of traditional masculine arrogance. He calls for others attention and care, specially his wife. He wants " to be treated like a child: to be petted and forgiven and made much of." (Act III) Morell's character

challenges the fixed gender roles of his time by embracing emotional sincerity, defenselessness, and a readiness to question his own masculinity. Shaw uses Morell's character to explore the complexities of gender and the fluidity of roles within relationships.

This literary analysis is attached to Morell's character whereas, in the play, Shaw presents Candida as a 'Victorian' woman who embodies both conformity to and defiance of the customary gender roles and opportunities of her time. The presentation of her character is significant in criticizing and challenging the limitations imposed on women in the Victorian era, while also handing out their capacity for knowledgeable engagements, emotional depths, and personal agencies.

### **Conclusion**

George Bernard Shaw's "Candida" directly handles a persuasive exploration of the female image and challenges traditional gender roles. In the play, Candida's character is developed as an independent, strong woman who challenges societal expectations and proclaims her independence. By analyzing her character in relation to Morell, this paper has confirmed the idea that Shaw clearly introduces a nuanced portrayal of female empowerment and agency.<sup>viii</sup> "Candida" serves as a testament to Shaw's progressive views on gender and provides valuable insights into the evolving female image during the Victorian era and beyond.

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