

'G.B. Shaw's Candida: A Problem Play with Feminist Concerns'

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Candida, true to her name, is honest and sensible, who seems to have been entrusted with the task of putting proper perspective on the vital aspects of man-woman relationship. She is sensitive enough to discern the false sense of ego and superiority complex in the male. At the same time, like other Shavian women, she is quite rational and does not allow herself to be carried away on the waves of emotion. She is not a radical feminist to challenge the traditional role of women in married life, nor does she reject the confines of the husband's home. But she does question the complacency and conventional values of the patriarchal society. She also exposes romantic approaches to love and marriage. When both her husband and Marchbanks, the poet, compete with each other to control and command her affection and loyalty, Candida fearlessly takes the situation in her control. She not only exposes the hollowness of the patriarchal as well as the romantic notion of 'woman' and 'marriage', she asserts her freedom to make a choice.

Right from the beginning of the play, Candida is found at the helm of the affairs. She is the wife of a clergyman, Morel, whose constant indulgence in his professional work of delivering lectures becomes possible because of her complete dedication and care. She is committed to the family life and makes Morel practically free from domestic responsibilities. However, she shares no illusion about the nature of Morel's passionate involvement in the Christian socialist project of "establishing the kingdom of God on the earth". She has very clear idea that people come to listen to his lectures not because they wish to improve their life, but because they get good pastime on Sundays free of cost and that women in particular love to look at his handsome personality. She is courageous enough to tell Morel her honest evaluation of his work which causes utter discomfiture to him. Later on, when Morel compels her to make a decision as to whom she wishes to stay with- with him or with Marchbanks- she remains calm, taking the situation under her control. Her statement is quite radical when she says, "Let's sit and talk comfortably over it like friends". Both Desdemona and Susan would meekly accept the verdict of their husband. But Candida would like to know the mind of her husband first. Moreover, she rejects the conventional offers that the patriarchal society has to offer to a married wife- the husband's status, wealth and social security. She declares that the wife herself is capable of acquiring all these things. It is love and nothing else that compels her to live with Morel. In this way, she makes Morel understand his utter dependence on Candida in whose absence his life will be quite miserable. He also realizes that he is the "weaker of the two".

In her treatment of Marchbanks, Candida is equally sensitive and compassionate. She takes care of his emotional needs in view of his adolescent age and his poetic temperament. The adolescent mind of Marchbanks mistakenly finds care and affection of Candida to be an expression of love. As such, he tries to reciprocate by showing his concern and uttering poetic lines. At one point in the play, Marchbanks feels miserable and cries to find Candida scrubbing utensils, peeling onions and filling paraffin in lamps. He cannot tolerate Candida ruining her hands in such menial works. He instead offers her the alternative of an imaginative world of romance and poetry:

“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 rain 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.”

Candida, however, doesn't feel offended and continues to maintain her objectivity and affectionate nature towards him. In her opinion, Marchbanks is temperamentally gullible and as such, he needs a kind of “training in love to grow as a mature man”. She knows that his fascination for her is the result of his adolescent age. Towards the close of the play, she explains the fact of difference between her own age and that of Marchbanks. She also makes him realize that life is not romance and poetry only and that married life does involve domestic responsibilities.

It is important to note that Candida never stops being a dutiful wife. She never forgets her duties as a wife, a mother and as a sensitive woman. Like a true feminist, she contends for her independence. She secures her freedom to make a choice, i.e., to stay with her husband without thinking about the benefits that she might get from her relationship with Marchbanks if she chooses him.

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