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The Treatment of Marriage in George Bernard Shaw's *Candida*

A. Kayalvizhi, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Scholar



Abstract

This article focuses on how George Bernard Shaw attacks the most popular institution *marriage* and the economic system of the society in his domestic play *Candida*. He conveys in this play that marriage is only a sexual contract between a man and a woman. Moreover,

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woman's economic dependence on man makes her a slave in the house, and it is also a hindrance to the free movement of Life Force, believes Shaw.

Outline Story

Candida, a pretty woman of thirty three, is married to James Mavor Morell, a popular man of forty and a first rate Christian Socialist clergyman, and they are the parents of two children. Outwardly, Morell and Candida seem to be a happy couple, living harmoniously without any kind of dissatisfaction between them. However, the intervention of Eugene Marchbanks, an eighteen years old poet, turns things into a different shape. He ascertains that Morell does not deserve Candida, for he is just a religious windbag, and treats her as a slave. And he realises that his poetic soul has a natural resemblance with the soul of Candida. He shows his love to her, and she responds to him impulsively.

Suddenly Marchbanks, who turns to be daring, tells Morell that he is no match for Candida, and he himself would be the suitable person to be her husband. First Morell does not take this seriously; but then he starts worrying, because of the assertion of Marchbanks. Morell, at last, lets Candida to choose between them. Candida finds herself for auction and asks the rivals to announce their bids. Morell offers his strength for her defence, his honesty for her surety, his ability and industry for her livelihood, and his authority and position for her dignity. Marchbanks offers his weakness, his desolation, and his heart's need. Though Candida is impressed by Marchbanks's bid, she declares her decision to remain with the weaker of the two rivals, i.e. Morell. Her choice shocks Marchbanks, yet he leaves the household of Candida without any complaint, but with a secret in his mind.

Heroism of Marchbanks

Shaw's depiction of his hero Marchbanks is completely different from the hero concepts of other playwrights. He is an eighteen years old youth who is shy and physically weak, but mentally he is very strong. The portrayal of Marchbanks by Shaw is observed by Innes: "Hypersensitive, fearful, physically puny, Marchbanks is a typical Shavian contrast to the conventional hero. Yet he represents both the idealist and an ideal" (17).

Marchbanks has the intellectual competence to judge others correctly, and it is he who finds the incompatible combination of the couple Morell and Candida, whereas they seem to

be an ideal couple for others. Shaw introduces Morell as a respectable, popular, first rate clergyman of forty, and having the unaffected voice with perfect articulation of a practiced orator. In spite of the fact that he is highly regarded by the people, Marchbanks sees him as a religious windbag. He opines about Morell to the typist Proserpine, “I can see nothing in him but words, pious resolutions, what people call goodness” (Shaw 39). He degrades the oration of Morell as which merely excites people and rouses their fervour but makes no change in their conducts. He even compares Morell to King David, who danced before people to make them enthusiastic and despised by his wife for that.

Unintentional Treating of Wife as a Slave – Marchbanks’ World View

Morell is, of course, an ideal husband and is very much devoted to his wife, but he treats his wife like a slave unintentionally. Marchbanks finds out that there is no real love between Morell and Candida though he adores his wife. According to Marchbanks, the conventional, pig-headed Morell cannot match up with the idealistic, noble Candida. His view is that if a man really loves his ladylove, he would wish to keep her happy and free from toiling, albeit to be idle and useless. So he wants to rescue her from the chores, and asks Morell to give up his wife. He condemns Morell, “your wife’s beautiful fingers are dabbling in paraffin oil while you sit here comfortably preaching about it: everlasting preaching! preaching! words! words! words!” (44). But what he, Marchbanks, can provide her is that, he says poetically:

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; where the south wind dusts the beautiful green and purple carpets. Or a chariot! To carry us into the sky, where the lamps are stars, and dont need to be filled with paraffin oil every day. (Shaw 46)

A Higher Goal?

Marchbanks may seem to be a wicked man for intruding into the affairs of a perfect couple and flirting with the wife of another man. But it is not true, for he does not seek sensual pleasure from her. His desire is only to see to it that Candida lives happily and this quality of his character can be perceived from his suggestion to Morell:

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Oh, Morell, let us both give her up. Why should she have to choose between a wretched little nervous disease like me, and a pig-headed parson like you? Let us go on a pilgrimage, you to the east and I to the west, in search of a worthy lover for her: some beautiful archangel with purple wings –. (Shaw 67)

Thus, in Marchbanks are seen this honesty and exquisiteness of the soul. The frail Marchbanks, who trembles in fear when Morell tries to attack him, is strong in his conception, and brave enough to fight against the notions of a clergyman.

Candida's Love for Marchbanks

Shaw describes Candida as a woman with the double charm of youth and motherhood who frankly and instinctively handles people by appealing to their affection. As evaluated by Marchbanks, Candida is a woman with a great soul, craving for reality, truth, and freedom. She ties her husband with her abundance of love, but does not have a high estimation of him. Her opinion about Morell is similar to that of Marchbanks. For her, his preaching is not any worth mentioning, that the big crowd listening to him do not follow his words but they take it as an entertainment for them. His sermons are, she says, “mere phrases that you cheat yourself and others with every day” (Shaw 53).

But the poet Marchbanks appeals to her soul very much that he is an extraordinary, quick-witted, and cleverer than Morell. She finds him well-suited to her own temperament. She expresses her love to him without any hesitation. She is bold enough to tell Morell about her increasing love for Marchbanks. Goodness and purity, which Morell expects from her, are little care for her, since she says, “I would give them both to poor Eugene as willingly as I would give my shawl to a beggar dying of cold, if there were nothing else to restrain me” (Shaw 53). Candida's fascination with Marchbanks is not to be taken as sexual magnetism. It is well-explained by Holroyd:

But the affinity between them is that of mother and son, and the weapon that guards them from Hell is the taboo of incest. It is because the Virgin Mother outlaws sex that she is Shaw's ideal. Candida reduces all men to children by emotional castration. (317)

Candida's Outlook of Men

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Morell recognises that Candida holds Marchbanks in high regards, and not him. Candida's outlook on both men is thoroughly expressed in her speech, for she tells Morell, "He is always right. He understands you; he understands me; he understands Prossy; and you, darling, you understand nothing" (Shaw 53). Her words, which hurt Morell, clearly show her esteem and affection for Marchbanks.

Preference of Candida

Morell, unable to stand his intolerable jealousy and the insistence of Marchbanks to give up Candida, asks her to choose her mate between them. In a situation of selecting a man, she finds herself as a thing being auctioned, and therefore asks the bids of the rivals. Morell says, "I have nothing to offer you but my strength for your defence, my honesty for your surety, and 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". And Marchbanks's bid is, "My weakness. My desolation. My heart's need" which is admired by Candida (Shaw 77).

After a while, surprisingly she announces that she wants to give herself to the weaker of two; by this she means that she wants to remain with her husband. She justifies her decision to Marchbanks that he can do without her, but Morell needs her very much, as his mother, sister, wife and mother to his children. Bentley comments on Shaw's converse view on the topic of weaker sex: "instead of the little woman reaching up toward the arms of the strong man, we have the strong woman reaching down to pick up her child" (71).

Marchbanks does not feel depressed for being rejected by Candida. He proves to be a gentleman unlike the jealous Morell, and he departs her without any hostility. His response towards Candida and Morell is purely benevolent, not malevolent. He tells Morell, "I no longer desire happiness: life is nobler than that. Parson James: I give you my happiness with both hands: I love you because you have filled the heart of the woman I loved. Goodbye" (Shaw 80). Holroyd observes his attitude:

It is Eugene Marchbanks who experiences the metamorphosis from sensuality to spirituality and artistic dedication. Looking upon the suffocating commonplaces of the Morell household, he concludes that domesticity, security, and love are inferior ends compared with the sublime and lonely renunciation of the artist. (316)

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Candida thinks that her decision must have shown him about the character of women. So she enquires him: “How old are you, Eugene?” and the philosophical reply of Marchbanks is, “As old as the world now. This morning I was eighteen” which implies that he becomes matured enough to understand the nature of the women (Shaw 80).

Purpose of Shaw

The intention of Shaw to make Candida take this decision is that, in spite of being an idealist, she cannot overcome the traditional economic morality of the society. Though a romantic, she is not influenced by illusions. Life Force, the power of Nature, utilizes woman, its willing agent, as equipment for the fulfilment of evolutionary process. It concerns only for betterment of the race, and individual’s happiness is not considered. Candida, in order to bring up her children well, needs economical help from man. Her insight enables her to assess the two men, and she perceives that it is her husband who can provide a more secured home and sustenance for her and her children.

The poets are intellectuals and help the Life Force in the enhancement of the human race, but they may fail to be successful breadwinners. Hence she renounces her happiness so as to obey the order of Life Force. She is prepared to continue her life at Morell’s home where she is a mistress as well as a slave. She tells Marchbanks, “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” (Shaw 79).

Focus on Biological Need

Nature intends women to propagate children and sustain the human race. If so, her sexual relationship with man is not the result of higher love but of her physical hunger. Therefore, man and woman live together for biological need, and fulfil their duty demanded by Nature, even though there is no true love and mutual understanding. Therefore the preference of Candida for Morell is not the outcome of real love. Bentley puts it, “The axis about which *Candida* revolves is that of strength and weakness, not love and hate” (71). Shaw exposes effectively the hollowness of marriage in the present society through this play. According to him, any marriage will be proved to be failure if it is checked up inherently. The people want

to maintain their relationship by suppressing their mental distress with the wrap of happiness and peace.

Impact of Economic Dependence

Furthermore, Shaw discloses how the economic dependence of woman impedes the free movement of Life Force. Life Force, whose sole duty is to produce better intellectual human race, urges the woman on choosing a competent mate for its purpose. In this case, Candida finds Marchbanks superior to Morell in fulfilling the requirement of Life Force. Had Candida been economically independent, she would have chosen Marchbanks. Therefore her economic slavery obstructs her from picking the right person for mating.

Implications of “Candida”

Shaw has his own intention for naming his heroine “Candida”. The different implications of the word “candida” such as white, bright, and light vividly describe the personality of his heroine. The purity of her soul is represented by “white”. She is “bright” and clever in making better decisions. And she is a light in the sense that she illuminates her surroundings with her charisma. Moreover, the word “candida” also means “fungus” and Shaw has cleverly titled his play with the same name so as to inform his readers that he discusses in this play how marriage and economic systems, like fungus, decay the society and restrict the Life Force.

Conclusion

The actual reason behind the decision of Candida and the influence of the social conventions on it may be the secret in the poet Marchbanks’s heart. Thus, the worthlessness of morality of society and its ideal of happiness are drawn attention to in this play. Shaw’s aim to attack the purport of marital love and domestic happiness is well achieved. And how the customs of the society become the setbacks of the progress of the human race is excellently depicted.

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