

# Bernard Shaw: Profiling his own 'New Women' in 'Plays Pleasant' and 'Plays Unpleasant'

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**Abstract** - Shaw was successful to shake men's beliefs to the foundation in all branches of life- be it science, philosophy, economics, theology, drama, music, art, novel, politics, criticism, health, education, and what not. George Bernard Shaw, who was regarded as a writer without a moral purpose at the beginning of his career in literary circles, is today looked upon as a profound thinker who saw the truth and revealed it through art. The brilliance of his dramatic technique and philosophy is aptly illuminated by his unconventional art and dramatic technique.

Shaw through his drama brought things like realism and idealism, individualism and socialism, together. The 'New Woman' introduced by Shaw; was treated with contempt or fear as it discussed on the age-old assumptions on how a man or woman should be. One version of New Woman defied traditional codes of female beauty, smoking cigarettes and dressing in a simple and 'manly' fashion which seemed to complement her discontented mouth and a nose 'too large for feminine beauty' but indicative of intelligence.' (1) New Women were often perceived to be masculine in other ways too, 'Sometimes devoting themselves to a profession or business in preference to the bearing and bringing up of children. Sometimes the New Woman was perceived to be freer in her dealings with men than custom allowed, and at other times a cold and 'apparently sexless' creature who rejected out of hand all relations with men.' (2)

The New Woman created intellectual panic in her function as what Carroll Smith – Rosenberg has called 'a condensed symbol of disorder and rebellion.' As Ann Ardis has pointed out the term 'New Woman' as : '...a way of naming, and thus controlling, a range of ongoing disruptions in the social understanding of gender.' (3).

**Index Terms** - Shaw, Man, Woman, Drama, Life, Art.

## INTRODUCTION

1890 marked the turning point in Shaw's life. the Fabian Society, formed in 1884, asked Shaw to give a

lecture on Ibsen. Shaw was already familiar with the Norwegian dramatist, having seen the London performance of 'A Doll's House'. The lecture became 'The Quintessence of Ibsenism'. Shaw's brilliant and promising answers formed the contents of the *Saturday Review*. It turned 'Shaw's attention to the drama as a means of expression on the ideas crowding his mind'. His plays were the truth of life. Shaw's aim as a dramatist was to understand everything around him and through his plays he tried to convey what he understood. He made efforts to enable the public to understand his vision. Regarding this aspect of Shaw; Purdom writes:

'He wrote plays to delight his audiences and to change their minds. He was not a private but a public man. This was a necessary element in his vocation, for drama exists only as a public art. Participation is the soul of drama, for an audience is essential and Shaw was never disrespectful to the audience and seldom criticized it.' (4)

By 1892, the new theatre movement had already been firmly established and plays with 'real human emotion' were planned to be produced. Shaw wrote plays which came to be called the 'Unpleasant Plays' – *Widowers' Houses* (1892), *The Philanderer* (1893) and *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1893) – for the Independent Theatre Society. *Widowers' Houses*, showing 'the rich suburban villa standing on the rents of the foul rookery', was designed to please the audience artistically while inducing them :

'...to vote on the progressive side at the next County Council election in London'. (5)

About the theme of the play, Shaw, described it to be 'middle-class respectability fattening on the poverty of the slums as flies fatten on filth'. The play was a blow to the Victorian middle-class morality and critics declared it to be 'in no sense a drama'. The play was later published with Shaw's first preface, where he writes:

‘It is not my fault, reader, that my art is the expression of my sense of moral and intellectual perversity rather than of my sense of beauty. My life has been spent mostly in big modern towns, where my sense of beauty has been starved, whilst my intellect has been gorged with problems.’<sup>(6)</sup>

*Widowers’ Houses* was followed by *The Philanderer*, which was an unpleasant satire. It was to be a frontal attack on capitalist marriage and divorce customs that would incorporate the emerging figure of ‘The New Woman’ and her opposite ‘The Womanly Woman’ in a parody of Ibsenite, progressives. Shaw’s third play, *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* was written at the behest of Mrs. Sidney Webb. She asked him to write about an unromantic hardworking woman and Shaw wrote on prostitution due to the ‘underpayment and ill treatment of women who try to earn an honest living’. In this play, Shaw directed his corrective pen toward the fiction of ‘clean’ moneymaking and exposed, through the metaphor of prostitution, capitalism’s coupling of gender, money, sex and freedom disguised by middle-class ‘family values’.

On November 26, 1893, Shaw began a ‘romantic’ play for Florence Farr that was to become *Arms and the Man*. It was written to keep the ‘New Drama’ in existence; it was an attack upon the romance of war and proved to be one of the most popular plays of Shaw. The fifth play was started towards the end of 1894 and Shaw called it *Candida*. Shaw always attempted to throw new light on old opinions and customs; he wanted the people to become aware of their morality and spirituality just as they were aware of the progress made in the field of science. In *Candida* he takes the common theme of marriage and extramarital relationship; any marriage can be upset with the entry of an intruder. In normal cases it is the husband who decides the course of action to be taken; in *Candida* Shaw makes the wife settle the dispute by imposing her will upon the two men in her life. The story discusses the issues related with love and marriage, rationally and intellectually. A.C. Ward thinks that Shaw has treated skillfully an old theme and transformed *Candida* into one of his most popular plays: ‘Although Shaw turned ‘the eternal triangle’ upside down by making the woman morally strong enough to sustain the two men instead of being upheld by them, the popularity of *Candida* has almost

certainly been due to the familiarity of the basic situation – the old story of two men in love with one woman....’ Shaw not only discusses the problem, but as is the case with his other plays, he works out a resolution. He preserves the sanctity of married life when *Candida* chooses to remain with her husband because he is the weaker of the two. In keeping with the morality of the age, she decides to stay with the father of her children.

Shaw wrote *The Man of Destiny* in 1895. In the summer of 1895, Shaw started on *You Never Can Tell*. He wrote *The Devil’s Disciple* in 1897. In 1898 Shaw published *Plays Pleasant and Plays Unpleasant* with the intention of reaching out to his readers in case the plays were not staged. It was a two volume publication with volume one ‘Unpleasant’, containing a reprint of *Widowers’ Houses*, *The Philanderer* and *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* and volume two, ‘Pleasant’, containing *You Never Can Tell*, *Arms and the Man*, *Candida* and *The Man of Destiny*. Nicholas Greene finds the title of the works significant because it is a ‘challenge to the traditional division, tragedy/comedy’. The Unpleasant plays dealt with ‘the crimes of society’ and the Pleasant plays with its ‘romantic follies’, which corresponds to the neo-classical division of the two genres. Shaw stated: ‘...to me the tragedy and comedy of life lie in the consequences sometimes terrible, sometimes ludicrous, of our persistent attempts to found our institutions on the ideals suggested to our imaginations by our half-satisfied passions, instead of on a genuinely scientific natural history’.<sup>(7)</sup>

*Candida* elaborates the concept of the emancipation of woman, who is equal to her consort in all the spheres of life. The late nineteenth century witnessed a growing discontent on the status of woman, which later became known as the ‘Woman Question’ and after 1860 came more in focus. The women in England were not granted a franchise until 1918, ‘but by 1882 married women had acquired legal capacity to own and dispose of property’. The changes were significant enough to unsettle the securely established patriarchal culture with a ‘considerable display of energy on both sides of the issue’. The results were soon evinced on the stage. As a socialist Shaw had pledged himself to the movement for the equality of the sexes, and *Candida* exhibits Shaw’s concern for the ‘woman’s

cause'. The title of the play is significantly based on the name of a woman and it hints at the issue. Candida is independent in spirit, has confidence, is courageous and has emotional stability. She is guided more by common sense and does not allow the men to quarrel over her; on the contrary she imposes her will on them. The auction scene, at the end of the play is a determined declaration of independence quite as definite as the slamming of the door in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*.

G.K. Chesterton in his book on the dramatist says that Shaw desired to be called 'Modern' and therefore supported the 'feminist movement'. He claimed not only equal rights for women but also the identical ones. On the question of the New Woman, Shaw was supportive on the emancipation of woman as well as of man, who, he felt, could be rude to the woman. G.K. Chesterton finds that:

'...almost everyone of Bernard Shaw's earlier plays might be called an argument between a man and a woman in which the woman is thumped and thrashed and outwitted until she admits that she is the equal of her conqueror.'<sup>(8)</sup>

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