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**MARRIAGE, MENTORSHIP, AND THE MAKING OF MODERN
WOMANHOOD IN GEORGE BERNARD SHAW'S *CANDIDA* AND
*PYGMALION***

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Abstract

*This paper offers a comparative feminist and socio-cultural reading of George Bernard Shaw's plays *Candida* and *Pygmalion*, focusing on the construction of female agency within late Victorian and early twentieth-century social frameworks. While Shaw is widely acknowledged as a progressive dramatist, his representation of women reveals a complex negotiation between empowerment and structural containment. Through *Candida*'s strategic deployment of emotional authority within marriage and Eliza Doolittle's linguistic transformation as a means of social mobility, Shaw interrogates the intersections of gender, class, and power. Drawing upon feminist theory, Judith Butler's concept of performativity-argues that gender is not an innate, internal essence or biological truth, but rather a socially constructed, "stylized repetition of acts", Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital- suggests that non-fictional social asstes-such as education, intellect, style of speech and taste- promote social mobility and class reproduction, and Arlie Hochschild's theory of emotional labour defines it as the requirement for service workers to manage their feelings to create a publicly observable, calm, or cheerful demeanor as part of their job duties -, this paper argues that Shaw presents two complementary models of female agency: one embedded in domestic negotiation and the other enacted through public speech. Though both protagonists challenge patriarchal authority, their autonomy remains circumscribed by social expectations. Ultimately, Shaw's drama anticipates modern debates on voice, choice, identity formation, and gendered power, demonstrating his continued relevance in contemporary feminist discourse.*

Keywords

*George Bernard Shaw, *Candida*, *Pygmalion*, Female Agency, Cultural Capital, Emotional Labour, Performativity, Gender Politics, Class Mobility, Feminist Criticism, etc.*

Full Article

Introduction:

The drama of George Bernard Shaw occupies a distinctive place in modern British theatre for its intellectual rigor, social critique, and unconventional portrayal of gender relations. Writing at the turn of the twentieth century, Shaw challenged Victorian moral conventions and exposed the ideological foundations of marriage, class hierarchy, and linguistic prejudice. Among his most compelling explorations of gender and power are *Candida* (1897) and *Pygmalion* (1913), two plays that center on women negotiating authority within restrictive social systems.

In *Candida*, the eponymous heroine becomes the pivot of a triangular contest between her husband, Reverend James Morell, and the young poet Eugene Marchbanks. However, the play ultimately subverts the conventional love triangle by transforming *Candida* from object to arbiter. In *Pygmalion*, Eliza Doolittle's transformation from Cockney flower girl to refined lady under Professor Henry Higgins foregrounds questions of linguistic determinism, class mobility, and gendered power.



This paper argues that Shaw constructs female authority in these plays through two distinct but related modalities: emotional authority and linguistic capital. While *Candida* wields power within the domestic sphere through emotional intelligence and strategic compliance, Eliza acquires cultural capital through speech, thereby challenging class and gender hierarchies. Both women, however, operate within patriarchal frameworks that simultaneously enable and limit their autonomy.

Historical and Theoretical Context:

Shaw wrote during a period of intense socio-political transformation. The late Victorian era witnessed the rise of the “New Woman,” increasing demands for women’s suffrage, and growing critiques of rigid class distinctions. Shaw’s involvement in Fabian socialism informed his belief in gradual social reform and intellectual progress. His plays frequently interrogate the ideological underpinnings of social institutions rather than merely dramatizing personal conflict.

Feminist theory provides a productive framework for analyzing Shaw’s female protagonists. Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity suggests that gender is not an innate identity but a repeated performance shaped by social expectations (Butler, 1990). *Candida* and Eliza both “perform” roles that appear natural but are socially constructed.

Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital (1986) is equally significant for understanding *Pygmalion*. Linguistic competence functions as symbolic capital, determining social mobility and legitimacy. Eliza’s speech training thus represents not merely phonetic improvement but entry into elite cultural discourse.

Arlie Hochschild’s concept of emotional labour (1983) illuminates *Candida*’s domestic authority. Emotional labour refers to the management of feeling to sustain relationships and social stability. *Candida*’s power lies in her ability to regulate the emotional economy of her household.

Emotional Authority and Domestic Negotiation in *Candida*:

At first glance, *Candida* appears to reinforce conventional domestic ideology. Reverend Morell is a confident Christian Socialist preacher admired by his congregation. Marchbanks, sensitive and romantic, idealizes *Candida* as spiritually superior. Yet Shaw destabilizes these masculine assumptions by gradually revealing their emotional dependency.

Morell perceives himself as *Candida*’s protector, assuming she relies upon his strength. Marchbanks, conversely, imagines rescuing her from domestic triviality. Both men project fantasies onto her, reducing her to a symbolic prize. However, the climactic “choice scene” in Act III dismantles these illusions. When *Candida* is asked to choose between them, she selects the “weaker” of the two—her husband.

This choice is ironic and strategic. By defining Morell as the weaker partner, *Candida* reverses the patriarchal script. She reveals that Morell’s public confidence masks emotional vulnerability. His identity depends upon her support. Rather than submitting, *Candida* asserts her indispensability. Her authority emerges not through rebellion but through redefinition of dependency.

Candida’s agency thus operates within the domestic sphere. She does not abandon marriage; instead, she restructures its power dynamics. This strategy reflects what might be termed “soft power.” Rather than confronting patriarchy directly, she manipulates its expectations. Her nurturing role becomes a site of control.

From a feminist perspective, *Candida* embodies a transitional figure between Victorian domestic angel and modern autonomous woman. She neither rejects domesticity nor accepts subordination. Instead, she transforms care into leverage. Her power is relational rather than individualistic.



However, this empowerment remains circumscribed. *Candida*'s influence is confined to private space. Unlike Eliza, she does not seek economic independence or public recognition. Shaw thus presents domestic authority as both enabling and limiting.

Linguistic Capital and Social Mobility in *Pygmalion*:

While *Candida* explores emotional negotiation, *Pygmalion* foregrounds language as social determinant. Eliza Doolittle's Cockney accent marks her as lower-class and unrefined. Professor Higgins wagers that he can transform her into a duchess by teaching her proper speech. The experiment exposes the arbitrary nature of class distinctions.

Language in *Pygmalion* functions as symbolic capital. According to Bourdieu (1986), mastery of dominant linguistic codes confers social legitimacy. Eliza's phonetic training grants her access to elite spaces previously closed to her. Yet this transformation is double-edged. She acquires pronunciation but loses her former identity.

Higgins treats Eliza as a scientific subject rather than a person. His authority is intellectual and masculine. He assumes the right to shape her speech and, by extension, her social existence. Eliza's rebellion in Act V challenges this dynamic. She confronts Higgins, asserting her dignity and independence.

Her declaration that she can support herself as a teacher of phonetics signifies economic autonomy. Unlike *Candida*, whose power is emotional and relational, Eliza claims professional agency. She rejects Higgins's paternalism and insists upon self-definition.

From Butler's perspective, Eliza's transformation illustrates gender performativity. By altering speech, dress, and manners, she performs upper-class femininity. The success of this performance exposes class identity as constructed rather than inherent.

Yet Shaw resists romantic closure. Eliza does not marry Higgins; instead, she chooses Freddy, symbolizing partnership rather than domination. Her future remains uncertain, emphasizing the fragility of social mobility.

Comparative Analysis: Voice and Choice:

When read together, *Candida* and *Pygmalion* reveal complementary models of female power. *Candida*'s authority emerges through emotional labour and domestic negotiation; Eliza's through linguistic acquisition and public self-assertion. Both challenge male assumptions, yet they operate within distinct spheres.

Candida's "choice" scene centers on emotional dependency. Eliza's climactic confrontation centers on voice. *Candida* affirms relational stability; Eliza demands individual recognition. These differences reflect shifting historical contexts between 1897 and 1913, as women's roles evolved.

However, both plays underscore the tension between empowerment and containment. *Candida*'s influence depends on sustaining marriage. Eliza's transformation depends on male mentorship. Their agency arises within structures they cannot entirely dismantle.

Shaw thus complicates simplistic feminist readings. He neither wholly liberates nor confines his heroines. Instead, he dramatizes negotiation—an ongoing process of redefining power within constraint.

Masculinity in Crisis:

An equally important dimension of these plays is the portrayal of masculinity. Morell's crisis in *Candida* reveals the fragility of patriarchal authority. When confronted with emotional dependency, he experiences insecurity. Marchbanks, though romantic, lacks practical strength.



Similarly, Higgins's intellectual superiority masks emotional immaturity. He fails to comprehend Eliza's need for respect. His detachment reflects a modern crisis of masculinity: authority without empathy.

Shaw critiques not only gender hierarchy but also male identity. By exposing masculine vulnerability, he destabilizes patriarchal confidence. His heroines gain strength partly because male authority proves unstable.

Contemporary Relevance:

Shaw's plays remain relevant in modern debates on gender and class. In contemporary societies, emotional labour continues to shape domestic dynamics. Women frequently manage relational stability while pursuing professional ambitions. *Candida's* strategy resonates with ongoing negotiations within marriage.

Accent discrimination persists in globalized economies. Linguistic competence influences employment opportunities and social mobility. Eliza's struggle mirrors contemporary concerns about language politics, particularly in postcolonial contexts where English proficiency signifies privilege.

Furthermore, the tension between mentorship and exploitation in *Pygmalion* anticipates modern discussions about power imbalance in educational and professional settings. Higgins's treatment of Eliza invites scrutiny under contemporary feminist ethics.

Limitations of Shaw's Feminism:

Despite his progressive reputation, Shaw's feminism is not unproblematic. *Candida's* power remains domestic; Eliza's success depends initially on male intervention. Neither character entirely escapes structural constraint.

Moreover, Shaw's emphasis on intellectual equality sometimes overlooks systemic inequality. His heroines achieve agency through exceptional strength rather than collective struggle. Thus, his feminism aligns more closely with liberal individualism than radical transformation.

Nevertheless, Shaw's nuanced portrayal of negotiation rather than revolution reflects historical realities. His drama captures transitional moments in gender politics, offering insight into gradual social change.

Conclusion:

Through *Candida* and *Pygmalion*, George Bernard Shaw constructs complex representations of female agency that challenge and reshape patriarchal norms. *Candida* wields emotional authority within domestic space, transforming dependency into power. Eliza acquires linguistic capital, destabilizing class hierarchies and asserting professional independence. Together, these heroines illustrate two modes of empowerment: relational negotiation and public self-fashioning. Yet Shaw resists utopian resolution. Both women remain situated within social frameworks that constrain as much as they enable. Their agency emerges through performance, adaptation, and strategic resistance rather than outright rebellion. By engaging questions of voice, choice, class mobility, and gendered labour, Shaw anticipates ongoing feminist debates about identity and power. His drama reveals that autonomy is rarely absolute; it is negotiated within existing structures. In this sense, Shaw's plays continue to illuminate the persistent struggle for recognition and equality in modern societies.

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