

THE NEW WOMAN QUESTION: THE REVOLT BEYOND AND BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

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Abstract: Domestic life has always been considered synonymous to a Woman. A closer look at the societal norms over the ages, around the world, would reveal its truth. Women, who had been subjected to much male-domination and subjugation, revolted according to their own measures (though their number was comparatively low). If the man controlled the spheres outside his home, then the reins of the household were in the hands of the woman. With close reference to Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and George Bernard Shaw's *Candida* a comparative study of two such women will be done, who are also the female protagonists. In both the texts the playwrights very boldly bring out the essence of the New Woman Question and thus deal with the same in their own light. The New Woman Question itself brought in the very essential aspects of not only women emancipation but also women empowerment. Though the story lines of both the plays remain almost the same, what surprises the readers is the deft handling of the closing scenes. In the former play, Nora's revolt commences beyond her domestic sphere, where she slams the door of her home shut behind her and particularly on her husband's face and goes out to the world to carve out a niche of her own. Whereas, in the latter play *Candida* (also the name of the female protagonist), shuts the door behind her and while remaining within the closed doors of her home, she masters her skills in household politics as she is well aware of the fact that her 'home' is the uncontrolled sphere where her husband's domination will not work. Writing almost in different time frames and societies, both Ibsen and Shaw do wonders with their individual ways of dealing with the New Woman Question and projecting their female protagonists as women of this genre.

In the closing years of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth, opinions about many things were changing rapidly in Britain, and the word 'New' was often applied to denote a change of attitude and ideas. The 'New Woman' meant the women who wanted to vote at parliamentary elections (which British women did not do at that time) and to earn their own living in business, or as doctors or lawyers or university teachers, instead of staying at home in idleness or as family servants.ⁱ

In this light George Bernard Shaw had composed his famous play *Candida* in the year 1903. On the other hand Henrik Ibsen wrote *A Doll's House* in the year 1879, when the concept of the Woman Question had not even risen. However, both the dramas, though written in different time frames, have the same concept of women emancipation lurking large behind them.

A plot that was familiar to the audience was chosen deliberately so that the lay man could associate himself with the story. Moreover, it gave them a sense of reality too. These dramas were realistically real. Instead of writing some dramas with original themes of their own, both Ibsen and Shaw concentrated upon modifying an old theme – the position of women in domestic sphere. In both these plays the position of women in society and at home is the central theme around which the entire drama pivots. Both are aimed at dealing with the same element, by the playwrights, giving them their individual flavours with the twist-in-the-tale only in the closing scenes. The playwrights wanted the women to break the age-old societal conventions and pave their own ways

amidst the patriarchal web – ways that they had not thought out for themselves as they had accepted the social norms over the years because they had been simply asked to do so.

As women have been considered to be the weaker sex or vessel over ages, their opinions hardly mattered to the males of their own families or outside. Moreover, suppression and subjugation of women by both family and society did them more harm than one. Constant domination had led many such women to forget their individual existence and becoming synonymous to the family. A woman was and is still expected to get married and look after the family. This remains a constant norm in all the societies across the globe. However, for the ones who dared or still dare to defy such norms are generally termed as wayward or not-so-lady-like. Virginia Woolf, in her much renowned book *A Room of One's Own*, rightly states, keeping in view the rights of women:

... in the first place earning money was impossible for them (women), and in the second, had it been possible, the law denied them the right to possess what money they earned.ⁱⁱ

A.C.Ward in his Introduction to *Candida* states :
Shaw did not attempt to upset the beliefs and ideas of others merely for the sake of upsetting them. Nor did he want his own views to be accepted without close examination. Throughout his long career as a writer he had one unchanging message : *Think for yourself*. It seemed to him that while the human race had made progress in science and mechanics it had made very little moral or spiritual progress. He therefore threw light upon the old opinions and customs; not,

it must be repeated, because he wanted to destroy those ideas and practices, but because he wanted them to be examined anew, so that what was found obsolete might be rejected, what needed change might be modified, and what was found valid might be retained.ⁱⁱⁱ

Thus, *Candida* in Shaw's play *Candida* doesn't leave her home to revolt against such norms but she takes the reins in her own hands to make them straight. On the other hand Nora in Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* leaves her home to revolt against these norms by willing to carve out a niche of her own. Shaw had been much inspired by Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and based his *Candida* with the same storyline but with a different ending. Ibsen imbibed some very challenging ideas in his play about a husband and wife relationship – ideas that still run deep even in today's generation and society. Shaw, changes the main idea of Ibsen's. The latter states that in a marriage the husband controls the wife and the former feels the contrary. Thus, the revolt beyond and behind closed doors takes place.

In *A Doll's House* we come to know that Nora, is the protagonist and her husband is Torvald Helmer. On reading the play we feel that she indeed is very happy to be his 'doll wife' but as we approach the end we are made aware that her so-called 'doll's house' crumbles due to her husband's condescending attitude towards her. In *Candida* also we witness a similar situation. *Candida's* happy household crumbles as well when her husband, Reverend James Mavor Morell acts condescendingly too. Both the wives are taken for granted till the moment they revolt. Here, the husbands are embodiments of the worn-out ideals. Nora's emancipation begins by slamming the door behind and leaving her home. *Candida's* begin by calmly closing the door and staying inside her home.

What we know as Feminism today was known as the Woman Question then. It was a slam against the male dominance, the patriarchal society, chauvinism and female drudgery. Such adverse attitude towards women and her position in the society had a fatal effect on the individuality of women and in the process questioned her very existence. With Nora slamming the door hard behind her, she opened it wide for many, women who never saw the light at the end of the dark tunnel of misery. Nora is thus, the unconventional woman who questions each and every thing that questions her existence as a woman. *Candida* is the conventional woman who believes she can make things right by staying indoors; she is aware of the fact that no matter how much her husband tries to be strong physically, he is an emotional puppet in her hands and that is exactly her trump card in the game of domestic politics.

...she (*Candida*) has made him (*Morell*) recognize that he is not so strong and impressive a person as he had always supposed.^{iv}

Thus, showing the man of the house his real position and pointing out to him the fact that he is a weaker vessel when compared to his wife. One of Shaw's critics, Chesterton, has observed that Shaw is almost completely domestic and likes to solve every private problem privately.

Throughout the main part of the nineteenth century in Britain the great majority of women were content with subordinate place in the home and in society, though a few writers had protested against this state of inequality. Towards the end of the century (nineteenth century) numerous women were expressing in various ways their discontent with an inferior status and were agitating for the equality with men. This unrest became known as 'the *Woman Question*' and anyone who declared her right to be given an independent place in the community was called a *New Woman*.^v

Both women are justified in their own ways. The steps that they take will make them independent. What we need to focus on is that how the two define freedom on their own terms. Many may say that freedom is just a state of mind or belief but here it is evident that it is their right. Nora leaves her husband and moreover, her children behind to find her identity in the society. Many accepted the fact that she left her husband but many couldn't digest the fact that she left her children too. To them it may appear that she is a heartless mother. But again it leads us to question – if we don't value and respect ourselves then how do we expect to do the same for others, even if it is the question of protecting and caring for our own children? Nissim Ezekiel writes in favour of Nora:

Nora's first duty, she realizes, is her duty to herself, as an individual, to think things out for herself. If this brings her in conflict with the society, she must 'discover who is right, society or me'.... By leaving her husband and children, Nora puts herself in a position to begin a new life, a very difficult one in which she will educate herself and 'learn to stand alone.'^{vi}

It's a moment of profound awakening when Nora realizes that her husband values his reputation and job more than his love for her.^{vii}

It is a blessing in disguise for her as she realizes her real worth in her 'doll house'. She puts her foot down and turns her face away from all that which had bound her ever since she was a child in her father's home till the moment she decides to leave her husband's home. Nora also to a certain extent realizes that her husband, who controls economy and law in her home and outside, is actually a failure when it comes to emotions. When finally she declares that

she should leave home for her own benefit, we find Torvald's life is almost on the rocks.

However, Candida strongly believes that if she controls her husband then she will be able to control every aspect of her home – marriage, money and children. Thus, she stays behind and turns the entire domestic melodrama in her favour. A.C.Ward comments:

Candida is not only a faithful wife, she is also the strongest character in the play, and is guided by common sense, not by emotion or passion....Shaw's women believe marriage and motherhood to be their proper duty and life-work...Whereas the common conventional belief is that the man seeks and pursues and masters the woman he desires to marry, in Shaw's plays it is the woman who seeks out and masters the man she has selected to be the father of her children. ^{viii}

Ibsen had mentioned that he did not understand feminism but much studies have revealed that *A Doll's House* is indeed a feminist text.

Nora Helmer is the best illustration of the illusioned woman who lives in a society where the male oppresses the female and reduces (her) to a mere doll or plaything. Nora Helmer is that doll living in her fake doll house, which reinforces the fragile idea of a stable family living under a patriarchal and traditional roof.... Woman is always depicted as a secondary to man. She does not exist as an entity by herself but as the "Other"... Ibsen's depiction of the weak and docile woman brings to mind the 18th century writer Mary Wollstonecraft who argues in her essay *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, that women are taught since their infancy to have the "softness of temper, outward obedience, scrupulous attention". Once accompanied by the gift of beauty, these attributes will ensure them the protection of man.

Shaw is obviously a pioneer in feminism. He strongly believed in it and thus he sculpted his women characters in the same light. A.C.Ward mentions :

Shaw was among the limited member of men who supported the principle of the equality of the sexes, and most of his heroines have the characteristics of the New Woman: they are independent in spirit, self-confident, clear-headed, morally courageous, and emotionally well controlled. ^x

Both the dramatists were not only way ahead of their times but were also on the favour of women's rights and emancipation. Their plays are sheer reflections of their thoughts and beliefs, and their women protagonists are their mouthpieces. What Nora and Candida do is just a step that is taken towards breaking the rigidity of the patriarchal societies. They not only undergo an emotional turmoil but surely they are made more worldly wise and mature. Nora's revolt is a result of both latent and outward reasons. She feels that in order to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with her spouse in the society she must fend for herself first. On reading the text *A Doll's House* we see that Nora is economically wise as she believes in saving and also does a little work of sewing to meet her meager needs. Quiet contrary to her Candida doesn't do any such thing; what she does is, she makes her husband a puppet in her hands. Her husband, Morell is ruled by her. She has an emotional upper hand on him and this does wonders for her.

Often men feel that women who are docile are the perfect wife materials since they feel that such women would hardly raise their voices to protect their own rights and continue to be silent. But in many a case we might see that such docile women are the ones to revolt more often. No matter what the scenario may be the New Woman and its relative issues must be held in high esteem. Before distinguishing our genders it is more vital to see ourselves as human beings first. Saying this, it is essential to provide the rights to each human being so that the question of fighting for it need not rise at all. If it is not the case then there will be many Noras and Candidas who would continue to revolt; both within and outside domestic spheres.

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