



RESEARCH PAPER

Nora vs Candida: A Feminist Analysis of Ibsenite and Shavian Protagonists

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate Victorian society's toxic stereotypes, enslaving gender roles, and subtle patronising behaviours of males towards women through the lens of Nora from Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1889) and Candida from G.B. Shaw's *Candida* (1894). Moreover, this research compares the different feminist ideologies of Ibsen and Shaw to Nora and Candida's actions. Victorian women were denied their social, economic, political, religious, or even moral rights. Ibsen and Shaw, through their feminist heroines, strived to expose society's injustice towards the female sex. The methodology is a comparative, descriptive analysis of the selected plays by employing the theory of feminism. The study succeeds in highlighting the oppressive designs used against women by the male-dominant patriarchy and distinguishing the unique feminist approaches of Ibsen and Shaw.

KEYWORDS Emancipation, Fallen Women, Feminism, Liberation, New Women

Introduction

Till the Victorian era, women were denied their social, economic, political, religious, or even moral rights. By the end of the nineteenth century, women began to rise from the ashes, and a rebellion was held against the ongoing injustice towards them. Society saw a new woman who came to recognize her place in the world, and she was not a mere artefact anymore. They went out for equal rights and to make a living instead of depending on their male counterparts. This movement was termed feminism. The traditional woman, who was "confined on the north by servants, on the south by children, on the east by illnesses, and on the west by garments," was detested by the new woman (Jain, 2006, p. 21). She never admitted to society to veil her individual identity and stood against every double standard of men. She was in control of her sexuality, marriage, and motherhood and did every daring thing. She could smoke, drive cars, hunt, and pursue her own career or business.

The conventional and moral roles attributed to women were being a mother and a wife, and her only glory was motherhood. All these roles centred on the female, and dutifulness and moral purity were the criteria for their reputation and womanliness (Nead, 1988, p. 12). True women were meant to live a life of self-sacrifice, with "seclusion, obedience, restraint, modesty" being their characteristics (Linton, 1892, p. 802). Any woman who violated these laws has been held an outcast and accused of ill character. They were either the angels of the house regarded as embodiments of virtue, selflessness, and

purity, or they were reduced to fallen women who were self-serving, independent, stubborn, degraded or abnormal creatures. Such a woman was never forgiven by society, and even her next generation was punished for that. One chance of acceptance was there for her if she could spend her whole life in repentance and shame or by fading away in a religious monastery. The pure mother, which was the highest position a woman could strive to achieve in her social and domestic life, was often set against the unusual fallen woman. The Victorian theatre maintained this dichotomy of a good and bad woman to keep women at their so-called appropriate place.

Ibsen and Shaw contributed greatly to literature through their thought-provoking and often rebellious problem plays and courageous heroines. Both are celebrated as the pioneers of early feminist struggles. Their masterpieces, *A Doll's House* (1889) and *Candida* (1894) share a bond of familiarity between them. However, their approach towards feminism and the employment of the feminist ideology by their female protagonists differ significantly. This subtle contrast in feminism can be traced by identifying the different historical contexts in which the selected plays were written.

At the time Ibsen composed *A Doll's House* (1889), the feminist movement was in its earliest infancy. The Western world had yet to discover the concept of women striving for independence, the right to vote, and sexual freedom. In contrast, Shaw's *Candida* (1894) emerged when the feminist movement had begun and was gaining traction. Such historical variances must be acknowledged when analysing the selected works as they influenced how Ibsen and Shaw represented their visions of feminism and their meanings of empowered women.

The ending of both plays and the climactic decisions of the heroines substantiate the above-stated claim. According to Hammer (2010), with Ibsenite women, the emphasis on women in the play took a clear turn towards the ultimate emancipation of the whole human world (p. 1). Shaw's new woman, on the other hand, may be separated from Ibsen's liberated woman in a number of ways. Shavian women are primarily focused on revolt, securing their independence, and seeking their uniqueness (Raouf & Khudhayer, 2022, p. 3275). Ibsen had to let Nora leave her home behind to save her mangled identity and the sense of womanhood that she had never experienced before in the male dominant society. In contrast, Shaw had to let *Candida*, an already empowered woman, stay to save her marriage and her home. Therefore, Ibsen and Shaw have presented their unique approaches to feminism through Nora leaving and *Candida* staying.

Women, especially in the Victorian era and early 20th century, have always been victimised by their husband's enslaving dominance as well as society's stereotypical chains of gender roles, which is still, to some extent, valid in the contemporary era. This study comparatively analyses two feminist models Nora by Henrik Ibsen and *Candida* by G. B. Shaw. It aims to expose the caging attitude of males and the whole society over women and their progress towards liberation and possession of self-identity bridled by their male counterparts or husbands. Playwrights Ibsen and Shaw, both early pioneers of feminism in the dramatic genre, have their views about women's freedom and empowerment as separate, strong human beings who control matters in their own manners of feminism. This research also aims to highlight the contrasting yet unique feminist approaches of Ibsen and Shaw through careful observation of their interesting heroines.

Literature Review

A Doll's House (1889) by Henrik Ibsen

Considered the Father of Realism, Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen is highly renowned because his works are replete with strong feminist models. Though he did not publicly identify himself as a feminist, his plays were concerned with women's causes and strove to acknowledge their struggles in a male-dominated society. Editor James McFarlane, in his book *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen* (1994), provides a rich account of Ibsen's life and a detailed critique of his major plays embellished with realism and feminist themes. In the same book, critic Janet Garton noted the importance of women's roles in his plays, stating that "a woman's probability of self-realisation in Ibsen's plays, as in the societal structure of his time, is greatly reliant on the mindset of the men closest to them, and it is the response of the men which is the primary determinant of the consequence" (McFarlane, 1994, p. 107).

Hassan Balaky and Mosawir Sulaiman (2016) used an Anglo-American framework of feminist literary theory for an in-depth analysis of *A Doll's House* (1889). They stated that Ibsen "addressed the traditional image of women in literature with his female characters" (p. 31). Their study concludes how Nora, as the end approaches, transforms from a possessive doll to an individual human being (p. 43). Yeasmin (2018) claims that Nora Helmer, in the drama *A Doll's House* (1889), is the fiery symbol of women against the patriarchal culture. Ibsen brought out the inner strength and essence of women through the model of Nora, which helped them break 'the doll's house', allowing them to breathe freely in a peaceful world (p. 334).

Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex* (1973), declares that "our societies are patriarchal and a woman must break the bonds in order to be herself as a human being" (125). Ahmad and Wani (2018) write that Ibsen stated that in the prevalent masculine culture of 1878, with laws drafted by males according to their desires and demand, and a judicial system that judges women from a masculine perspective, a woman cannot be herself, in notes written for *A Doll's House* (1889) (p. 54).

Moreover, in his article "Ibsen's Treatment of Women (2016)", Amir Hosain illustrates various negative attitudes towards women of 19th century Scandinavian society by analysing Ibsen's different plays. He deduced that Ibsen's female characters are brave, innovative, forceful, unusual, and unfeminine. Some of them, on the other hand, are weak, docile, and submissive, falling into the categories of sweetheart, traditional, and meek. Nevertheless, they are dedicated to accomplishing their liberation (pp. 9-8). Gail Finney (1994) expresses that "[Ibsen] challenges society in his play to realise that relationships based on finances and power are flawed; that the image of the providing husband and adoring wife is exactly a façade." Therefore, Nora, after realising her husband's demeaning attitude, elevates herself to the same level as him, becoming the 'dominant one' in the relationship (p. 3).

***Candida* (1894) by George Bernard Shaw**

The Nobel Prize-winning playwright George Bernard Shaw, notably known for his revolutionary comedies, is considered one of the first pioneers of women's rights. His plays often portray powerful female leads such as *Candida*. Abdus Sattar, in his research, endeavoured to throw light on the 'female world' and exert that Shaw, inspired by Ibsen's realism and socialism, "projects the female sensibility and emancipation of women through the concept of the new woman in his plays (p. 533).

Grace Orpha Davis (1913), in her comprehensive thesis, summarises that Ibsen, through his female characters, has a truth to share about the women of the world (p. 145). For women, Shaw's purpose is "to dispel all so-called chivalrous notions about a woman

that seems to elevate her but really do not, and to place her in her rightful place far above romance to work out her own salvation side by side with man." They represent his great ambitions for future femininity, both directly and indirectly, as do those of the purest men and women of his day (p. 147). Shaw himself reviewed *A Doll's House* (1889) critically and said that "it is evident that Helmer is shaken, and Nora's leaving is not a nonsense "farewell forever," but rather a path towards self-respect and a different overview of life... The door slamming behind her is more significant as it clearly puts a stop to the old order (Egan, 1997, p. 376).

Material Methods

The methodology adopted for this study is a feminist comparative analysis of the female protagonists – Nora and Candida – chosen from Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1889) and G. B. Shaw's *Candida* (1894) respectively. The feminine struggles, belittling stereotypes, and imprisoning gender roles faced by these heroines from males, lovers, husbands, or society symbolise the abused women of their time. The research focuses on the behaviours and dialogues of male counterparts of the novels towards Nora and Candida to investigate this oppressive phenomenon of male dominance. The feminist lens also allowed us to dissect the distinct and peculiar feminist ideologies of Ibsen and Show by comparing the main protagonists. The research is qualitative in nature and the data is examined through descriptive analysis. The texts of both plays were taken as primary sources and secondary sources comprised of internet websites, journal articles, and books.

Results and Discussion

Henrik Ibsen was the pioneer writer who wrote for the feminist cause. His drama was termed modern drama, which dealt with the new woman and their cause. Ibsen tried to highlight the feigned commercial and political ideals of society and the institution of marriage. Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1889) was the first play to depict feminism. The play showed the struggle of the submissive woman against the crippled society, which resulted in devastation. He attempted to attack the men who were addicted to control not only their business but also the ladies around them. The women were in constant war against the hegemony of the dominating men to minimise the power barrier between the sexes. The women were so subjugated that they were only treated as a doll after marriage, a doll that was not meant to be taken care of but instead to be played with. The men used them as agents of fertility, and their whole identity was masked under the weight of responsibilities and superior husbands.

The play is replete with the events when Torvald called Nora pet names, like skylark, squirrel, and featherhead, out of love. Firstly, Nora accepts the dominance of Torvald, and she feels no hesitation in accepting it. Torvald spends most of his time in study or, largely, in the public sphere. He interacted with his wife as per his mood and least with his children while giving more attention to doctor Rank. When the children returned from their walk accompanied by their nurse, Torvald left the room, saying, "only mothers can stand such a temperature" (p. 81). When Torvald fell sick, Nora took the loan for his trip to Italy, feeling proud to do something for her husband. She does not let Torvald know about the matter because she thinks that it would hurt his manly ego to know that he owes something to his wife. Moreover, the woman of that time was not allowed to borrow money without her husband's consent, and Torvald would never have agreed to it.

Nora, by the end of act 1, wanted to get rid of her agitation and desperation after she had gotten the realisation of her spiralled position. In the next act, the tarantella dance allowed her to express her true self, as Gail Finney conveyed by Catherine Clément's views

about the true achievement of tarantella dance which allows “women to momentarily break free from motherhood and marriage into an ungoverned and unrestricted world filled with music and unrestrained action” (p. 98). The dance symbolically offered Nora a temporary break and an essential need for her inner self before returning to her duty as a wife and mother after her feverish condition, but only as a launching point for her emancipation. Freed from her husband’s dictating shadow over her and liberated from the chains of her strangling marriage, she danced so frantically, as she is unable to hear her husband’s voice, who commented, “Nora dear, you’re dancing as if it were the matter of life and death” (p. 82).

It was not uncanny for Nora to be aware of this notion that women are supposed to obey men. Nora says to Torvald that he should feel grateful because she listens to him so well. Torvald laughed at the idea that he must be thankful for her being his obedient wife tasked with the moral purpose of serving him, saying “Good of you! To give in to your own husband? Well, well, you little madcap, I know you don't mean it” (p. 57). Nora was foolish enough to consider that Torvald would forgive her for the loan she took, for his sake no less, rather than taking on the responsibility himself. Torvald threw horrifying mocks at her when he came to know about Nora’s innocently nefarious forgery and loan because he considered his so-called honour at risk; being in debt to Nora and Krogstad pained him. Even though he declares that he is a man who can take of Nora's matters and her things day and night, serving her happily and risking his life for her, he still refuses to sacrifice his honour for her. Nora answered, “Millions of women have done so” (p. 120). He thought his reputation would be ruined if Krogstad publicised their secret. Not thinking about Nora's true intention behind her actions, he threw all the blame on her. He prosecuted Nora by belittling her parenting of his children, accusing her of having “No religion, no morality, no sense of duty” (p. 107). All his love for Nora was obliterated at this very scene and Nora was shaken.

He never said anything about Nora after Krogstad freed them of the loan, exclaiming he was safe. That very moment was the one when Nora got her epiphany of realisation about her husband Torvald not being the better man she deserves. Torvald always considered her a helpless, damsel-in-distress creature, incapable of social work and unable to hold her responsibilities, and never thinking of her as his equal partner. After acknowledging that her identity and moral rights were being violated by her husband, Nora was stormed and enraged. She comments in fury that “my duties towards myself.... I think that before all else I am a human being, just as much as you are” (p. 117). In the penultimate scene of the play, Nora realised that being a doll wife is unnecessarily against her self-worth. The door she slammed, the bursting sound it made, which was heard all over the world, ironically opened a doorway for nineteenth-century women to free themselves from oppressive marital conventions.

The play was banned in many countries for years because such feminist concepts were considered unacceptable to the audience of 1879. Ibsenite women were strong independent women striving for their identity in a culture that viewed women as playable toys or possessive items. Nora too was considered a plaything by her husband, Torvald. Nora admits that she was basically handed down from her father, who treated her like a doll, to her husband. Her choice to leave her husband reveals an achievement or triumph of the individual over society. McFarlane (1994) comments that Nora distinguishes out as one of Ibsen's most emancipated characters because she bears no constraints on her right to personal autonomy (p. 83). By freeing herself from the chains of her controlling marriage, Nora understood she must discover her position or place in the world by herself. After she left, Torvald finally concluded in the end that it was he who depended on Nora for his healthy survival.

Nora's suitcase symbolised liberation, and by taking that, she decided on her future as a modern woman. She was not bound or destined to obey her husband who was not even ready to commit to his own expected position responsibly because marriage is built on the foundation of equality and partnership, not subordination. Neither in the public sphere nor in private, has Nora had any power, making her totally dependent on her husband financially as well as socially. Torvald, a man who manages public and domestic affairs, absconds her for wasting too much money on Christmas presents when he gives her two pounds which are, in a household controlled by Torvald, not Nora, considered enough for housekeeping. This distinction, according to Guerin, "puts women on a pedestal but also in a cage or just in a 'doll's house' as in this play" (Hassan Balaky & Mosawir Sulaiman, 2016, p. 41).

In contrast to contemporary society, the females in Ibsen's plays are presented as more empowered. These influential and well-integrated women are conscious of their worth and are striving to achieve their place in society. Nora was courageous enough to admit the fact that for the past eight years, she had been living with an unknown. The unwillingness of Nora to adhere to her husband and the choice to slam the door on Torvald to leave her children demonstrates an act of incredible moral courage and mental strength. Nora's reluctance to rely on what is written in books or what culture preaches shows that she has rejected society's conventions entirely. She says, "I will see whether what he taught me is true, or, at any rate, whether it is true for me" (p. 82). Ibsen portrayed the psychological state of his characters most realistically and admirably.

Ibsen was never understood till George Bernard Shaw emerged and explored the ideas behind his words. He presented him as a moral leader who focused on the importance of the individual's will and self-liberation. Shaw realises the importance of motherhood for a woman. Unlike Ibsen, whose female character always took a suitcase of emancipation in her hand at the door, Shaw's female character exercised more power inside the house in her duties instead of going outside. Shaw created a doll husband who depended thoroughly on his wife and was influenced by her. The traditional women who were physically, socially, culturally, and politically inferior to their male ordines were altered by Shaw. He portrayed the picture of women having their personality, interests, and concept of liberty and being equally sensible creatures as men. Shaw's plays feature women who seek out and hold power over the man they have chosen to be their children's father, contrary to the widely held assumption that men look for, decide, and master the women they wish to marry.

Shaw's 'New Woman' is not vulnerable, delicate, obedient, or submissive, but she is aware of her rights, and she is audacious, productive, and seductive. Shaw was not so focused on developing a delineation between the new woman and the traditional Victorian woman but simply able to take the initiative to show the true inherent nature and potential of women. Shaw's female protagonists are real women because of their individuality. Finney (1994) stated that Shaw described his heroine, in his play *Candida* (1894), as being "rooted both from the mythical tale of the Virgin Mary and from the kind of new woman of the year at the turn of the century" (p. 202).

Candida (1894) is one of the most well-known plays by Shaw. Shaw's portrayal of the character of Candida is dual as she is shown doing the home tasks and listening to her husband as Victorian women do. On the other hand, she also openly talks with Morell about Marchbanks' love for her, depicting the ways of a modern woman. It was argued that this play is Anti-feminist as Candida accepts Morell as her master. As Lexy comments, "Ah, if you women only had the same a clue to Man's strength that you have to his weakness, Miss Prossy, there would be no Woman Question" (p. 16). In actuality, Candida

beautifully exercises her power by controlling both men as children, calling them “great baby” (p. 35) or “boy” (p. 71)

Candida’s character is a transition from the second wave of feminism to a brave and autonomous woman who makes her own decisions standing within the four walls of her house. Candida lives her life according to her own wishes. She knows her husband on the inside out and about his selfish and eager-to-be-treated-like-a-child nature. So, by politely controlling this knowledge, she makes independent choices.

Marchbanks, the young lover of Candida, fell deeply for her and thought of love as a romantic rapture. His love had little or nothing to do with mundane tasks like chopping onions and adjusting lights, as well as with the sublunary aspect of bodily ownership. Candida, on the other hand, does not see domestic life as imprisonment but rather as an incentive to affirm her free will. That is why she is not engaged in Eugene's notions about the domesticity of women as meekness. In *Candida* (1894), the protagonist cherishes doing her housework and taking care of her family. She gladly sweeps the floor, fills the lamps, cuts the onions, and does her house chores. She is frequently criticised for appearing to be relying on her husband at a time when women are fighting for equal pay and political rights. However, Shaw skillfully demonstrates in this drama that the cleaning brush is not a representation of Candida's subordination but instead her freely chosen work and self-governance. Cleaning the house and taking on house chores do not hold Candida back from exercising her control of the house and dominance over her man.

Candida manipulates others through her physical beauty and motherly care, making them listen to her. Marchbanks held Morell responsible for preaching over Candida’s oil-dipped hands while she deserved to be preached about. At the climax of the play, both men argue to win Candida’s companionship. Morell says, “Oh, if she is mad enough to leave me for you, who will protect her? Who will help her? Who will work for her? Who will be the father of her children?” (p. 101). Morell tried to fake his hold over Candida, which was weakened by Candida's ambiguous statement that she gives herself to the “weaker of the two” (p. 118). It clarified that it was actually Morell who was dependent on Candida and needed her and not vice versa.

Candida chooses herself because she always had the third option of walking away from them, and Eugene realised this fact. With Candida’s final statement that she gives herself to the weaker, the real influence of a modern woman over men is explained. She decided not only her fate but also the fate of the two men because none of them could have changed her decision. Morell's patriarchal approach is evident when he gives her two options and then fails to understand Candida's statement. Eugene's inclination is depicted when he understands her remark and explains it to Morell. Candida is a Pragmatist who knows Morell cannot live without her, so she chooses him over Marchbanks, who has lived ages without love. This phase of feminism illuminated that the new woman was emancipated from the men at the time she recognised her worth. It is the man now who must be emancipated from the world of false beliefs and misconceptions.

Conclusion

Both heroines prove to be the beautiful feminist models of Ibsen and Shaw, who are strong and independent, capable of making their own choices for freedom and identity. Moreover, Ibsen and Shaw both possess unique views about feminism and women’s empowerment which is reflected through their female protagonists. In comparison, Nora's identity was massacred by her marriage, while Candida's marital relationship glorified her. Ibsen's Nora and Shaw's Candida made different choices when it came to leaving the house

to discover herself by the former and live in the house to gain her full power by the latter. They were similar at one point when Candida said she must be talked to sometimes, and Nora said that she and Torvald had never sat at a table for discussion. Though both women walked on opposite roads, they showed that a woman must be heard; otherwise, she would make you listen in her own way.

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