

The concept of free women in the works of Caryl Churchill

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Abstract – This paper attempts to look at the position of women in society through the plays of Caryl Churchill, a feminist playwright. The main focus is on the concept of free women portrayed in her works. How her plays show the oppression of women in a patriarchal society. By illustrating these subjugated and oppressed female characters, Churchill strikes the attention of the audience and makes them criticize the established social and economic norms. The continuous abuse and exploitation of women has resulted in their struggle to fight for their position and to get equal opportunities for themselves. Women in her works do not accept the conventional norms and demand for their rights. They want to live for themselves and achieve success in life instead of sacrificing their lives for their family. The impressive female characters in Churchill's selected plays, *Vinegar Tom* (1976), *Cloud Nine* (1979), *Top Girls* (1982) and *A Mouthful of Birds* (1986) are talked about in this paper and it also focuses on how they defy the social norms and the socially constructed gender identities.

Keywords: Caryl Churchill, exploitation, women, feminist, gender

Introduction – Caryl Churchill, born in London in 1938, is one of Britain's greatest writers. She began to write short radio dramas, and then started exploring gender and sexuality through modernist theatre technique of Epic Theatre. In the mid-1980s she started to incorporate dance theatre in her writing. She also wrote about objections to sex and violence. But then Churchill gradually abandoned more conventions of realism, with her loyalty to feminist themes and ideas becoming a guiding principle in her work. She won an Obie Award (annual award given to theatre artists in New York) for best play in 1983 with *Top Girls*. Her plays also explore the effects of the colonialist or imperialist mindset on intimate personal relationships, and uses cross-gender casting for comic and instructive effect. Feminist thinking plays the main role in much of her works, she has experimented with language, structure and form as well. She wanted to deconstruct the traditional norms of society about women. Through her innovative approach, she projected gender issues, overlapping dialogues and cross-dressing techniques in her works. Churchill is unique in her own way of describing the struggle of women against oppression. Through her plays *Top Girls*, *Vinegar Tom*, *Cloud Nine*, *A Mouthful of Birds*, *Serious Money*, *Blue Heart* and many others, she tries to defy the old patterns and themes of writing.

Caryl Churchill and the concept of free women – Caryl Churchill was famous for her exploration of sexual politics and feminist themes. Her first play to receive wide notice was *Cloud Nine* (1979), "a farce about sexual politics". It challenges 'the preconceived notions held by the audience in terms of gender and sexuality' (Caryl Churchill profile, 2018). She subverts stereotypes by using cross gender casting to unsettle the audience's expectations. "Betty is played by a man in order to show how femininity is an artificial and imposed construct". She herself says "The first act, like the society it shows, is male-dominated and firmly structured. In the second act, more energy comes from the women and the gays." By cross-casting Churchill also tries to play safe as it makes same-sex relationships visibly heterosexual and normative. Act II set in a London Park in 1979, contains much more sexual freedom for women, whereas in Act I that is set in British colonial Africa in the Victorian era, the men dictate the relationships. Act II "focuses on changes in the structure of power and authority, as they affect sex and relationships," from the male-dominated structure in the first act (Michael Patterson, 2008). Churchill writes that she "explored Genet's idea that colonial oppression and sexual oppression are similar." She essentially uses the play as a social arena to explore "the Victorian origins of contemporary gender definitions and sexual attitudes, recent changes and some implications of these changes (James M. Harding, 1998).

Her work *Top Girls*, (1982) deals with women losing their humanity in order to attain power in a male-dominated environment. It features an all-female cast, and focuses on Marlene, who has relinquished a home and family to achieve success in the world of business. Half the action takes place at a celebratory dinner where Marlene mixes with historical, iconic and fictional women who have achieved great stature in a "man's world", but always at great cost. The other half of the play, set a year in the past, focuses on Marlene's family, where the true cost of her "successful" life becomes poignantly and frighteningly apparent (Tycker, Alicia, 2008)

The play is set in the Britain of the early 1980s and examines the issue of what it means to be a successful woman, initially using "historical" characters to explore different aspects of women's "social achievement". Churchill has stated that the play was inspired by her conversations with American feminists: it comments on the contrast between American feminism, which celebrates individualistic women who acquire power and wealth, and British socialist feminism, which involves collective group gain. There is also commentary on Margaret Thatcher, then prime minister, who celebrated personal achievement and believed in free-market capitalism (Thatcherism). Marlene, the tough career woman, is portrayed as soulless, exploiting other women and suppressing her own caring side in the cause of success. (Churchill Caryl,1982)

The play argues against the style of feminism that simply turns women into new patriarchs and argues for a feminism in which caring for the weak and downtrodden is more prominent. It questions whether it is possible for women in society to combine a successful career with a thriving family life. The play is famous for its dreamlike opening sequence in which Marlene is waiting for some guests to arrive as she is throwing a dinner party to celebrate her promotion at the employment agency where she works. As the women arrive and start the meal, they begin to talk about their lives and what they did. meets famous women from history, including Pope Joan, who, disguised as a man, is said to have been pope between 854 and 856; the explorer Isabella Bird; Dull Gret the harrower of Hell; Lady Nijo, the Japanese mistress of an emperor and later a Buddhist nun; and Patient Griselda, the patient wife from The Clerk's Tale in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. All of these characters behave like a gang of city career women out on the town and get increasingly drunk and maudlin, as it is revealed that they have suffered in similar ways. Each of her guests is a historical, fictional or mythical woman who faced adversity and suffered bitterly to attain her goals. They also recall the children that they bore and subsequently lost. After dessert, the women sit drinking brandy, unconsciously imitating their male counterparts. (Brantley, Ben,2008)

In a scene Mrs. Kidd, who was passed up for promotion in favour of Marlene. Mrs. Kidd tells Marlene how much the job means to her husband, how devastated he is, and questions whether she should be doing a 'man's job'. It becomes clear that she is asking Marlene to step down and let her husband have the job instead, which Marlene firmly declines to do. She tries to clear Mrs. Kidd out of her office, but Mrs. Kidd only becomes more insistent until Marlene finally asks her to "please piss off". Louise, a client who after conscientiously working for many years at the same firm is deciding to quit. She slowly opens up to Win, describing how she had dedicated her life to her job, working evenings at the expense of her social life, without reward. She has found herself at 56, with no husband or life outside of work, in a position where she trains men who are consistently promoted over her. Marlene is depicted as a successful businesswoman, and all her guests from different ages celebrate her promotion in the 'Top Girls' employment agency. We see Marlene at work in the surprisingly masculine world of the female staff of the agency, in which the ladies of 'Top Girls' must be tough and insensitive in order to compete with men. The life stories of the dinner guests externalise Marlene's thoughts and anxieties over the choices that she has made in her own life and the alternatives, like whether it was the right choice to give up her child in order to be successful. In the last scene Merlene and her sister Joyce discuss what is to become of Angie, who hates Joyce. It is revealed that Angie is actually Marlene's daughter, whom she abandoned to Joyce's care, causing Joyce to lose the child she was carrying from the stress (Benedict,2012).

So, this play centres around Marlene, a career-driven woman who is heavily invested in women's success in business and ignores the duty of bringing up her illegitimate daughter. It examines the roles available to women in modern society, and what it means or takes for a woman to succeed. The play clearly talks about the concept of free women in society who want to live their life on their own terms and not how the society wants them to live. They give more priority to themselves and their career instead of what is always expected from them, to stay oppressed and live for others.

In her work *Vinegar Tom* (1976) gender and power relationships are shown through the lens of 17th-century witchcraft trials in England (Janik et al., 2002). This work is based on the story of a woman who was tried and executed for witchcraft in Essex in 1645 and inspired by the Women's Rights Act in 1970. It explored the thought that women were treated unequally to men in England. The play was written at the height of the second feminist movement in the 20th Century. Churchill tried to display how much control men have in society and how women have historically been treated as chattel, taught to be subservient to men. The play also outlined society's rejection of people who do not conform to the mainstream, or who are "odd" or "different". It was shown how going against the norm, no matter the time period, is not accepted by traditionalists. (Matsuo, Alex, 2014).

The play *A Mouthful of Birds* (1986) a play with dance and its perspective on mental illness and sexuality is strongly influenced by the work of Michel Foucault. It is a meditation on possession, madness and female violence. In this play an unhappy wife named Lena, slowly succumbs to post-natal psychosis. She experiences command hallucinations telling her to drown her baby in the bathtub and eventually does so. Also, there is a woman who struggles to overcome alcoholism. Dan crosses gender boundaries by becoming a woman. Churchill has openly challenged the traditional gender roles and explored the limitations of madness as a means of liberation. Derek when reborn as a woman says "My waist isn't small but it makes me smile, my shoulders are still strong, my skin used to wrap me up, now it lets the world in. Was I this all the time? I've almost forgotten the man who possessed this body. I can't remember what he used to be frightened of, every day when I wake up, I'm comfortable". The play seems to explore an underlying anxiety about the implications of performativity and theatricality when teased out to their extremes. It offers up the "truth" behind gender identity that it is socially constructed. Though on one hand it establishes the socially constructed nature of gender, it also questions the possibility of escaping the prison of postmodern subjectivity, wherein the self is always already an "effect of forces" outside itself. The play questions, in other words, whether altering one's consciousness (e.g. changing one's performance) truly is freedom. Churchill shows that the potential for change lies in our ability to act new parts within the rubric of constructed identity. She explores both the surface of social structures and the mental territory beneath that surface. (Laura Nutten, 2001)

In conclusion, this paper examines the female voices as they appear and communicate in the plays of Caryl Churchill, who is known for dramatizing the abuses of power, and for her survey of sexual politics. Her works show us how women fight for their rights and want equal opportunities and they want to show what it means to be a successful woman. The concept of free women is clearly shown in these plays, the woman of today is not fearful and burdened by the abuse of patriarchal society. She knows her worth and how to stand against socially constructed gender rules.

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