

# Concept of Women's Autonomy in Caryl Churchill's Plays "Top Girls" and "Vinegar Tom"

Paper Submission: 15/07/2020, Date of Acceptance: 25/07/2020, Date of Publication: 26/07/2020

## Abstract

Caryl Churchill, a feminist dramatist, presents the structures of oppression through the narrative and theatric elements. She uses the formal elements of theatre to challenge the inevitability of oppression and empowers audience to seek change. Caryl Churchill became a prominent dramatist of the Royal Court Theatre in 1970's and 1980's. She became the exponent of women's cause in the feminist drama. She presented perspective on history which emphasizes women's social roles. In representing historical identity of woman, Churchill's play such as Vinegar Tom, Top Girls and so on call into question conventional motions and theatrical expressions of sexuality and relationship of power to gender. There is no place for sentimental empathy for women or working class people in her plays.

**Keywords:** Historical Identity of Woman, Female Personality, Feminism, Persecution, Gender Consciousness, Imaginative Challenge, Women's Social Role, Struggle of Women, Woman's Autonomy, Traditional System, Superstition

## Introduction

Caryl Churchill's feminism is not based on any propaganda or vogue of writing in the latter half of 20<sup>th</sup> century. She does not prefer her feminism simply because she as a woman must have partiality to her own kind. In this manner, Churchill's feminist writing does not have the touch of sentimentality. She works on logic and develops her arguments on the realistic plane. She is critical of the traditional systems of looking at the womanhood simply because the male dominated society cared little for the actual welfare of womankind as a class. A powerful male being took delight in protecting his lady partner and always projected it as his grand concession to the female beings. Even a small sacrifice from the side of a male being was trumpeted highly and all other sacrifices from the side of a woman were looked as a routine of her nature. A woman was never given her due share as a class. Caryl Churchill found that woman's voice was dubbed to the extent that she remained mute inglorious bloom for man. Every sociological structure suffers from partiality in favour of the male agenda. A man has always secured his position because every system of the society was designed by the apprehensive values of the rules and formalities in favour of the male beings. So Caryl Churchill becomes thoughtful about woman's lot in the society.

Caryl Churchill felt and realized the things related to feminine world and developed keen desire to project an ideology in which woman must have the exposure of her identity in full. She was shocked to read the Biblical test and Christian gospels, which mostly professed derogatory things about women. Churchill read the Biblical test, which announced Eve as a greater sinner, and therefore, the woman in the world of physical reality is posed to have greater part of sufferings. A woman in adultery is nicknamed with several designation of ugliness. There are so many titles for such a woman whore, courtesan, prostitute, strumpet and luxuriant witch. The child bearing by a woman is viewed as ugliness in bodily structure. Her labour pains and the process of childbirth do not add much to her glory in this act. On the other hand, she is treated as sinner with the punishment of labour pains in the childbirth. In this manner, Caryl Churchill found that woman's position was never treated honourable. A man took all delights admissible in the physical world and did hardly anything for the aftermath in the process of procreation and furtherance of humanity. A man

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hailed highly what he did and hardly have due honour of the effort of womankind.

#### **Ideas of Woman's Persecution**

Caryl Churchill's wide readings at school and in the college brought before her ugly pages of history in which the tales of woman's persecution made her look aghast. Any attempt of the womankind to take a free decision about herself, was liable to be called an act of a witch. She was likely to be treated most roughly on this account. Caryl Churchill's personal experiences in this regard brought her to the composition of light shining in Buckinghamshire and Vinegar Tom. She has taken up a theme of woman's presentation in the name of false social values devised by the male dominated attitude of the society. Let us mark what came to the mind of Churchill at the time of planning Light Shining in Buckinghamshire:

Caryl Churchill's first play for the joint stock theatre Group was originally going to be about the Crusades. Max Stafford Clark had visited a house where there was a Crusader's tomb and this had led him to speculate on 'what would make someone uproot himself and set off for Jerusalem'. He invited Caryl Churchill and Colin Bennett to co-write a play on this topic, and the three of them need frequently to discuss ideas and reading. In the course of the discussion period their focus of interest shifted to the Crusades to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. They kept the idea of 'the millennial dream and Max's question of why you would turn your life upside down for it' but, in place of the remote figures of the crusaders whom they would never been able to imagine very clearly, they 'could hear vivid voices: "Give give give give up, give up your houses, horses, goods gold.....have all things common."<sup>1</sup>

The arrest of brothertom on the charge of vagrancy without giving a thought to the actual problems of women in that era is a question, which the action of this drama leaves on us. In Vinegar Tom, Alice Susan and Joan are charged of witchery as they took their independent decisions about themselves. Alice was guided by her romantic fancy about a man and slept with him and had pregnancy in return. Susan took abortive measure to save herself from the fear of her death in childbirth as she had narrow escape during the birth of third and youngest son. The attempts of these women are viewed very seriously by the male dominated society. The idea of devilish exercise is forced upon them. They are forced to accept that they are witches. These questions about woman's story of persecution haunt the audience and we are forced to think about what Caryl pronounces.

#### **Caryl Churchill's Personal Experience**

Caryl Churchill's personal experiences in giving birth to her children in rearing and nourishing them at a time when her literary career as a dramatist was

also standing with its demand make her really feel what woman generally suffers. A woman has to keep herself in restraint about her desires and ambitions, as her major concerns become childbirth and child rearing. It is beautifully recorded by Helene Keyssar thus:

When Churchill left Oxford, she was prepared to attempt an established path of London's theatres. A decade later in 1972, she did arrive at the Royal Court Theatre, a haven since 1956 for aspiring playwrights. But unlike her male colleagues she took her long detour enroute. She married David Harter, a struggling barrister, moved on the suburbs of London, had three sons, a series of difficult miscarriages, and began to write radio plays. Like many women, Churchill was engaged in a life more complex than even she acknowledged.<sup>2</sup>

Caryl Churchill's personal problems are pursuing the ambitions of her dramatic career were further aggravated when she had her three kids sporting, babbling, gurgling and giggling around her. Let us mark the following words of Helene Keyssar again:

Writing with three small boys in the house was difficult, and eventually Churchill hired a woman to help with children so that she could write a few hours a day. But still she would be torn's about paying someone else to take care of my children. About the feeling that I could do it better. She wrote at home; the nanny would bring her tea and her youngest child in mid morning, and she would want to stay with him. The pressure she imposed on herself to reduce was able a strain: I felt guilty if I did not accomplish something while I was paying someone else to baby sit. Then, when her youngest child was two, the nany moved away; Churchill decided not to hire a new sitter: All the old nagging questions (reappeared) of what's really important. Are the plays more important than raising kids? She did not resolve the question but continued to grab movements to write at weekends and occasional evenings. As a result of these constraints, she often wrote very quickly.<sup>3</sup>

These personal experiences of Caryl Churchill framed her outlook and conditioned her feminist programmes. When she came to the fold of writing with the force of her ideas, she developed her outlook about woman's lot in this world. Now, she thought about the liberated woman with all her desires at free play. The problems concerning woman's life started clicking to her memory and her imagination was fired by such considerations as she felt around her and as she read in the pages of history. She

started thinking about woman's autonomy in taking her own decisions. She also shunned what the false social values were heaped upon the womankind, Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* is the product of this consideration about the autonomy of woman.

#### **Construction of female society**

By her actual personal experiences Caryl Churchill realized that economic factor played vital role in granting social recognition to either a man or to a woman. That is why, Caryl Churchill plans a society of female beings in **Top Girls**. Though it sounds impossible that a society in which males do not participate can work, but Caryl Churchill does it as part of imaginative construction of a social pattern in which only feminine beings live breathe and interact. In this manner, this society becomes absolutely free from treachery, exploitation and oppression.

The social comedy of *Top Girls* cleverly shifts multiple respective in order to explore the nature and meaning of success economic, social and professional for women in a world dominated by men. If women have to give up or redefine an essential part of themselves, how is the ultimate achievement to be valued? What kind of accomplishment is it to be successful in a competitive (and destructive) way? These are not questions strictly limited to women however, as anyone pondering on the prevailing notions of success can vouch. How to define or redefine oneself in pursuit of a happy and fully rounded life in our time (career or public recognition notwithstanding) is a central concern that informs and shapes *Top Girls*.

Churchill's ambitious work challenges dominant societal and cultural conceptions and assumptions about gender roles and the status of women, capitalism, class and the family. Frequently her specific dramaturgy moves freely within contrasting timeframes, shifts chronological sequence of events, engages historical and literary references and uses nontraditional casting and characterizations. The writer trusts that her audience will string together apparently unrelated elements in a play and find connections for themselves. In the following dialogue between Joan and Isabella and between Nijo and Isabella we may mark how these women cherish their desire to become as free and independent as male beings:

JOAN, first I decided to stay a man. I was used to it. And I wanted to devote my life to learning. Do you know why I went to Rome? Italian men did not have beards.

ISABELLA, The loves of my life were Hennie, my own pet and my dear husband the doctor, who nursed Hennie in her last illness. I knew it would be terrible when Hennie died but I did not know how terrible. I felt half of myself had gone. How could I go on my travels without that sweet soul waiting at home for my letters? It was Doctor Bishop's devotion to her in her last illness that made me decide to marry him. He and

Hennie had the same sweet character. I had not.

NIJO, I thought his majesty had sweet character because when he found out about Ariake he was so kind. But really it was because he no longer cared for me. One night he even sent me out to a man who had been pursuing me. He lay awake on the other side of the screens and listened.

ISABELLA, I did wish marriage had seemed more of a step. I did wish marriage had seemed more of a step. I tried very hard to cope with the ordinary drudgery of life. I was ill again with carbuncles on the spine and nervous prostration. I ordered a tricycle that was my idea of adventure then. And John himself fell ill, with erysipelas and anemia. I began to love him with my whole heart but it was too late. He was a skeleton with transparent white hands. I wheeled him on various seafronts in a batchair. And he faded and left me. There was nothing in my life. The doctors said I had gout and my heart was much affected.

NIJO, There was nothing in my life, nothing, without the Emperor's favour. The empress had always been my enemy, Marlene, she said I had no right to wear three layered gowns. But I was the adopted daughter of my grandfather the Prime Minister. I had been publicly granted permission to wear thin silk.

JOAN, There was nothing in my life except my studies. I was obsessed with pursuit of the truth. I taught at the Greek school in Rome, which St. Augustine had made famous. I was poor, I worked hard I spoke apparently, brilliantly. I was still very young. I was a stranger; suddenly I was quite famous, I was everyone's favorite. Huge crowds came to hear me. The day after they made me Cardinal I fell ill and lay two weeks without speaking, full of terror and regret. But then I got up.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Caryl Churchill's Concept to Patriarchal Society**

Caryl Churchill's reaction to the patriarchal society is also based on her personal realizations. Her keen eyes observed that women with all the slogans of quality in the modern society were still lacking in their forceful assertions and in assuming a distinctive identity of their own. The feminist Theatre, which was brought to cheers by the attempts of Caryl Churchill makes use of alienation effects because the patriarchal society did not and does not permit complete growth of woman's inner psyche. The attempts of Caryl Churchill go beyond partial fragmentation to shatter the unitary viewpoint into a range of perspectives. It will be in the fitness of things if we quote the following words of Kritzer:

Churchill's theatre is remarkable for its channeling of the anarchic energy associated with performance art, as well as with such early drama and rituals as the satyr play and feast of Fools to animate a materialistic feminist analysis of oppression based on race, gender, sexual preference and socio-economic class.<sup>5</sup>

Caryl Churchill wanted to dismantle the prevalent notions about womanhood in the patriarchal society. Patriarchal ideology is, of course, present in the overt images of powerful men and submissive women that dominate traditional theatre.<sup>6</sup>

Caryl Churchill wanted to break and has broken the dominant ideology of patriarchal capitalist culture. In her plays like **serious money, fen and soft cops** she raises questions about economic independence of women because in the systems of patriarchy woman remains at the low ebb due to her economic dependence. In *Top Girls* she reaches the points of women's autonomy in their own world aloof from the shadow of male dominance.

There is an underlying ambiguity in *Top Girls* that recognizes the conflicting impulses for women in male society between self fulfillment and responsibilities which stem from their biological uniqueness. The successful but empty Marlene emerges as crude Thatcherism, while Joyce is the one who has kept faith in her working class politics. There is a sense in which Joyce has also kept faith by raising her sister's abandoned daughter, a moral balance which is over weighted by the discovery that Joyce lost her own child because she was too tired and busy bringing up Angie. Although this does not represent the simplistic idiom between sexuality and politics. For instance, in *Objections to sex and Violence*, the left/right contrast does appear to be tacked on to rest of the play rather unconvincingly.

The deliberated and caricatured barrenness of Marlene's life is too harsh a contrast with the extraordinary lives of the chosen historical characters. Churchill on purpose has not made Marlene an engineer, a doctor or a barrister, for example, a choice which would have altered the balance of the play decisively. Perhaps the roots of her need to be independent are more important. But they are only sketched in and are presented as little more than a dislike of her home life. The need for Marlene to be free may be as basic as that of the explorer Isabella, but the play denies her the possibility of Isabella's transient but intense joy. Whether that is Marlene's fault or the lack of any corresponding possibility in our society to Isabella's exotic experiences is never made clear.

#### **Fear and Superstition Effect**

In *Vinegar Tom*, there is no witch character but discussion is carried about witches- ladies with some uncommon practices in their behavior. The play throws light on misogyny against a particular class of women in society, particularly those old, poor lonely widows, adolescents, herbal healers midwives and sexually unconventional. Misfortune comes upon Jack and Margery when their cattle suddenly begin to die.

Margery suffers from headache and Jock begins to lose his sexual organ and the use of his hand. They ask Ellen to confirm their suspicion of witchcraft alone by the neighbors. A professional witch finder is called who asks Jack and Margery to accuse Joan, Alice, Susan and Ellen. The witch finder severely tortures the four women to exact confessions. Susan is very much tortured for abortion. She endues power given to her by Ellen. Out of the fear of being further tortured she implicates the others. As a result, Joan and Ellen are handed, while Alice and Susan await the same fate in the prison. In the final scene we are introduced to two medieval theologians, Kramer and Springer who have written the misogynist classic, *The Hammer of Witches*. These giants of religious worship against witches comment thus:

All wickedness is but little to the wickedness of women..... women have slippery tongues.....women are feebler in both body and mind.....and so an imperfect animal.....so cannot keep faith.....They are witches.<sup>7</sup>

All these things are patiently and interestingly heard by the grave persons of the society. Women's indictment does not stay here. Further comments are still more vocal-

A woman is a liar by nature, vain, more bitter than death, contaminating to touch, their carnal desires, insatiable malice.

It is ironical that carnal desires spring in men, but its cause and accusation is with women. The play ends with the song called **Evil Women-**

Evil women

Is that what you want?

Is that what you want to see?

On the movie screen.

Evil women.

If you like sex sinful, what you want is us.

You can be sucked off by a succubus.

We had this man and afterwards he died.

Does she do what she's told or does she nag?

Are you concerned in the kitchen by a biting hag?

Satan's lady, Satan's pride.

Satan's baby, Satan's bride,

A devil's woman's not easily satisfied.<sup>8</sup>

The whole issue in the play is to raise a very potent question about what the humanity and human considerations were doing when the so designed honourable theologians were speaking about women and seeing before their eyes women's lives dwindling and diminishing is utmost misery. How could they grasp the dictates of the Bible wherein mercy is given the most important place in the virtuous assets of mankind. Caryl Churchill leaves a question before the mankind to think about the whole matter impartially.

#### **Conclusion**

Thus it becomes clear that Caryl Churchill has displayed her gender consciousness as a female being throughout her dramatic production. Her portraits of the female world have an itch of her soul which was bubbling to recognize the female identity in

all its psychological stresses. Her approach to the feminine world has the truthfulness of a female genius with her versatility. She commanded the dramatic properties of the presentation in order to objectify the picture of womanhood which may have come to in light in the event of those social happenings which may have been commanded by the woman's voice.

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