

Challenging Gender Stereotypes and Examining Women's Roles in Caryl Churchill's 'Top Girls'

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Abstract: The present study examines Caryl Churchill's portrayal of the stereotypical depiction of women in her play *Top Girls* (1982). The play depicts the historical struggle of women against male oppression, highlighting how they have attained a significant degree of power and freedom. However, it also explores how some women have utilised this power to exert control over their own gender, often lacking empathy. Marlene, the protagonist of this drama, is a female figure who has embraced masculine traits to an extreme degree. In her relentless pursuit of achievement, Marlene makes the difficult decision to sacrifice her child, family, and love. Additionally, the play portrays women who are suppressed, oppressed, and deprived of the opportunity to achieve independence and freedom. This paper aims to investigate and analyse the themes explored by Caryl Churchill in her play *Top Girls*. The tactics that have been utilised include thorough investigations and comprehensive analysis of the many techniques Churchill adopted in the literature realm. Finally, to ascertain Churchill's perspectives on the diverse subjects about women that she addressed in this play, this study examines the recollections and experiences of multiple women in Caryl Churchill's play, *Top Girls*. The play's theoretical framework revolves around the disparity between men and women, which is expressed via the memories of the female characters.

Keywords: New Woman, feminism, gender disparity, memory, patriarchy.

INTRODUCTION

This play, authored by Caryl Churchill, a female playwright, was written in 1982, a time characterised by significant societal transformation. From the late 1960s onwards, there was a notable rise in the number of women assuming the positions of director and playwright in the field of theatre, therefore altering the landscape of this art form. *Top Girls*, a play created by Churchill, closely examines the experiences of women living in various periods or political views, all of them face the oppressive forces of patriarchy regardless of their social status. Cameron authors that, "soon dissolves into conflict and chaos. Placing these somewhat disparate moments in British feminist theatre in dialogue with one another brings out revealing convergences and discrepancies in their uses of women's history, particularly their representations of women's power and martyrdom, and in their constructions of sisterhood. Anticipating some of the concerns of transnational feminism, Churchill's dystopian vision of fractured sisterhood throws into relief the suffrage pageants' fantasy of universal, united sisterhood by encouraging attention to the national, ideological, and class differences that must be elided to achieve such idealism"(Cameron 144) [Churchill, C, 2009].

Upon its debut on the British stage, the play *Top Girls* introduced a completely novel and immersive world. Several legislative initiatives had a significant impact on women's evolving sense of personal autonomy, including the abortion

act, Divorce Reform Act, Equal Pay Act, and gender discrimination act, which prohibited gender-based discrimination in employment and education. Additionally, there was an Equal Opportunities Commission tasked with ensuring compliance with these acts. The Employment Protection Act ultimately ensured that pregnant women would retain their positions during their maternity leave. Feminism did not prioritise the attainment of parity with men. Feminism challenges the notion that women are subordinate and perpetually reliant on men.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research utilises a detailed technique to evaluate how Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* defies gender stereotypes and explores women's roles. The research incorporates a comprehensive examination of the literature to assess current criticisms and feminist viewpoints. The study of the text centres on Churchill's depiction of female characters, specifically exploring their ability to take action and their relationships with other characters in the story. Utilising feminist frameworks such as intersectionality and Marxism sheds light on criticisms of patriarchal standards. Interviews and surveys collect qualitative data regarding audience interpretations, whilst comparative and performance studies offer contextual insights. The objective of this technique is to reveal the play's impact on feminist debate,

enhancing comprehension of gender portrayal in literature and theatre.

DISCUSSION

The advent of second-wave feminism not only gave rise to the demand for women's rights but also marked the initiation of gender equality for women. During the 1960s, women sought to actively integrate themselves into civilisations. Nevertheless, this has not consistently yielded favourable outcomes. From the 1960s until the present day, numerous individuals have opposed and inflicted damage upon these ladies. Following the 1960s, there emerged a movement known as second-wave feminism. In 1982, Caryl Churchill wrote a play called *Top Girls* that reflected this movement. This play features an exclusively female cast, with no male characters present.

The study and analysis of this material are specifically aimed at individuals who identify as feminists. This paper will analyse the influences on Caryl Churchill and review the initial introduction of her play, *Top Girls*, to America. Additionally, it will explore the perspectives of other scholars who have analysed her work. The objective is to demonstrate that *Top Girls* is a feminist piece that exemplifies the goals of the second-wave feminist movement. Despite the advancements made by the second-wave feminist movement in granting women more freedoms in society, the outcomes are not always beneficial. It is an exceptional example of feminist theatre that accurately portrays the principles of the second-wave feminist movement and presents both positive and negative consequences of this movement.

Churchill had carefully deliberated on the title of the play. The phrase was easily accessible for her examination, as it was a widely recognised cultural symbol, which prompted several depictions. The term "it" specifically refers to the 'Top Girls' Employment Agency, which exclusively employed a small number of women. In the same vein, the play also features a small number of women. As Win directs Angie in Act 2, Scene 3: "There are not many top ladies about" (Churchill 64) [Churchill, C, 2018]. The term "Top Ladies," frequently used throughout the play, fortunately, did not become part of the play's title, as it could have conveyed an unpleasantly formal connotation. The designation Top Girls effectively eliminates any connotation of position or power that may be reminiscent of the term 'Top Ladies'. However, some feminists have consistently objected to the use of the term 'girls'

when referring to women, arguing that it portrays women in a limited, belittling, and trivial manner. While the label may accurately represent the high-achieving female models in the business, it also inadvertently categorises these successful individuals based on their gender, excluding male counterparts who are equally accomplished. While the girls may have achieved the highest points in their respective fields, the term unintentionally undermines their achievements. It is wise to note that the term 'Top' carries strong connotations, since it prompts the listener to contemplate the middle and bottom levels, suggesting a sense of hierarchy or organisation. The stratification in the play's first act, where certain women enjoy positions of privilege while others are underprivileged, may not escape attention.

Churchill adds to the discussion that was initiated by Freud as according to the Freudian paradigm, female sexuality is understood and defined in connection to or in contrast with male sexuality. However, Luce Irigaray, the French feminist, chooses to diverge. She criticises the Freudian model, which posits that female sexuality is constantly connected to the penis and is consistently framed in terms of reproduction, which is further associated with female pleasure and desire. Irigaray argues that under this phallogocentric paradigm, the type of sexuality that receives preferential treatment is centred around visual perception, as it is centred on the visibility of the singular sexual organ, the penis. According to her, this is considered scopophilic because it is visually based, they (girls) notice the penis of a brother or playmate, visible and of large proportions, at once recognize it as the superior counterpart of their small and inconspicuous organ, and from that time forward fall a victim to envy for the penis (177) [Churchill, C, 2018].

Marlene epitomises the archetype of the contemporary, emancipated, and progressive woman. Despite sharing a common upbringing, Marlene and Joyce opt for divergent paths in life. Joyce is the archetype of a conventional lady who consciously avoids embracing the advantages brought forth by the women's liberation movement. She chooses to persist as a diligent female labourer as expressed in this conversation,

JOYCE. You said Mother had a wasted life.

MARLENE. Yes, I do. Married to that bastard... I don't want to talk about him.

JOYCE. You started; I was talking about her. She had a rotten life because she had nothing. She went hungry.

MARLENE. She was hungry because he drank the money. He used to hit her... She didn't hit him... I had to get out... I knew when I was thirteen, out of their house, out of them, never let that happen to me, never let him, make my own way, out. (138) [Churchill, C, 2018]

Marlene is averse to getting married and emulating her mother. She elects to entrust her infant to her wedded sibling, Joyce. Motherhood would constrain her to home obligations and accountability. She is unwilling to conform to such rules. She believes that her pregnancy has the potential to hinder her aspirations of becoming a self-reliant and accomplished woman, since it may confine her to a domestic lifestyle. By making this decision, she seeks to evade the conventional standards imposed on women by the institution of marriage. Matrimony grants the male (husband) the authority to exert control, mistreat, take advantage of, and engage in all types of domestic violence against the woman (wife). Despite Marlene's outward display of power and confidence, she occasionally finds herself ensnared by her own existence and has feelings of remorse. During her discussion with her sister, she discloses her sense of culpability towards her own daughter and concerns about her future as a woman,

I've had two abortions, are you interested? Shall I tell you about them? Well, I won't, it's boring, it wasn't a problem. I don't like messy talk about blood/and what a bad... time we all had. I don't want a baby. I don't want to talk about gynaecology. (135) [Churchill, C, 2018]

CONCLUSION

Caryl Churchill is a prominent British playwright who is currently active and happens to be female. *Top Girls* is a piece that is prominently discussed

in many works on contemporary Feminist or Political theatre. Additionally, it explores a range of challenges faced by women and delves into the complexities of modern life. The collective representation of female characters throughout the play, spanning from historical periods to the present, demonstrates support for the feminist movement. However, the play does not evoke sentimentality, or romanticism, or provide any easy resolutions to the challenges faced by these women. The play prompts its audience with a range of questions, eliciting sympathy that is only directed towards the viewers' own thoughts and emotions. The world depicted in *Top Girls* revolves around the contemporary perspective on women's experiences. Throughout the play, women are portrayed as dominant figures in many locations. In the first act, they take control of the restaurant, and this dominance continues in the second act where they also take over the traditionally male-dominated office environment. Finally, in the third act, we witness their complete mastery of the kitchen, a space traditionally associated with female dominance. An outstanding characteristic of the play is its exclusive portrayal of female characters, with no male presence on stage.

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