

## The Image of Modern Women in *Top Girls*

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### Abstract :

*Caryl Churchill, a woman feminist playwright has played a significant role in contemporary literary studies. Churchill's plays mostly illustrate the oppression of women in patriarchal societies. By illustrating these subjugated and oppressed female characters, Churchill strikes the attention of the audience and make them to criticize the established social and economical norms. The blatant abuse of women in male dominated societies had resulted in a continuous struggle by them throughout history who fought for equal opportunities as they attempted to improve their positions in the society they lived in. Churchill also illustrates some subversive characters among these oppressed women that although cannot change the present situation, they defy the conventional norms and challenge for their rights. In "Top Girls" Marlene's decision to pursue her career, to leave her family behind and to ignore the duty of bringing up her illegitimate daughter "Angie" reflects the hollowness in her life though professionally she proves herself as a very successful and efficient woman. To accomplish such a self-rooted independent achievement, Marlene immolates her emotional, social and moral obligations that cause her fear and loneliness as a result.*

**Key Words :** *Caryl Churchill , patriarchal, oppression, subversive, dominated.*

### Introduction

Caryl Churchill is recognized as Britain's leading woman dramatist. Her plays are politically radical with strong views on feminism, money, and exploitation. Her own life experience as a middle class wife and mother has put her in an ideal position to write about feminism and the impact of it on women like her. Churchill's plays deal with sexual politics, social and political oppression, and exploitation, but they are also plays where a clear and fierce intelligence meets a sense of mystery to

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reveal, as Churchill herself stated in a manifesto about writing for theatre, “new worlds beyond and beneath the surface of ordinary life.” When she was asked about her plays and feminist attitude, Churchill explains as:

For years and years I thought of myself as a writer before I thought of myself as a woman, but recently I’ve found that I would say I was a feminist writer as opposed to other people saying I was. I’ve found that as I go out more into the world and get into situations which involve women what I feel is quite strongly a feminist position and that inevitably comes into what I write (Aston, 1977: 18).

In 1975, Churchill wrote *Objections To Sex and Violence*, which was not tremendously successful, but it was her first play to introduce themes of feminism. *Cloud Nine*, which was first performed in 1979, was her first play to receive wide notice. It weaves several themes simultaneously. In this play, Churchill deals with the relationships of power like colonist and native, master and servant, and man and woman. Churchill’s most important stage successes, encompassing a remarkable range of subjects, offering provocative viewpoints, and demonstrating continual experiment with the theatrical form, occurred in the 1980s. Four of the plays she premiered during this time *Top Girls* (1982), *Fen* (1983), *Soft Cups* (1984) and *Shrouded Money* (1987), brought her critical acclaim, international recognition and major awards (Kritzer 108). In 1982, *Top Girls*, which is about the choice for women between motherhood and business success, was praised as “the best British play ever from a woman dramatist” (Kritzer 112).

Churchill presents the structures of oppression through the narrative and thematic elements of her plays. She uses the formal elements of theatre to challenge the inevitability of oppression and empower audiences to seek change. Her application of highly theatrical techniques to the portrayal of grim situations results in a dialectic between imagination and material conditions. This dialectic confronts audiences with a dual sense of material reality and imaginative possibility. It models

for audiences a process by which to analyze and challenge historical conditions.

The opening of the play *Top Girls* is very peculiar as five fictional characters from the history come to celebrate Marlene's promotion as a managing director of an employment agency. The presence of the historical personas in the contemporary setting creates a fairy tale like atmosphere. Alluring affect of Act-I, Scene-I magnetizes the audience's focus. The suffering of those fictional characters enable the audience to identify themselves with their agonies which prepare them to analyze the cause and effect relationships of the later scenes of the play during the multiple episodes of interviews. These personas tell their lives' stories in an amorphous manner causing inexplicability since nobody pays attention to anybody's story in particular. But, it does establish a point when Marlene says, 'Oh God, why are we all so miserable?' This statement qualifies the fact that women always suffer no matter what century or country they belong to. This is the principal theme in Churchill's play. Consequently, she tries to prove it through characters from the past as well as from the present time because same characters play the roles of the past characters first then they act as the modern characters. Thus, indirectly indicating that women always suffer whenever they try to live independent life or to defy the set norms of the society. Undoubtedly, this technique introduces a new genre in the literary tradition, hence, the trait of magical realism is skillfully plaited in the first scene of Act-I as Gunter Grass has also employed this genre in his novel 'The Tin Drum' in which the protagonist Oscar's mischievous actions, primarily, provoke the readers to look for the causes of Germannation's suffering after the World War-II. Likewise, the presence of the past mythical characters can also be interpreted on the same lines that the dramatist wants the readers and the audiences to investigate the reasons of modern women's afflictions. This new genre can also be symbolized as the Greek chorus used for affirmation of the intrinsic argument 'of women's suffering' in the play. In either of the interpretations, it highlights the agonies of the women throughout the history.

Since patriarchy considers women to be men's property, inferior, ignorant, and incompetent, its value system claims that women cannot



take their own decisions and need to be led by a male figure. Isabella internalizes the values imposed upon her by her father to such an extent that she is not aware that she is in a situation of self-denial. In Act 1, Scene 1:

ISABELLA: I tried to do what my father wanted [...] I tried to be a clergy man's daughter. Needle work, music, charitable schemes [...] I studied the metaphysical poets and hymnology. My father taught me Latin although I was a girl. But really I was more suited to manual work. Cooking, washing, mending, riding horses. Better than reading books [...] My father was the main string of my life and when he died I was so grieved. (2,3)

The next important scene in *Top Girls* is the last one which takes place a year earlier than the prior scenes in a sequel. In this very scene Churchill dramatizes the American individual capitalism through Marlene and English social capitalism by Joyce, Marlene's sister. Both sisters seem to have a tight economical status because Joyce supports herself and Angie by cleaning houses, indicates her low financial status whereas Marlene earns a lot of money but spends it all to maintain her high living standards. As a result, she finds herself unable to give Angie's birthday and Christmas gifts due to the deficit of funds when she says, "Just a few little things. I have no money for birthdays..."

Therefore, this indicates that whether women follow American individual capitalism or English social capitalism there is not comfortable financial status. It can be deduced that it is individual's preferences and management that can provide financially comfortable life not the system.

Marlene earns a lot of money and spends it all, the way she wants to spend it, so she is not better off than Joyce in this sense, yet Marlene has a satisfaction of making her own decisions and living her life fully. Both sisters appear true in their arguments, yet partial resentment for

Angie and Marlene can be noticed in Joyce because of two reasons: firstly she calls Angie “a big lump and useless” as she to some extent was the cause of her miscarriage. Secondly, Marlene improved herself by alienating herself from the filial responsibilities to succeed in her ambition as a top career woman, in contrast to, Joyce who sacrifices for the sake of her family and receives no gratitude or appreciation. Despite these minor differences, they care a lot about each other and are very much alike. They both believe they are right and do what they have to do to survive in their different worlds.

*Top Girls* marks a new phase in socialist-feminist political theatre; because under the reign of Thatcher in 1970s women begin a struggle against a patriarchal system, and turns to an analysis of the status of women in contemporary capitalist societies. Caryl Churchill once wrote: “Playwrights don’t give answers, they ask questions” (Aston, 2001: 80). In *Top Girls*, one of her most important works, Churchill asks: Is it more important to break out of a cycle of poverty and make something of yourself, or to fulfill your responsibilities to your family and community? If you are a woman, are you more likely to answer this question in a certain way? How can women balance the demands of a career and motherhood? What actually constitutes success in life? (Tyser, 2008: 1). The play ends with Angie’s frightened entry after dreaming a nightmare probably. The fright of Angie can be interpreted as a fear of her blurred future to become a top girl. Thus, getting a cheerful welcome from Marlene can be decoded as a wake up call for Angie who joins her aunt / mother in London in an earlier episode after a year of this meeting.

The tone of *Top Girls* is objective and ironical in some episodes. The language of *Top Girls* is quite knotty, for the dramatist has given notes in the ‘caution’ section to clarify ambiguities, yet it is plain, slang and comprehensible with minor complications.

*Top Girls* is set in the contemporary times. The action is confined to two places in England, London and Suffolk. The realistic action takes place in these two settings. One is the *Top Girls* employment agency, where Marlene works and the potential clients are interviewed, and Angie shows up, hoping to stay with Marlene. Marlene looks composed and in

control in this surrounding. The second setting is Joyce's home and backyard, where Angie and Kit scheme and Marlene visits. At home Marlene becomes vulnerable and bursts into tears. The fantasy dinner party that opens *Top Girls* also takes place at a restaurant in London. Though the dinner is clearly a fantasy because all the guests are dead or fictional, the setting is very real. It can be seen as an isolated place where Marlene and a waitress are the real people who do not talk; though Marlene being a success does not have any true relationships around her to enjoy with her the promotion. Thence, she celebrates alone and becomes boozy. It can also depict the loneliness of a successful modern career woman who seems to have some flaws despite being a success in the men's challenging world. The employment agency reflects the status of a contemporary middle class English woman.

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