



A Critical Study On Caryl Churchill's Top Girls

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Abstract

Bringing history or myth into the play 'Top Girls' (1982) of Caryl Churchill, is neither for detailing history like historical plays nor for dealing with the life of kings and queens of past. 'Top Girls' juxtaposes past and present into a single frame, where past characters are reclaiming for changes in the situations which is all dominated by the male and in the same strain present characters do not agree to flinch a bit from their insistence. She presents the suffering, striving, and sacrifice of every 'top girls' into the play with very minute details of their emotions and tries her hand in giving their dialogue a single direction when they get together for celebrating Marlene's success as a modern career-minded woman. And in doing so, her presentation of history and myth in the mould of a contemporary drama embays myriad meanings for the audience. This article chiefly aims at finding the assumed ways that will help in dissolving the borderline between past and present, and measuring relevancy of introducing historical and mythical female figures along with the present characters into a modern contemporary drama.

Keywords: History, Myth, Borderline, New woman, Universal Female Experience

Introduction

"We did not want to shore up a capitalist system we did not like." (Burt 470) – With this bold assertion, Caryl Churchill breaks out with her 'first major stage play' (Burt 470) Owners (1972) and by passing through the zigzag way of various major issues into the plays – reached to Top Girls (1982) with multifarious issues. This play conceives in its matrix – social, political, cultural and identical issues along with immediate feminist and other issues. Apart from all those issues, the play also becomes an arena to render Churchill's experimentation over its style and form. 'While all-female productions were in vogue among feminist groups during the 1980s, few gained Top Girls' level of popular success or critical acclaim' (Tycer 3) and not only she has introduced a drama with all female characters but also its female characters are presented from the history (like Isabella Bird, Lady Nijo, Pope Joan), literature (Patient Griselda), art (Dull Gret) along with contemporary female figures (like Marlene, Joyce, Win, Nell, Shona, Jeanine, Louise, Angie, Kit, Mrs. Kidd).

Throughout the whole first act which is an elongated one with a single scene, Churchill gives her characters – a wider space to vent up their feelings and life's predicaments in front of the audiences. So as to say with Alicia Tycer, "The first act depicts a transhistorical tableau in which Marlene, an eighties' career woman, hosts a dinner party for a table full of disparate women drawn from history, literature and art" (2). And she further points out that the rest two other acts 'focus on Marlene's career and family life during the 1980s, with

the last act being set a year before the previous act' (Tycker 2). It can be inferred from the aforesaid statements that with its non-linear sequencing in plot construction in three acts, Caryl Churchill perhaps tries to portray the contemporary woman's life to balance the family and profession.

And to attain her desired success, Churchill has played her trump card with the women characters that are from various nations with different cultural backgrounds and from various life-styles in different time frames: ... Joan who was Pope in the ninth century, and Isabella Bird, the Victorian traveller, and Lady Nijo from Japan, Emperor's concubine and Buddhist nun, thirteenth century, ...and Gret who was painted by Brueghel. Griselda's in Boccaccio and Petrarch and Chaucer because of her extraordinary marriage.(Churchill, p-127) It can be said further that Churchill has brought the historical and mythical characters from different psycho-social backgrounds but implanted them into the soil of contemporary society and brought them up with the atmosphere of feminist wield.

However, this paper basically focuses on the topic – how history, myth are presented in the mould of a contemporary drama under the appearance of female characters from history, literature and art; and how the borderline between past and present has been merged into one to bring compatibility into themes of the play. Analysis Having “created some of the most iconic moments in contemporary British theatre: the cross-dressing colonials of ‘Cloud Nine’; the meal shared by a collection of female historical figures in ‘Top Girls’; the swaggering, foul-mouthed yuppies of ‘Serious Money’; the grotesque parade of designer-hatted prisoners in ‘Far Away’, and the cloned brothers of ‘A Number’” (qtd. in Aston 14) – Churchill has always brought some novelty in British theatre. But to speak of in particular about the dinner party of Top Girls, Churchill has not only revived history before the audience by bringing the characters from the past but also has rejuvenated the evolution and transformation that came with the ‘dramatic genealogy of Marlene’s historical community’ (qtd. in Naismith 41):

ISABELLA. [...] we're here to celebrate your success.

NIJO. Yes, Marlene.

JOAN. Yes, what is it exactly, Marlene?

MARLENE. Well it's not Pope but it is managing director.

JOAN. And you find work for people.

MARLENE. Yes, an employment agency.

NIJO. Over all the women you work with. And the men.

ISABELLA. And very well deserved too. I'm sure it's just the beginning of something extraordinary.

MARLENE. Well it's worth a party. ISABELLA To Marlene. MARLENE. And all of us. (Churchill, p-116) From the very outset, Caryl Churchill sticks to the very idea about presenting Marlene, the central figure of the play and also the pivotal character in the dinner scene of the first act, as a ‘new woman’ (qtd. in Naismith 42) which is also proposed by Naismith as one of its ‘theme and context’ (42-51). In this connection, it can further be comprehended that the first act can be a preliminary stage to the development of her character. The play begins quite casually with the celebration of Marlene's success. But as soon as the storyline of the play carried forward, the course of the dramatic function shifts into a serious one and shows her as an emblematic of ‘a high flying career woman’ (Tycker 29).

Marlene does not share anything about her past in the first act, she only shares her voluntary feelings toward the incidents of her guests' life stories and engages herself in an active participation along with them all. And in the rest two acts, Churchill artistically ruminates about Marlene's personality and her actual existential state. Prof. Bimberg has claimed about the development of Marlene's personality and also points out that the play has: ... a dramatic exploration and further revelation of Marlene's personality against a widening social, personal and private background, which has a climactic effect on the spectator: (1) The play starts with a celebration of Marlene's appointment to which five other women from the past are invited (Act One). The recipients see Marlene on top of her career (result). (2) Subsequently the office life of Marlene and her male and above all female colleagues is presented in greater detail (Scenes II.i; II.iii).

The audience's awareness of the inherent difficulties of the job(s), including the clash between the working and the personal worlds, is increased (process). (3) Finally the private background of Marlene's life and her split personality are revealed (Scenes II.ii; Act Three) (conclusion). (400) Even a closer inspection into this very dinner scene suffice enough to realise that it can also serve as a prologue to the drama where 'hypothetical situations' (Jain 327) are created as in Keatley's *My Mother Said I Never Should* (1987) and it has earlier been claimed by Jasbir Jain that these situations are 'historically not possible but are rendered so spatially and proceed to become emotional questionings' (327). Moreover, Marlene does not go anywhere in past places as it was the case with H. G. Well's science fiction *The Time Machine* (1895) where the protagonist scientist goes very anachronistic changes to realise the actual situations of the future time. Unlike Well, Churchill's Marlene invites them who were either from long dead past, or fictitious characters from literature and art.

They are all well known figures for their 'extraordinary achievements' (Churchill, p-117) and also familiar literary names as 'Nijo and Isabella Bird are known because of their autobiographical writings and Joan, Griselda and Gret each achieved mythical status in their own right' (Naismith 47). Their coming to a modern day restaurant after Marlene's invitation to celebrate her success, may also bear significance – as if she is the true successor of their lineage and they 'drink a toast' (Churchill, p- 117) with the affirmation of Marlene's speech: We've all come a long way. To our courage and the way we changed our lives and our extraordinary achievements (Churchill, p-117)

Above all their involvement in coherent way of conversation about encoring their past experiences which are also intertwined to each other along with Marlene, presents them as 'a sisterhood in the present' (Naismith 41); and as the play precede, they become 'a chorus communicating more than their individual stories' (Naismith 15). With the reminiscence of the past lives of those characters, audience has also got an opportunity to live in history and to discern the emotions of these historical and mythical figures who were either victimized or immolated in the name of patriarchy for violating the codes and conventions of the patriarchal ideology. Isabella Bird, a clergyman's daughter, is the first guest to arrive at the restaurant and shares mostly of her self-absorbed life-story and her resentment for trying 'to be a clergyman's daughter' (Churchill, p-101).

Like Joan, she has also used the direct shaft to blow up the patriarchal structure and further to say, question also raises from them all to the patriarchy either 'obliquely like Nijo, or silently through victimization like Griselda' (Jain 328). Almost at the end of the act, Gret also ejaculates her tragic lifestory of coming to hell and beating the devils. Their conversation is basically endowed with experiences of each historical or mythical figure about the inequality in society about sexes, self sacrifices, sacrifice of mothering and so on. It is quite baffling for critics like Edith Oliver of *The New Worker* to make out 'whether she was making one point with the whole play or a lot of points in its separate segments' (qtd. in Thomason 322). Churchill may

have infused the dinner scene to expound before her audience, how it took time to be established on a 'top' position in a patriarchal society and create an identity of one's own after being a woman.

Liberal feminist writers like Simone De Beauvoir, earlier proposed as 'It is through gainful employment that woman has traversed most of the distance that separated her from the male; and nothing else can guarantee her liberty in practice' (641), and perhaps in the same strain Churchill through this play instigates 'public attention on the real conflicts which many women face in juggling work and family responsibilities, in the context of societies which do not yet provide adequate resources for working women' (Goodman 219). She brings her characters from ninth century like Lady Nijo to Isabella Bird from the Victorian period and resuscitates them perhaps to excavate the changes in the matter of equal rights and shows her spectators, how they have been neglected by society from the very ancient ages and in this way, 'they have been indirectly paving the way for Marlene who was to live up to that moral obligation if possible' (Bimberg 405).

Though the changes come into the society now-a-days after feminist movements; but it was not bountiful even at Marlene's time. And this implication is also conspicuous when Mrs. Kidd, a woman to flow with the tide of traditional patriarchal norms, pronounced her thought as, What's it going to do to him working for a woman? I think if it was a man he'd get over it as something normal. (Churchill, p-188) As if she cannot think it normal that a girl can hold the top position by debunking the traditional patriarchal rules and regulations. All the more, her suggestion to Marlene for resigning the 'top' post 'undoes everything that those women from the past have achieved in a millennium' (Bimberg 405). Moreover, Churchill's skilful use of modern language, overlapping and compatible speeches are also adding more savour to the play that may certainly help in merging the border between past and present. Along with Marlene, all the five characters from past in the dinner scene have given the tongue of modern women that helps them to become more friendly and frank in their speaking with each other. The characters are merely rendered from the past with interlinked life-events, but they have given the words of their own. Even the characters who were the products of male imaginations, have no longer remained the products of their male writers.

They have given the vocals to express their own feelings in the same events as those were in literature, art or in myth and need no story teller to depict them. In addition to that, their temperamental shifting may also help them in accommodating with modern psycho-social and cultural context. Kate Millett has claimed that "many of the generally understood distinctions between the sexes in the more significant areas of role and temperament, not to mention status, have in fact, essentially cultural, rather than biological bases" (Millett 28). It is also the case with 'top girls' of the dinner scene. While feminist issues are concerned with the main plot of the play and 'second wave feminism' becomes pertinent in the playwright's time, they no longer recede from sharing their audacity and temper. In dinner scene of Shakespearean play "Macbeth", Lady Macbeth did not lose her mental sanity even after the involuntary movement of her husband and only to resist the suspicion of the guests.

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