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DIALECTICS OF SEX IN CARYL CHURCHILL'S TOP GIRLS

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Abstract

Among contemporary dramatists of post-war British drama, Caryl Churchill has a unique place. As an enthusiastic supporter of women rights and an iconoclast of modern drama she is the most original and enigmatic writer of her generation. Churchill's socialist feminist voice is indisputably the strongest of the postmodern era. She creates a contemporary feminist landscape where the influence of male power can be felt everywhere in society. In her most masterly work *Top Girls* she creates a dark vision of success for women and shows the dialectics of this process. This article aims at revealing a critical appraisal of feminist discourse reflected in Churchill's *Top Girls* in the light of dialectical reading.

Key Words: Caryl Churchill, Contemporary British Theatre, Feminist Theatre, Top Girls

Modern British playwrights may be said to have been successful to a large extent in portraying a picture of post-war British malaise and its effect on the life of British society. This notion has mostly been taken up as a never changing subject in the imaginative power of the playwrights of the period. The hardships in the post-war years played a large part in encouraging playwrights to create themes with proper messages in respect of the lives of the members of their society. That is why; paying attention to the validity of the issues under consideration was indispensable in the effort to produce plays which were supposed to be relevant in view of current conditions. The effort to form a new tradition in drama in this way which was to contain the creation of up-to-date sensitivity in the expression of ideas has significantly induced playwrights to concentrate exclusively on this point (Takkaç, 2001: 1).

As one of the most contemporary women playwrights, Caryl Churchill is generally grouped with the dramatists of the late 1960s who refresh and at the same time change the format of British theatre. She is one of a number of playwrights whose plays receive admiration not only from British audiences but also European theatre critics. The route of her career is extremely different from that of contemporaries. While the male dramatists of that time in general started to found a theatre company and from there to the forecoming subsidized playhouses, this was a little bit different for Churchill. Because the route Churchill followed was much more complicated as this process was characterized by some important changes in direction.

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Caryl Churchill was born in 1938 and grew up in England and Canada. She educated at the Trafalgar School, returned to England to study at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford in 1957, and finished her degree in English in 1960. She began writing short stories as a youth. In 1961 Churchill married to David Harter, and during the 1960s, she composed radio and television plays while spending time at home raising her three sons. Churchill's duty as a mother, to some extent, has split her from the major occurrences of the time, although 1960s have witnessed a series of fast disruption and change in social and political life. While the 1960s were a annoying decade for Churchill, during the 1970s she found communities of like-minded artists, and her access into the London theatre world booms with the 1970s feminist slogan "the personal is political". Since the foundation of English Stage Company in 1956, The Royal Court Theatre had been connected with politically leftist playwrights. Mainly with the 1965 production of Edward Bond's *Saved*, the theatre became influential in the fight against censorship.

During the 1970s, Churchill became involved in political and experimental theatre groups, and in 1974, she wrote *Objections to Sex and Violence*, which some critics regard as her first clearly feminist work. The play gives a picture of two bourgeois sisters, one of whom rebels to become a political terrorist. With this play her feminist beginning corresponded to her work's prioritization of women's issues.

The year 1976 marked a turning point for Churchill's work and political attitude, when she met members of the feminist theatre group Monstrous Regiment, which had been established the year before to supply the opportunities for women that were lacking in both mainstream and fringe theatres. The year 1976 also initiated the beginning of her long working relationship within the director Max Stafford-Clark, with their production of *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*.

As a feminist and socialist playwright, Churchill wrote *Top Girls* as a direct answer to political events of her decade. While the election of Margaret Thatcher as Britain's first female Prime Minister could be seen as a success for equal representation, Churchill wrote *Top Girls* in opposition to Thatcherism. As Churchill became more and more politicized during the 1970s, she saw the 1980s move from a socialist attitude to a capitalist stress as an ominous change. Thatcher's three administrations brought huge and unquestionable changes to the British political panorama. The relative liberalism which established and maintained the welfare state and made Britain a model of harmony politics in the post-war period began to unravel during the years of 1979-1990. At this time, a number of social and economic forces combined to make Britain move gradually in a new and more conservative way. There exists no particular, broadly held classification of "Thatcherism", but the expression has been used so frequently as both a rallying cry and curse. It is a much discussed satire that under Britain's first woman prime minister, women's rights and status did not progress in the United Kingdom. Churchill herself discussed Thatcher's first electoral success as:

...there was talk about whether it was an advance to have a woman prime minister if it was someone with policies like hers: she may be a woman but she isn't a sister, she may be a sister but she isn't a comrade. And in fact things have got worse much for women under Thatcher (Betsko and Koeing, 1987: 77) .

The election of Margaret Thatcher was regarded as a great triumphant for all women in England by many right-wing women when Thatcher first took Office. They were in the opinion that the existence of a strong and resolute woman having that much a position of power would mean that women were actually competent leaders. But on the other hand it is difficult to claim that Thatcher greatly dealt with some fields of social policy known as, for instance, women's issues- among those issues may be included the feminization of poverty, women's health, equal rights and pay, child and family care etc. And moreover, Thatcher's governments were not only conservative but also right-wing conservative. As a politician Ros Brunt points out, "Thatcher never made any claim to represent women or speak in any way on their behalf. Nor indeed has

she ever done anything for women, apart from making the majority much harder up" (Brunt, 1987).

It seems rational at this point to ask a question: why didn't the feminist movement, which was founded in 1979, help to protect women from the harmful effects of the government policies? As a response we can say that organized feminism was less helpful than women might have hoped for three reasons: first, the backlash against women did not take the form of a frontal assault; second, women were seen by the government and its policies as individuals, not as a part of a movement or even of a group; and third, the movement itself was growing increasingly fragmented and difficult to characterize as society moved to the right. So, the feminist women found themselves as powerless individuals rather than as a powerful contingency. Of course the massive social and economic changes which affected all levels of British society during the Thatcher years would not leave cultural institutions untouched. Artists, including playwrights in Britain had been accustomed since World War II to expect a fairly strong commitment to the arts from their government. The Arts Council and similar organizations were an accepted part of the welfare state. But, like so many other "non-essentials", arts funding came under closer scrutiny and eventually under attack within the belt-tightening of the Thatcher administrations (Gardner, 1995: 27, 42, 44).

Yet even though these hardships for women, for feminists, for leftists, and for artists, Caryl Churchill had perhaps her most productive and most interesting period of production during the Thatcher years. As in the case of Churchill herself, for socialist-feminists, women's repressions derives from financial affairs as well as from patriarchy since free enterprise and patriarchy are equally dependent. Patriarchy, where men are methodically placed in positions that enable them to wield power over women, is institutionalized in the nuclear family. A patriarchal culture is carried over from one historical period to another to sustain the sexual hierarchy of society, in which some men benefit economically and historically through sex inscription. Churchill herself became 'politicized' when she married and had children. Within the atmosphere of marriage and motherhood she found herself isolated from life outside these foundations. And her political identity was formed within this social background.

A comprehensive investigation of several of Churchill's clearly socialist feminist plays will enable us to determine the degree to which her plays can be regarded as within the perspective of Brechtian epic-dialectic theatre. For this reason tracing the progress of epic-dialectic theatre not only make known its principles and features, but also makes possible a discovery of the level to which Churchill's plays can be considered within this context.

Brecht, in his dialectical theatre, believed in the necessity of change in society's structure, and because he felt social change results from education of the masses. Like Aristotle, he sees drama's pleasure-giving feature, its capacity to heighten one's enjoyment of life, as an important task. Although he prefers the 'zig-zag' or episodic plot to the linear development plot favoured by Aristotle, Brecht shares Aristotle's view of the theatre as a place of enjoyment. However, Brecht objects vigorously to the Aristotelian notion of katharsis because it avoids the audience from thinking about the events presented on the stage. In Aristotelian theatre, Brecht suggests, the spectators became completely engrossed with the action, leading to an emotional climax which releases their tensions, but more importantly leaves them exhausted by play's end. In Brechtian epic theatre, emotional involvement never leads to the spectators becoming completely immersed in the action. Brecht insists on the need of breaking the theatre's illusion in order to enable the spectators's reasoning to operate. Because his plays address social issues, Brecht's dialectical theatre asks the spectators not only to observe the play, but to think about the issues presented on stage and, when possible, to contribute to social reform (Morelli, 1988: 6-8, 29-30).

Because dialectical theatre is a political theatre that seeks to change the ills of a class-based society's patriarchal system, and because feminism is also a politics, it is hardly surprising that devices of dialectical theatre become priceless to socialist feminist playwrights

such as Churchill. For Churchill, issues of gender in the light of dialectics cannot be distinguished from issues of class and sex. Her socialist feminist standpoint is politically useful for women because it recognizes the significance of the establishment of meaning in women's universal reality. Through the use of Brechtian dialectical theatre, Churchill shows the question of the status of women and the dialectics of sex in male-oriented societies.

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 opening scene of the play, in which there is a women's diner party, is also the one most discussed by the critics. During this long scene Marlene, the modern woman who has also a good career, gathers five women from ten centuries of history, fiction, and art to rejoice her promotion to Managing Director of the *Top Girls* employment agency. The women eat, drink, and talk about the successes. They also discuss the disappointments and pain which have made up their notable lives. The diners contain Victorian traveller Isabella Bird, thirteenth century Japanese courtesan-turned-nun Lady Nijo, the almost certainly ninth century Pope Joan, Breughel's peasant-warrior Dull Gret, and Chaucer's Patient Griselda. The scene itself is dramatically and politically uplifting, with an energy occurring both from difficulties transcended and heroic collapse, sometimes harshly contrasted. Following this panorama, we come to see a bit of everyday life in the *Top Girls* Office, where Marlene her friends talk about success in the 1980s and interview a sequence of prospective clients. These short scenes show us the story of Angie, Marlene's slightly retarded young niece who runs away from her working-class settlement and mother to join her aunt in London. The final part of the play breaks with linear chronology and demonstrates us a visit one year earlier of Marlene to her sister Joyce and niece Angie. The sisters drink and quarrel over politics, and in the course of the play. The audience discovers the shocking family secret that Angie was born to the 17 year-old Marlene, who abandoned the child to be raised by her older sister while Marlene moved to London to begin climbing career ladder.

Churchill herself wrote the greater part of *Top Girls* between 1980 and 1982, although many of the thoughts had been forming for years. Churchill expresses the play's development as follows:

Top Girls is a play whose ideas came together over a period of time and in quite separate parts. Some years before I wrote it I'd had an idea for a play where a whole lot of people from the past, a whole lot of dead women came and had cups of coffee with someone who was alive now...Then I started thinking about a play possibly to do with women at work and so I went and talked to quite lot of people doing different jobs. One of the places I visited was an employment agency, which later became a focus of the play. Then there was an idea of a play in which all the characters were women (Goodman, 1998: 72).

As the extract shows, in *Top girls*, Churchill combined historical and contemporary exploration with a feminist awareness. Churchill saw her feminist and socialist discourse as co-existing as twofold layers of *Top Girls*:

What I was intending to do was make it first look as though it was celebrating the achievements of women and then- by showing the main character, Marlene, being successful in a very competitive, destructive, capitalist way- ask what kind of

achievement is that? The idea was that it would start out looking out like a feminist play and then turn into a socialist one, as well (Betsko and Koeing, 1987: 82) .

As in *Top Girls*, Churchill criticizes in most of her works the dialectics of institutionalized gender roles, and sexual discrimination under the current ideology, which put women in an extreme position so that they are always politically disadvantaged and mistreated. 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).

For Churchill writing from a feminist standpoint is something that comes to her naturally as a woman artist. Her apprehension over troubles and circumstances that women all over the place for centuries have to face in the world where male prejudice is as powerfully as ever, has put Churchill in the point of giving women possibilities to voice their beliefs and reactions over their circumstances in the characters of her plays. In *Top Girls* all of the characters have numerous similarities in a sense that they all have experiences dealing with the unhappiness of living in a man obtained society and are mistreated by the structure despite their effort to overcome the system. All of them have struggled to bang the system either by accepting what are thought to be male or female features, yet all of them are either trapped in the social structure of feminine manners or betrayed by their own bodies.

The major character, Marlene, was born into a working class family where familial violence was a habit. She grew up witnessing her mother continually being ill-treated by her father without the least desire to protect herself. Marlene's mother's inactive acceptance of the cruelty implies that she thinks such behavior as natural and then gives confidence her husband to keep on his behaviour. Marlene sees her father the representation of men in general. Since she was thirteen, she has thought herself to find methods to run away her fortune as a lower-class woman, because she "hate[s] the working class" (Churchill, 1990: 39).

Despite her efforts, she needs man to complete her biological needs so that she has a lover. Her body betrays her when she finds herself heavy with child at an early age. It seems inevitable for her to get married and settle down like the other young women of her class, or like her sister, Joyce, who is married but childless. But again; Marlene is able to run away the trap of marriage by giving away her baby to her sister. For the little Marlene, her pregnancy is a leap backward, because her pregnancy threatens the understanding of her expectations about the future and puts her on the point of repeating her mother's life experience. Moreover, an infant is definitely a burden as it will tie her down to domesticity and she cannot manage to have a baby if she desires to follow her goal as a career woman. Marlene's cry about her true feelings about a baby at the same time reveals how she dislikes getting pregnant and has to terminate it. This is not merely about the baby, but more of her complaint is aligned with the injustice and wrongness of the whole system. In this respect it is possible to interpret Marlene's objection as a cry of protest against the creation of a woman's body.

If Marlene willfully gives up her baby as she knows that a baby would mean a wall to her career, Joan's case is dissimilar. Living in the ninth century, an age where women were regarded as the other sex, Joan finds her rights to get education is rejected by the leading patriarchal system at that time symbolized by the Church. Hunger for knowledge, awareness and education, Joan makes a decision to camouflage herself as a man and enters the Church, which allows her to occupy the top position in the system when she becomes a cardinal and then the Pope. In a sense, Joan is able to defeat the system by totally immersing in the system and becomes part of it. Joan supposes that the Pope does not actually have godly power, because as the Pope, Joan has never had the experience of God talking to her. Her success is put in danger when she gets pregnant with one of her chamberlain's. Having masked as a man

since she is twelve and lives in an atmosphere full of men, Joan has a very least information about her body and ability as a woman. Like Marlene, Joan is also the one who has to stand the results of the sexual bond she has with one of her chamberlains. Her unawareness that she is a pregnant woman masked under a male identity specifies how a woman is punished because of her ignorance, yet a man can escape generously. That popes can have children on condition that they do not give birth to them is a different form of discrimination against the female sex. Joan's regret of being a woman is her complaint against the inequality done to her.

In *Top Girls* one of the leading characters Griselda is a famous personality of 13th century literature. She is the daughter of an unfortunate and a poor farmer who is married to a marquis. Her being chosen as the Marquise wife is a blessing that she cannot reject, as she is bestowed with riches and a higher position. Griselda's taking of the offer is not only because of her obedience since she is also calculating the advantage of marrying a rich man from a higher class rather than a poor man. She believes that she has to get married anyway and has to follow her husband as much. Even though she is going to be his wife, her status would never be alike to his, because of her status as a woman. As Griselda is the woman of her age, she agrees without questioning the story that a good woman should obey her husband in any way as the evidence of her love and loyalty to him. As a confirmation of her love, Griselda lets her husband take her six-week-old infant girl away from her. She also does not complaint when Walter takes away her second child. The third experiment is when Walter sends Griselda home wearing only a slip, because he wants to marry a girl from the upper classes and later asks her to get ready for the wedding. Griselda passes all the tests as she forever obeys and never criticizes the inequality done to her. When Griselda has good-naturedly passed all the tests, she is well prized. She is clothed in cloth of gold as a reward for her good manner. That she is rewarded for her obedience is the way in which the patriarchal system preserves its control by declaring women's passivity as a desirable and honorable feature and legalizing male authority in a marriage.

The fifth character of the play is Isabella Bird, a Victorian traveler. She is the child of a clergyman who has wasted half of her life doing familial works. She does these works when her father is alive because women's position under Victorian religious belief is at home, either as a daughter, sister, wife or mother and has to do the domestic responsibility. But as soon as her father passes away, she finds herself liberated to do her desire to travel the world. Isabella is free from any of male domination which controls what she should or should not do as a woman. Instead of experiencing satisfaction in her action, Isabella feels herself to be egotistic that she has travelled the world without concerning for household duties, because only men can do that. She feels responsible of breaking the religious tradition and the principle that are constructed to guarantee female weakness.

The last character of *Top Girls* is Dull Gret- the theme in Brueghel's painting entitled *Terrific Griete*. She is the only one who honestly attacks and takes revenge against all the devils in hell that have taken away her children. She will not just sit inactively regretting her destiny but is ready to take action in revenge for her lost children.

All these six characters in the play share a number of resemblances. First of all, these characters live in a patriarchal culture and a man owned a social order, then all of them, consciously or unconsciously, have the consciousness of their rights and they totally understand that they do not deserve to be ill-treated. As a result of this understanding, all of them show confrontation to succeed and survive the patriarchal system by using dissimilar tactics. All of them get victory in a sense that they can achieve what they want- Marlene acquires a victorious career, Joan becomes a Pope, Griselda wins the admiration from her society which she lives in, both Nijo and Isabella have their liberty and free will. Gret has her revenge. But all of them have to pay a cost for their victory. Marlene has to pay with abortions and giving away her daughter so that she can follow her vocation. Joan has to pay the victory with her life. Nijo and Griselda have to give up their children for their public position. Isabella pays with her feeling of guilt and Dull Gret loses all her children.

Thinking about the price that they have to pay –a problem occurs on the value of the success that they have gained. Are all of the characters pleased with their way of resisting to get what the male description of success? In one part of the play, Marlene tells for all of the characters asking one question “Oh God, why are we all so miserable?” (Churchill, 1990: 39). This question, no doubt, is not more than a satire, that despite all the sacrifice, they do not feel happy or satisfied over what they have achieved.

In *Top Girls*, the experience and practice of these six women exemplifies how male authority in the patriarchal structure has took place since centuries ago and is supported by the most holy foundations of the church and grows in the marriage organization. Individual struggles of these women will never come to any success because the system is too well rooted to overcome. This poor result of the play shows us the dialectics of sex and also the way to beat the current situation: Women should reorganize and redesign their way of struggling against the patriarchal system. Eliminating the well-established patriarchal system needs more than copying male’s roles and recalling women’s own nature and identity.

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