Gender Discourse in Caryl Churchill’s Top Girls

*Top Girls*, a landmark play of Caryl Churchill was premiered on August 28, 1982, in the Royal Court Theatre in London before making its New York debut on December 28, 1982, in the Public Theatre. *Top Girls* won an Obie award in 1983 and was the runner-up for the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize. The play has been performed around the world and has quickly become part of the canon of women’s theatre. In this paper, I have tried to examine and analyze how Caryl Churchill reconceptualises women’s place in history. Churchill’s genius can be seen when she re-examines the past and present from the woman’s point. Janelle Reinelt in Beyond Brecht: Britain’s New Feminist Drama, 1986, very rightly states: “Exposing hidden aspects of the past and exploring their consequences for contemporary experience has proved a fruitful undertaking for feminist playwright” (Reinelt 43).

The 1980s were years of rapid advancement for women in many areas of the business world, but one which saw little corresponding advancement in organized child-care systems or benefits for working mothers. In this climate the idea of the ‘superwomen’ emerged: one who excelled in all areas of life, public and private, professional and domestic. The real woman suffered under the strain of the ‘Superwoman’ image. Dealing with the women’s issues, Churchill’s *Top Girls* masterfully manages to make even a man wonder what it means to be a woman. More so, it makes anyone challenge the ideal that a person can be successful with power and raise a child at the same time. Churchill talks about the genesis of the play, in an interview with Lizbeth Goodman in 1995 in *Mythic Women/Real Women: Plays and Performance Pieces by Women*, as under:

*Top Girls* was a play whose ideas came together over a period of time and in quite separate parts. I think some years before I wrote it, I 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. That idea was just floating around as something quite separate, by itself. Then I started thinking about a play possibly to do with women at work and went and talked to quite a lot of people doing different jobs and one of the places I
visited was an employment agency, which later became the focus of the play (Goodman. 85).

*Top Girls* complicates and extends questions about women’s roles. Act One of the play opens in a restaurant, where Marlene, Churchill’s protagonist, is waiting for some friends to arrive. Marlene has recently been appointed director of *Top Girls* Employment Agency. To celebrate this promotion she invites an eclectic group of female achievers to the party, the famous women from the past. As the women arrive and start the meal, they begin to talk about their lives and what they did. The guests include Pope Joan, who became pregnant whilst masquerading as a man; Isabella Bird, a Victorian traveler; Dull Gret, a figure from a nightmarish Breugel painting who led a counter charge against her male oppressors; Lady Nijo, a courtesan at the Japanese Imperial Court who became a Buddhist nun to escape her exploitation; and Griselda, the personification of patient fortitude from Chaucer’s ‘The Clerk’s Tale’. Lady Nijo recalls how she came to meet the ex-Emperor of Japan, and her encounter with him. While the rest of the women understand the encounter as rape, she explains that she saw it as her destiny: the purpose for which she was brought up. The individual stories speak of sacrifice and pain rather than emancipation and attainment. This evokes a call for a third way to female emancipation that does not rely upon either passivity or male-form aggression. While nineteenth-century explorer Isabella Bird, Pope Joan, Japanese courtesan Lady Nijo, Breugal’s Dull Gret and Chaucer’s Griselda had indeed lived extraordinary lives, they also suffered and compromised and finally had not been happy. Even Marlene acknowledges, “We’ve all come a long way. To our courage and the way we have changed our lives and our extraordinary achievements” (*Top Girls*. 15).

The first short scene is a curtain-raiser for the realistic and the contemporary scenes which follow. In Act two and Act 3, the ‘real’ story of Marlene’s life develops in the agency, where she competes for success against a management board and a business world which is primarily male and at her sister’s Joyce’s home. Unlike other women characters, Marlene shows more energy and resourcefulness. There was nothing to battle against odds as severe a other women characters but she has travelled a long way from her underprivileged origins. Instead of seeking out opportunities for joy, she has concentrated her energies on climbing the capitalist ladder. We see her interact with her colleagues at work, with young women seeking employment. One can observe that her success rests on her acceptance of those patriarchal patterns of behaviour needed to succeed within the male dominated world of offices and careers. In the subsequent scenes we can see how Marlene and her employees, Win and Nell carry out
their responsibilities in the realistic world of everyday work. Marlene, Win and Nell are Top Girls, in the employment agency, who have reached as high as possible in a male dominated field.

Later we see Marlene in a personal environment for the first time, with her sister, Joyce, and Angie, the child whom we eventually discover to be Marlene’s illegitimate daughter. In the final scene we find Joyce, the elder sister is married childless when Marlene gives birth to Angie at the age of 17. Marlene gives the baby to Joyce to bring her up as her own child. Joyce has remained in the place where she grew up under poor conditions because she was both unable and unwilling to follow Marlene’s example. Marlene does not value her feminine responsibilities. She has undergone two abortions and in the third, “she got rid of it somehow. “Pregnancy threatens her success and she further refuses to “turn into the little woman” to gratify her would be sexual partners. When one realizes that Marlene gave her daughter up to be raised by her sister in order to succeed in her career, the complicated and compromising situation of the modern ‘superwoman’ is made explicit. Denial of their maternal capacity characterizes all of Marlene’s dinner guests. Even Win’s life is made up of a series of unsatisfactory or illicit relations and love affairs with men, whom she calls ‘bullshitters’ (Top Girls. 65). Thus the pursuit of capitalist rewards by the Top Girls has meant rejecting maternal instinct, human feelings and moral values.

Angie, Marlene’s illegitimate daughter and her friend Kit, are the emblems of future, of women, work and power. Angie adores ‘Auntie Marlene’ and dreams of living with her in London. Angie’s identity is that of a rebellious one. She rebels against the agent of repression: “I’m going to kill my mother, and you’re going to watch” (Top Girls. 90). In the final scene, in a long argument between Marlene and Joyce, Churchill stages the class tensions and political differences between the sisters to mount her critique of feminism without socialism:

Marlene: She’s a tough lady, Maggie. I’d give her a job. / She just needs to hang in there. This country.
Joyce: You voted for them, did you?
Marlene: needs to stop whining. / Monetarism is not stupid.
Joyce: Drink your tea and shut up pet.
Marlene: It takes time, determination. No more slop. / And
Joyce: Well I think they’re filthy bastards.
Joyce: What good’s first woman if it’s her? I suppose you’d have liked Hitler if he was a woman. Ms. Hitler. Got a lot done, Hitlerina. / Great adventures.
Marlene: Bosses still walking on the worker’s faces? Still Dadda’s little parrot? Haven’t you learnt to think for yourself? I believe in the individual. Look at me.

Joyce: I am looking at you (Top Girls. 84).

This short excerpt shows the alignment of Joyce with their working-class father and the history of sisterly strife (Marlene identifies with the downtrodden and the abused mother). The family argument at the kitchen table brings the personal issues of success and happiness together with national political issues. Marlene completely rejects any possibility of value to which the patriarchy relegates women. Believing that their mother had a ‘wasted’ life, she tells Joyce, ‘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’ (Top Girls. 85).

Standing for a whole generation of young women who will inherit the future of their mothers, Angie has the last word in the play. Waking up from a bad dream, and mistaking (correctly) her Aunt for her mother, Angie describes her dreams as ‘Frightening’. The two sisters are able to resolve their own conflicts over their "daughter," but the girl herself, Churchill admitted, is doomed to a miserable life in which she can achieve nothing. The daughter stumbles from her bed to center stage in the last image of the play, and her final cry is a terrifying shriek of isolation and need. Angie’s repetition of the word ‘Frightening’ summarizes everything that Marlene has chosen to ignore in order to succeed. Thus at the end Marlene stands for all the top people, Joyce for the have-nots of the society and Angie for the many unfulfilled lives who might not achieve anything, or can never be a Top Girl. Further Churchill seems to suggest that Marlene is a character at odds with the world which expects too much of women and offers too little support. Marlene is the only character who appears in both the surreal dinner party scene and the realistic modern scenes. She is the centre of the play’s focus, but her position is also somehow symbolic of the position of women in the 1980s. She is an individual character and also a stock figure or representative of an age. Once the all-female world is established in the dinner party scene, the idea of women competing in a ‘man’s world’ is emphasized by the lack of men on stage. The introduction of one male character would set Marlene up in competition with him, whereas the scene stresses her internalized sense of competition, which manifests itself in her relationship with other women.

Critics praise Top Girls for a number of reasons. Churchill explores the price of success paid by the central character Marlene, while using unusual techniques including a nonlinear construction, an overlapping dialogue, and a mix of fantasy and reality. Churchill deploys an interesting technique whereby characters’ narratives overlap which leads to complicated scenarios wherein the meaning is lost in the melee of competing voices. This certainly makes reading as well as listening difficult but acts, uniquely, as a physical representation of the interrupted and disjointed histories of the five women from different times.
in history, literature and art. Many critics highlight the tough questions discussed over the course of the play and Churchill’s handling of such big ideas in such a singular fashion.

Caryl Churchill wrote *Top Girls* to question the extent to which Second Wave feminists were buying into Thatcher ideology to the detriment of real women. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this play is its attempt to redress the emerging political conservatism of its day. From a family-value frame of American conservatism, Marlene can be seen to stand for all the feminists, bringing the play’s point of view in the 1990s uncomfortably close to the recent calls for women to stay at home with their children, seeming to support the changes that feminism has failed women by promoting the workplace to the exclusion of marriage and motherhood. *Top Girls* specifically tackled a bourgeois interpretation of feminism which was prevalent under Thatcher era. Churchill displays most effectively the crucial divisions in society which occurs as a result of such individualism, and without being anti-feminist she shows the Thatcher method to be a necessarily flawed way of progressing society. The whole play focuses on women whose duty falls between caring and competing in the world ruled by patriarchy and capitalism. Amelia Howe Kritzer in *The Plays of Caryl Churchill*, 1991, states:

In showing how contemporary disparity forces women (and men) to choose between work that builds relatedness or work that offers excess to power, Churchill rejects any hint of progress. She demands recognition of the needs of that great majority of women (and men) I society who, like Angie or Howard, have no chance of rising to the top. (Kritzer. 150)

Caryl Churchill firmly advocated that: “Socialism and feminism aren’t synonymous but I feel strongly both and wouldn’t be interested in a form of one that didn’t include the other” (Kritzer. 221). The feminism thoughts which have been put forward in this play are Liberal Feminism, Materialistic Feminism and Cultural Feminism. The Liberal Feminism proposes the amelioration of Women’s Position in Society without any radical change to its political, economic or social structures e.g. through legislative reforms. Materialistic Feminism critiques the historical and material conditions of class, race and gender oppression and demands radical transformation of social structures. Whereas Cultural Feminism based on an essentialist view of the differences between women and men and advocates independence and institution building, it has led feminists to retreat from practicing public politics to a focus upon individual “life-style”. Throughout *Top Girls*, Churchill critiques liberal feminism and advocates the need for feminism as a whole to maintain a socialist outlook. She presents a Wake-up Call, against, the landscape of the present reality is a nightmarish class war that will devastate the generations growing up in this context. The play sends out a
Call to Action for alternative feminism, social justice and redefinition of power and success for future generations.

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