

THE THEME OF CONVENTION AND REBELLION IN CARYL CHURCHILL'S PLAYS

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Abstract

The present paper focuses on Churchill's defying the conventional aspects and revealing innovative approach in the plays. She, as a post-war British dramatist, deals with vivid subjects matter. She is a staunch supporter of women rights and iconoclast of modern drama. She, as a socialist feminist, voiced against the evil traditions related to gender, class, patriarchy, women's oppression etc. Her presentation of these issues made her famous in male dominated society. Churchill's plays draw attention of the people due to its contemporary issues that relates to all human beings. She voiced against the burning issues of the society that is why she can be called as 'a rebellious playwright'. She breaks the conventional topics and frankly highlighted various topics through her plays viz Cloud Nine Top Girls, Mad Forest, The Skriker, Far Away, A Number. She ignored conventional theatre style and employed innovative and unique theatrical style. In other words she rebels the conventional structure.

Keywords: Socialist Feminist Theatre, Gender, Power and Sexuality, Patriarchy, Cloning, Hyperreal, Dystopia etc.

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Caryl Churchill (1938-) is the most original writer of her generation. Many British Playwrights portrayed the picture of post-war British malaise and its effect on the life of the people. She is also one of the playwrights who skillfully present the contemporary issues in her plays. The upheavals created by the post war years played an important role to encourage the playwright to write the dramas with proper themes. And their dramas draw the attention of the society. Churchill produced plays which are relevant to current conditions. She is one of the British playwrights whose play receives admiration not only from the British Theatre but also whole world.

There has been scarcity of woman playwrights from the beginning on the English stage. The reason is the predominance of men playwrights in the field. Its only after 1950s, dramatist such as Samuel Becket, John Osborne and Arnold Wesker seemed to shaken the theatrical arena by producing innovative dramas. This decade considered a watershed for woman playwrights and it paves the way for a different depiction of society that would give way to other playwrights to appear. It is worth noting that soon after Becket's *Waiting For Godot*, Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* and Wesker's *Chicken Soup with Barley*. We had female playwright Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* (1958) appeared on the stage which described the dark aspect of the society. It is in the sixties that we witnessed a bigger jump taking place, through her presence of Ann Jellicoe and her play *The Knack*. It was in last years of the decade and early 1970s, number of companies concerned with subverting social values at the level of gender sexuality. It was happened due to the upheaval and movements (Woman's Liberation Movement, Gay Movement) in England. The women's liberation movement was a collective effort woman for equality. It was a second wave feminism activity which began in 1960s. The movement was active during 1960s and 1970s. The movement was concerned with freeing women from the male supremacy. The second wave feminism drew attention of contemporary playwrights. Caryl Churchill and Pam Gems have achieved consolidated place among woman playwrights in England in 1970s and 1980s. Apart from these woman writers, others playwrights are also appeared in the late 1980s. such as April de Angelis, Sarah Kane, Liz Lochhead, Phyllis Nagy, Rebecca Prichard, Sue Townshend or Timberlake Wertenbaker.

Mass Social upheaval, groundbreaking work and woman movement brought back the social consciousness and the destruction of the existing patriarchal society. Churchill

played a significant role in the creation of a new feminist theatre. Churchill placed women at the centre of the dramatic action and addressing a wide range of important socio-political issues. The theatre censorship act of 1968 had also allowed freedom to playwrights and companies to create thoughtful and provocative plays to the nation. It led feminist drama evolving in the mid 1970s.

The issue of women's oppression has been addressed by many scholars. Among these critics socialist feminists also paid a special attention to this notion. Indeed, a dominant concept in socialist feminist theory is oppression which emphasizes the discrimination and subjugation of different groups of people such as women, working class people, gays and lesbians in patriarchal societies. The definition of oppression extends beyond sex differences. Oppression as a general term refers to the intersection of its various kinds that related to gender, class, and race in patriarchal societies. Then oppression and oppressive practices are social constructs. The Royal Court writers in the 1960s and 1970s dedicated on the whole to social realist theatre. Churchill was greatly influenced by this school of thought.

Cloud Nine (1979) is one of Churchill's best-known play. The effects of race, class, sexuality, ethnicity and gender are some of the bold subjects which she dealt with. In past the discourse on sex, gender, race, heterosexuality, homosexuality were control by the cultural laws. But her depiction of such topics shows that she is a freelance writer. The play pokes fun at British society and convention. The transformation of men into women and vice-versa suggests their sexual repression. In *Cloud Nine*, Act One takes place in Colonial Africa and Act Two in London it is hundred years gap but twenty five years have passed for characters. Her manipulation of time scheme provided the necessary space.

Top Girls (1982) is an excellent example of different women's voices. In past women were confined to their home and had limited environment. The issue of gender disparity is everywhere criticizes in the society. Men are more favorable than women in the many established institutions. Few years ago women had no right to vote but now things have changed vastly they are elected as President or Prime Ministers in many countries.

In *Top Girls*, Merlene celebrates promotion party of the post of Managing Director of the Company. All guests belong to different fields some from history, some from art and literature. The woman like Marlene is not conventional type of women who suppressed in patriarchal system. The position she held on the basis of her individual accomplishment. Today men and women are celebrating promotion party like man. Her thinking capacity is beyond the traditional and conventional women. She says that anyone can do anything. She is a typical modern woman who dissociates herself from class, race and culture barriers. Her achievement and success shows her female empowerment, ignoring the millions exploited and suppressed from long time. She adopts male values in the business world. To gain success fame and respective positions, these three women Marlene (Managing Director), Joan (Pope) and Isabella (Traveler) ready to give up their feminine quality. This rebellious quality is shown through Churchill's plays. Marlene's masculine and capitalistic value knows from her conversation with her colleagues in a highly materialistic and

competitive world. Thus, Churchill primarily highlights gender oppression in her plays. In a patriarchal society, established institutions (marriage) have been always in favour of men not women. Churchill shows through her different characters that gender inequality is cause of suffering misery.

Churchill is famous for her stylistic experiment. She breaks the conventional methods of portraying life on the stage and invents new way of seeing reality in *Top Girls*. She disrupted the chronological time pattern in this play. Thus, the non-conventional structure and jarring but effective technique questions the success of *Top Girls*.

The contemporary burning topics like totalitarian dictatorship, suffering economic hardship, political censorship and cultural stagnation dramatizes in *Mad Forest (1990)*. It is a play that focuses on the Romanian revolution from the perspectives of the middle-class Antoscu and working-class Vladu family. It is a crystallization of the yearning for the collapse of the repressive regime and eradication of the autocratic administration.

Churchill's play *The Skriker (1994)* introduces the mythic dystopic world. Churchill deliberately explores areas of experiences of women that the stage traditionally ignored. Her portrayal of fragmented and distorted world of woman gives rise to unreal reality. *The Skriker* explores uncertainties of the individual in the post modern world. The play disrupts the underlying void, terror and vacuity in the contemporary world. A real world is introduced to the audience instead of illusions. Thus, *The Skriker* is an exploration of illusion and reality.

Churchill creates hyperreal world which is more real than the real, truer than true. The characters are unaware what exactly taking place. In such a confusing state, they are neither real to others, nor to themselves. The existence of the *Skriker* in the present world and her encounter with the two women do not appear to be illusory; rather more real and true. This state of hyperreality baffles the audience as they remain wondering about the uncertainty of reality and the disastrous, deceptive world which women are creating for themselves. Like the Theatre of the Absurd, in this play also the audience sees characters and virtual reality in constant flux, devoid of any motivation. Both Lily and Josie like Doctor Faustus are tempted by the Mephistophelian *Skriker* who ultimately drags them to hell. Neither of the two women has the scholarship or ambition like *Doctor Faustus*, but has to face a more bleak future from where there is no escape. By disrupting the illusion of reality and constructing a hyperreal world, the audience is introduced into a world more real than the real, where real and unreal merge. It would be relevant to point out here that the progress of technology (film, TV and advertising) has led to a loss of the distinction between reality and illusion, surface and depth.

Churchill, as we know, is famous for her bold subjects gender, power and sexuality. *Far Away (2000)* is play about governments fear among the society. The play exposes the dual policy of politics. The playwright may have depicted political affairs of her country but it is happening overall the world. The government could not achieve the people's favors and in reverse they created fears in the society. The playwright is not interested in reform in traditional way, but revolution. She criticizes the deficiencies and excesses of the

political systems.

A Number (2002) is related to the scientific progression of the world and its threat. Churchill highlighted the human cloning in the play. A man's too much revolution in the science which also dangerous to our nature is examined in the play. It's a conflict between natures versus nurture. The cloning of animals like sheep, kitten etc gives rise to controversy in last few years. The possible human cloning became of conflict in the world. Salter is about sixty years old whose wife committed suicide when Barnard his son was only two years old. To agree for his son's experimental cloning is only tragic flaw (*Hamartia* in Aristotelian sense) in the play. And this cloning suggests the human cloning is against nature. But modern men draw disaster due to their greed. Caryl wants to say through this play that too much progression is harmful for men, society and nature.

Caryl Churchill, as a twentieth century playwright in modern era, defies tradition and rejects the conventions of literary device. She escapes from the tradition and authority and begin to set her own world. She wanted to change in every aspects of life. He tries to deconstruct the traditional and age old norms based on Aristotle's ideas in writing the plays. The Aristotelian ideal pervaded throughout history but now many artists asserted to be change. Many plays followed the classical tradition and present a set dramatic pattern especially based on following steps: Preparation, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action and Conclusion. But many socialist feminist playwrights tried to dismantle the patriarchal ideology and deconstruct the traditional notions in their plays.

Churchill is a leading woman dramatist whose plays staged not only in England but also in other countries also. She is widely known for her radical theatrical experiments and political prospective. Her plays illustrate the patriarchal force that had been oppressed men and woman in the society. Her plays different from G.B. Shaw, Anton Chekov, Arthur Miller, Sam Sheppard and Eugene O'Neill whose plays are primarily male dominated. Most of her character holds unequal position in the plays. The notion of patriarchy dismantles by using unconventional theatre technique in her works.

Churchill transformed theatrical convention such as structure, character, action and the use of space. Churchill modifies realism's tenets by employing a series of unconventional theatrical devices such as structural forms, intertextual juxtaposition, quoting historical figures and texts, cross-gender casting, the use of visual stage images, overlapping dialogue and intercutting texts. Her using of appropriate common language reaches out to a larger audience rather than expressive language and its rhetorical components. Churchill deconstructed the logic of the linear narrative in *Cloud Nine*. There is a disruption of the audience's expectation of time in the way Act one is set in Victorian England and Act Two in England in the 1980 while the age of the character is only 25 years. This is not possible in life but only in the theatre.

Thus, Churchill is placed a unique position among 'male stream' of the British stage due to her innovative approach to feminine writing in theatre. By projecting gender issues and innovative theatrical styles (radical use of language, innovative characterization, cross dressing techniques, overlapping dialogue) she delights her audience. She utilizes freedom

and innovation not in the form but in the content of her work. As per as I concern, none of her plays patterns the traditional Aristotle's model. But she manages to change the structure of performance and uses her innovative technique. In short, Churchill's writing is not in conventional manner but an innovative or rebellious manner.

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