

# Deconstructing Gender Stereotypes in Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*

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## Abstract

The question of gender-based identities and sexuality has always attracted many theorists and they became the primary instruments of disciplining the personal as well as the public body with the politicization of sex around the nineteenth century. As gender is understood to be a social and cultural construct, the patriarchal notion of gender could be subverted by contesting patriarchy's grand narratives of gender. Caryl Churchill's feminist play *Top Girls* subverts such patriarchal and heteronormative grand narratives by challenging the accepted role of women as the appendage of man with the aim of vindicating subjective power for women. With an all-women cast, Churchill dramatises the torturous fate of women and their gradual ascendancy to the position of 'top girls' literally an Employment Agency, but metaphorically a space for women's liberation. Each of them has their own story to tell, as they have all been victimized by the patriarchal system in the century they lived and have resisted the system with different strategies. The present paper is an attempt to examine how *Top Girls* deconstructs the taken-for-granted assumptions concerning the notions of gender and overthrows the patriarchal hierarchy that restrains women from occupying central positions in theater and in society as a whole.

**Keywords:** Caryl Churchill, *Top Girls*, Deconstruction, Gender, Stereotype, Sexuality, Patriarchy, Subjectivity

Caryl Churchill, an ardent supporter of women rights and an iconoclast, owns a unique position among the contemporary dramatists of post-war British drama. As a twentieth century artist in modern era, Churchill defies tradition and rejects both the respectable morality and the conventions and formulas of literary success. She wanted to deconstruct the traditional systems of representation and gender politics often find its place in the works of Caryl Churchill. Her plays explore the values set by patriarchal society, and examine gender roles and power relationships in the society and thereby brings forth such issues which tend to deconstruct traditional ideas of sex and gender. Churchill is unique in her own way in illustrating the position of women along with their struggle to social oppression. Focusing most of her plays from women experiences, Churchill vividly retells the representation of women and the realities of their living in a patriarchal society.

Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* (1982), a play with an all-women cast, portrays a clear picture of woman's world. The play tries to investigate the oppressive forces of patriarchy on woman throughout history by giving a real depiction of the position of woman in male-dominated societies and her struggle against the oppressive patriarchal agents. The play is slotted into three Acts initiating at a restaurant on a Saturday night where Marlene, the main protagonist of the play, hosts a dinner party to celebrate her promotion as the Managing

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Director of 'Top Girls' Employment Agency. The long opening scene is a package of overlapping and interrupting conversation among the five guests who recount their individual histories with horror, dismay, humour and celebration. In Act Two the scene shifts from the restaurant to her office where Marlene interviews Jeanine, Win questions Louise and Nell interrogates Shona projecting the theme of women and work that constitutes the crux of the play. If Act Two forms the traditional domain of the male taken over by females, Act Three locates the spaces of the women where they can express themselves freely. The play closes with Joyce's kitchen, a symbol of women domination, where Marlene pays a visit a year earlier. The play is a tale told or rather re-told by a group of females who have experienced almost the same torture or pain by their male counterparts – husbands, priests or office-bosses. All of them attempt to violate the patriarchal system either by adopting or by revolting against it.

Churchill places her women in sharp contrast with the traditional or classical representation of women in plays where they are to perform certain stereotype roles – wives, mothers, sisters, daughters and lovers – all parasites to men, rarely having their individual or independent identity. The play is thus original in giving a voice and allowing the women to speak for themselves. They open up a world of experience new to the British stage and also to the world of patriarchy. Patriarchy might explain why the top salary earners in Britain are all men. It has a strong relevance to *Top Girls*, both regarding the play's sexual politics and its treatment of the subject of employment. The playwright seems to project that employment is a necessary mode of survival for the women against the oppression and the subjugation of the male world. The professional women would find it rather easy to place them in the process of evolution – both social and cultural. Marlene is a 'victor' not that she is the Manager of the Company but because she has been able to form a constellation of women in which they can live and express themselves positively. They can at least think freely.

Marlene, being the central character of the play, experiences domestic violence herself from early childhood. She suffers because her mother is being abused by her father. At the same time her mother doesn't show any opposition to overcome such ill treatment. Like many voiceless women, her mother doesn't consider such mistreatment as something unnatural. To her it is normal for a wife. So this acceptance and blind obedience encourages the husband to continue with his brutality as part of his right. Such unhealthy environment leaves a great impression on the children's mind and identity. Marlene decides not to be like her mother. She is the representation of the new, liberated and modern woman. Though Marlene and Joyce are sisters and grown up in the same environment, they choose to live differently. Joyce symbolises the traditional woman who doesn't try to enjoy none of the benefits yielded by the women's liberation movement. She prefers to remain as a hard- working labourer woman.

Marlene's guests, who attend the dinner in Act one, have all achieved a certain iconic status in history or myth and are all from radically different times and cultures: the 19th century Scottish world traveller, Isabella Bird; Lady Nijo, a 13th century Japanese courtesan who was forced to become a nun after losing her master's favour and who then travelled all over Japan; and the 9th century Roman Pope, Joan, who disguised herself as a man and attained the highest ecclesiastical rank in the Empire. There are also two very different fictional characters, archetypes who were both invented by male writers and artists: Griselda, the medieval good wife whose husband Walter subjects her to all kinds of tests including forced marriage, banishment and separation from her children, and who was written about approvingly by Chaucer, Boccaccio and Petrarch; and Dull Gret, a heroic folk figure painted by the Flemish

artist Breughel as a woman who leads other peasant women to the mouth of hell to fight demons, symbolically resisting the constant wars and invasions in 16th century Holland, armed with pots and pans from the home.

It can be assumed that all institutions are constructed for man's benefit. For example, church as the most holy place, is constructed to support masculinity. Pope Joan succeeds to defeat all barriers and proves that woman can occupy position. Though she achieves her goal and becomes a Pope, unconsciously she internalises the patriarchal norms. She holds herself responsible for every bad thing that had happened. Her ignorance and little knowledge about her body as a woman constructed her tragic downfall. The physical weakness of woman makes her inferior to a man since her body will show the result of the action. Woman's action makes her naturally responsible for it. Hence, she deserves the social and natural punishment. On the other hand, man is free from any responsibility; no one asks or blames him for any action because he is superior. Joan protests about all such unjust norms against her as a woman, which is the result of her biological weakness saying "If it hadn't been for the baby I expect I'd have lived to an old age like Theodora of Alexandria. Who lived as a monk" (TG 16) It explores how her physical form has sealed her tragic destiny. In the patriarchal society, sex can determine the individual's worth and destiny rather than talent, hard working and intelligence. Joan suffers the consequences of the physical relationship alone. The physical form of woman makes her inferior to man and liable for social punishment. Joan protests against the entire system where human being face all unjust based on the individual's gender.

Griselda is another character representing the 13th century life. She is from poor family and got married to Marquis. She got unusual chance to be the Marquis's wife and enjoyed wealth and higher position in the society. The dramatist attempts to highlight the difference and consequences of being obedient and of being rebel in the patriarchal society through the characters of Joan and Griselda. In a patriarchal society woman is tamed to obey their husband and follow all norms unconditionally. The Marquis asks for the complete obedience. She accepts all Marquis's conditions because she considers it as something natural and a man's right. Though she becomes Marquis's wife, her status would never be equal to her husband because of her gender and her class. Griselda's husband asks her to prove her loyalty to him by allowing her children to be killed. She doesn't have any other option but to obey him. When her husband takes her children away she doesn't show any kind of objection from her side. Such an acceptance shows that woman considers her man as something more important than her children and her own life. She finds the system strongly rooted in the psyche of society. Finally, she is rewarded after passing all tests, and proved her loyalty and obedience. "And he stayed behind and put his arms round me and kissed me. I felt half asleep with shock..... Well I fainted. Then I cried and kissed the children..... of course, I loved them." (TG 27)

The patriarchal system maintains its power by using punishment and rewarding. Griselda is rewarded for her obedience. However, she has to suffer psychologically to get her husband's favour and rewards at the end. The same thing happened to lady Nijo, the Japanese woman of the thirteen century. Her father sent her to serve the ex-emperor at the age of fourteen. He orders her to be respectful and obedient to receive his favours. In the patriarchal society, man has all rights to do whatever he wants with his woman. So, Nijo sees the emperor's oppression as something natural and part of his right. She violates the system by taking another lover as a revenge on the entire system. This system empowers man to have many women and at the same time illegalises woman to do so. Nijo thinks that she is taking revenge by cheating

the emperor. Noticeably, she is the one who suffers psychologically and physically from her deed because she lost her children. When Nijo takes other lovers secretly; she expresses her objection to the entire system she lives in. She is helpless to resist it because it is too strong to uproot or change. Her deeds can be understood as unconscious protest against the injustice values in the patriarchal society.

Nijo bears the mark of her deed since she becomes pregnant. Thus, she has to sacrifice her child to save her position. This baby may end her life as the emperor's woman and as a respectable woman in the society. So, she has to pay for her action. She doesn't have any option but to suppress her affection for the survival of the baby. Her question to Griselda about her feeling when her children were taken away from her reveals her dilemma. "But did you feel anything for them. Did you feel anything for the children?... Nobody gave me back my children" (TG 27). She wishes to know what is Griselda's feeling when her husband took her children away from her. Noticeably, she feels jealous of Griselda who got her children back. From these two experiences of Nijo and Griselda, it can be said that Griselda remains submissive and obedient so she is rewarded. Besides, she can get her children back and live with respect and love from her husband and society. On the other hand, Nijo has dared to go against the system so she is punished. She is deprived of her children, her lovers and everything she has and finally she has to live alone as a nun.

Such stories aim to strengthen the system and implant the desirable and undesirable qualities in a woman in the patriarchal society. Isabella is another female character who Marlene introduces as the Victorian traveller. The ideal woman of the Victorian time is supposed to circle around home and family. It is unnatural for women during the Victorian times to practice any activities outside the home. By her father's death, Isabella becomes free from the male domination in her life. Home is the expected place for women. Isabella tries to fit with the conventional norms in the society, but she finds it too hard since she has health problems. So, she starts her journey again as soon as her husband dies. With his death, she sets out on a journey that will lead her to a sense of fulfilment. She travels and gets a lot of experience of this world. But she could not set herself free from the patriarchal ideology that moulds every woman's psyche. Though Isabella seems free from the male supremacy in her life, unconsciously she still appears trapped in the conventional norms. Furthermore, she feels unsatisfied with herself because she dares to break the constructed norms. She considers the enjoyments of life are not meant for woman. By violating norms, she feels guilty. Dull Gret is an important female character in the play, who articulates less and believes in action. To her thinking and speaking for the rights of the woman is not as important as the action for the same. Hers is a case of a woman who doesn't complain against the oppressors; instead, wish to work out the action plan. It is her belief that action yields fruits. To her, nothing can be changed through crying and regretting. The problems can be changed only through action and unity. There is no guarantee that the action will yield victory, but its continuation is essential.

There are several similarities between these six characters. They live in the patriarchal society and try to survive by using different strategies. Though they are aware of their right in the patriarchal society, they are subjugated, exploited and paid for their successes. Marlene achieves her success by sacrificing her motherhood, giving her daughter away and her family. She pursues her success in the patriarchal society and attains personhood. Griselda has to sacrifice her children and her emotion to be an ideal woman and to keep her social status. Nijo also sacrifices her children for the social status. Isabella pays with her comfort and feeling.

Gret scarifies all her children. Churchill depicts the negative effects when woman breaks the norms. Furthermore, she attempts to illustrate through the experiences of these women characters that the patriarchal system has existed since centuries and passed down to the generations.

Churchill advocates women to be aware of her position in the society. To overcome any kind of marginalisation, she must rethink and re examine her way of struggling against all odd norms in the society. Churchill also attempts to highlight the importance of unity among women to achieve their liberation. They must know that individual struggle will never and ever uproot and defeat the unjust system, since the system is deeply rooted. To attack such well constructed system, women should reorganize and redesign their way of struggling against the patriarchal system. She has to reject the pro-male social structure. The blind imitation of the oppressive structure is of no use to her. She has to reconstruct a new one, recalling her own nature and identity.

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