

**Reversing Patriarchal Hegemonic Ideology in Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*****Dr. Shachi Sood***Assistant Professor***Ms. Samiksha Sharma***Student, M.A. English**Department of English, Baba Ghulam Shah Badshah University, Rajouri, (J&K) India***Abstract**

The present paper aims in highlighting Caryl Churchill's attempt to explore the exceptional heroic deeds of female characters in the play *Top Girls* and their attempts to break the cultural hegemony of gender discrimination. All the women have done something extraordinary to satisfy their internal desires. These women have retaliated against the traditions of patriarchy by denying the societal norms. The six characters attending the dinner party have taken the roles traditionally reserved for men, thus breaking the cultural supremacy of gender biasness. The play has been set in the England during the times of Margaret Thatcher and also reflects the positive benefit that women reap from Women's Liberation Movement. Moreover, *Top Girls* is about the women achievement and empowerment.

**Key Words:** patriarchy, discrimination, gender, feminine, hegemony

Caryl Churchill, one of the most noteworthy British dramatists of the late twentieth century is concerned with the subjugation of women, the poor and powerless. She is also known for her resolute experimentation with dramatic form which includes the questioning of power relations and gender roles, and she seeks to look for choices which are the root of her drama. Churchill's move towards patriarchal ideology destroys the traditional image of a prime male figure in opposition to a compliant recipient female, exhibiting the fickleness of gender roles.

The play *Top Girls* was written in an era when Queen Elizabeth II and Margaret Thatcher were the most important female political figures in Great Britain. Margaret Thatcher, a member of Conservative Party, was elected for the parliament as the first female Prime Minister in 1979. Though she was nicknamed as Iron Lady, her reign has been criticized because of the

unemployment she caused with the privatization of the major industries like coal mining and telecommunications. The enhancement in unemployment rates had a great impact on women, especially working and lower class women. Mostly women were fired but only a limited number of women had a very good career in their lives but this success came with diligence, ambition and self-sacrifice.

The play celebrates the accomplishment and emancipation of women, along with reversing the gender roles and breaking the gender stereotypes. The characters in *Top Girls* are represented as unconventional from the very beginning of the play, they are depicted as liberated from patriarchal bonds and prejudices. Churchill has portrayed women from different backgrounds who endure the stiff patriarchy in their own ways. These women with their heterogeneous experiences in respective ages find

commonalities rooted in their gender specifications. The play resonates the psychological and moral development of a female.

The play opens with a dinner party thrown by the protagonist Marlene to celebrate her promotion to Managing Director of Top Girls, the employment agency where she works. The guests are all extraordinary women from history, art or literature of different time periods. At the party, women eat, drink and talk about their lives. The guest includes Victorian traveler Isabella Bird, thirteenth century Japanese courtesan Lady Nijo, the ninth century Pope Joan, Breughel's peasant-warrior Dull Gret, and Chaucer's Griselda. The scene itself depicts the elevation of women with passion while transcending the hurdles. All the six women showed extraordinary valour and fortitude, perceived every opportunity and made commendable sacrifice. Each woman has endured hardship at the hands of a husband, lord, or a patriarchal institution. However, these women also refused to inhabit their expected roles which bind them together against injustice done to women. This is the reason that Marlene has assembled these women because she considers herself equal to them; as they all have triumphed the patriarchy.

Isabella Bird, for instance, is a spirited and renowned travel writer from the nineteenth century who travels to the far corners of the globe, despite her physical sickness. Isabella's experiences as a traveler to different parts of the world were beyond the imagination of an ordinary woman confined to her home and a limited environment. Similarly Joan, as a 'second class citizen' of the ninth century, finds her rights to get education being denied by the

dominant patriarchal system represented by church. Joan decides to disguise herself as a man and enters the church, which enables her to occupy the top position in the system when she becomes a cardinal and then the Pope, a position unthinkable to women in the history of Christianity. As a Pope, Joan has successfully defeated the system because the patriarchal system that has discriminated against her sex, gives her the power to control over the male sex. Now, she also has the power to change the truth, as she revealed to Marlene:

JOAN: I had thought the Pope would know everything. I thought God would speak to me Directly. But of course he knew I was a woman. . . And I realised I did know the truth. Because whatever the Pope says, that's true... Yes I enjoyed being Pope. I consecrated bishops and let people kiss my feet. I received the king of England when he came to submit to the church. (Churchill. Act I)

Joan suspects that the Pope does really have the divine power, because as a Pope, Joan never had the experience of talking to God. She exposes that the truth is actually from the Pope himself and not from the God, so she has the power to deconstruct the belief which regarded Pope as an intermediate between God and people. Joan exposed the false values of patriarchy as a rebellion against the conventions.

Lady Nijo who lived in thirteenth century has served the emperor as a courtesan at the age of fourteen. The society in which Lady Nijo lives is male dominating, as her life and future are decided by her father, and then by the Emperor. Nijo chooses to take two lovers when she is out of the

Emperor's favour. She cheats the Emperor and shows her retaliation against what has been done to her.

NIJO: My first child was His Majesty's, which unfortunately died, but my Second was Akebono's...  
(Churchill. Act I)

Lady Nijo describes her spirited retaliation against the Emperor for allowing his attendants to beat her and other concubines during an annual festival. Nijo concocts an elaborate plan with the other women. Nijo springs upon him and beats him with a stick until he promises not to allow any of his attendants to hurt the women again. Millett claims that "the culture encourages the young male to develop aggressive impulses and the young female to develop the virtue of passivity, and "sexual behavior" is almost entirely the product of learning" (*Sexual Politics* 31-32). But this act of revenge against the very symbol of patriarchy becomes the proudest moment in the life of Lady Nijo.

NIJO: And I hit him with a stick  
Yes, I hit him with a stick.  
(Churchill. Act I)

There is Dull Gret, who openly attacks and takes revenge against all the 'devils' in hell that have taken her children away. Dull Gret leads a group of women, "Come on, we're going where the evil come from and pay the bastards out" (Churchill. Act I). Taking her neighbours with her demonstrates the need for all women who has been deprived of their rights and children, unite to fight the devil together. Gret's call for a collective action and resistance against these powers make her extraordinary and stand apart from the rest of famous women in the party. Dull's

courageous resistance against her oppressors is a heroic deed. Certainly, this kind of uprising would have commonly been carried out by an army of men, so Gret has defied the gender conventions by taking action. Another thirteenth century character, Griselda is extraordinary because of her ability to endure her marriage with rare patience. She accepted the proposal of the Marquis and calculated the benefit of marrying the rich man rather than a poor fellow. She would be bestowed with wealth and high status which is very pleasing for a poor girl. Her submission to her husband is an act of calculative reasoning.

Marlene, the main protagonist in the play symbolizes the new woman, liberated and empowered by the Women's Liberation Movement. In 1960's, women from England and other western countries actively sought a new identity distinguished from their traditional, domestic roles. The Women's Liberation Movement in England raised women's self-consciousness against sexual discrimination. They liberated themselves from the bondage of their body, their domestic identity and familial responsibilities. Women proved to be intellectually and professionally competent as their male counterparts and re-established a new gender identity. Marlene was born into a working class family where domestic violence was the routine. The family, where all the members are controlled by a man, is represented

through the whole act one as a principal institution of patriarchy. As Millett claims:

[Family] is both a mirror of and a connection with the larger society; a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal

whole. [...] Serving as an agent of the larger society, the family not only encourages its own members to adjust and conform, but acts as a unit in the government of the patriarchal state which rules its citizens through its family heads. (Millett 33)

Marlene has taught herself to escape her fate as a working class woman, because she hates the working class and their offensive ways of living. She finds 'power and control' to be desirable, so she left her home at the age of thirteen to determine her own future. As Millett puts forward "in general the position of women in the patriarchy is a continuous function of their dependence. Just as their social position is vicarious and achieved through males, their relation to the economy is also typically vicarious or tangential." (40) Marlene got job at the Top girls Employment Agency and subsequently, she becomes the managing director. She expressed her delight and achievement in the beginning of the play:

MARLENE: Well it's worth a party.

ISABELLA: To Marlene.

MARLENE: And all of us.

JOAN: Marlene.

NIJO: Marlene.

GRET: Marlene

MARLENE: We've all come a long way. To our courage and the way we changed our lives and our extraordinary achievements.  
(Churchill. Act I)

During the times of Margaret Thatcher, women begin to analyse their status in contemporary capitalistic society. This society allows the Top girls like Marlene to succeed; however, it neglects those who are inefficient. Marlene, in the office is an

example of successful women who has received positive benefit from individualistic markets. As a Managing Director of Top Girls Agency, she dictates, dominates, and decides other women lives. Howard, a male co-worker of Marlene, loses in competition of the Managerial job to Marlene. Churchill draws a picture of two different women in this dialogue: one is the doing gender who is worried about her husband, his health and his situation; the other one is a woman who is trying to make her own choices, Marlene. When Mrs. Kidd comes and talks to her about her being appointed as the managing director instead of Howard, Marlene ignores her and she even gives suggestions and alleviation for her husband:

Mrs. Kidd: It's very hard when someone has worked all these years.

Marlene: Business life is full of little setbacks. I'm sure Howard knows that.

He'll bounce back in a day or two.

We all bounce back. (II.I)

Although Marlene tries to convince Mrs. Kidd that no one can be sure about what would happen in business life, Mrs. Kidd brings another perspective to the discussion saying:

Mrs. Kidd: If you could see him you'd know what I'm talking about.

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.  
(II.I)

In the conclusion of *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir points out that:

woman is a product that is embellished by civilization: It must be repeated once more that in human society nothing is natural and that

woman, like much else, is a product elaborated by civilization. The intervention of others in her destiny is fundamental (725).

Marlene's female subordinates Win and Nell conclude, "Our Marlene's got far more balls than Howard" (Churchill. Act II, scene 2) Hating and ignoring her middle class association, Marlene now says, "anyone can do anything if they've got what it takes" (Churchill. Act III). Her colleagues Nell and Win, also believes in Marlene's thinking. Nell says she is not a "staying put lady" and Win though doing better than men, enjoys a secret relation with a rich married man. These Top girls have left no stone unturned to achieve success in their lives.

Angie is a very significant character. Joyce and Marlene do not think highly of her because she is a high school drop-out, hence can't get a decent job. However Angie performs very well over the course of Top Girls, more than expected. For instance, Angie manages to call Marlene to visit her home. Angie also manages to visit London from Suffolk on the bus, and reaches her aunt, Marlene's work place.

She hopes to stay with Marlene only if she agrees. Angie has a keen sense to reform her life, she wants to be a top girl, this shows her dedication and hope for the better future. Angie's friend, Kit also expresses her ability and desire to take on a traditionally male profession, such as a physicist. In second Act of the play, Angie and Kit create a little new world and community in the Joyce's backyard with their resistance against the traditional world. This younger generation symbolizes vigour and enthusiasm for upward movement, although in a different manner.

Churchill has criticized gender roles which are obligatory for both sexes according to patriarchy and are, therefore, arbitrary, and has endeavored in drawing attention to the issue that women should trapping themselves in extraneous categories while trying to free themselves from the patriarchal structures. Beauvoir states that modern woman accepts masculine qualities, she prides herself on thinking, taking action, working, creating on the same terms as man (Walters 98).

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