

Impressive Female Figures in Three Selected Plays of Caryl Churchill

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Abstract

This study aims to show how Caryl Churchill, a woman feminist playwright has played a significant role in contemporary literary studies. Churchill's plays mostly illustrate the oppression of women in patriarchal societies. By illustrating these subjugated and oppressed female characters, Churchill strikes the attention of the audience and make them to criticize the established social and economical norms. The blatant abuse of women in male dominated societies had resulted in a continuous struggle by them throughout history who fought for equal opportunities as they attempted to improve their positions in the society they lived in. In this regard, in researcher's opinion Churchill also illustrates some subversive characters among these oppressed women that although cannot change the present situation, they defy the conventional norms and challenge for their rights. This study places its crucial lens on portraying these impressive female characters in Churchill's selected plays, *Vinegar Tom* (1976), *Cloud Nine* (1979), and *Top Girls* (1982). It also aims to focus on social construction of gender in the characters of these selected plays.

Keywords: Feminist Plays, Agency, Subjectivity, Social Construction of Gender, Drag, Performativity.

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Introduction

It is a wide-held belief that women belonging to the lower strata of society in the economic sense are more likely to be victims of male oppression than their counterparts belonging to the more financially stable upper classes. However, it must be noted that the latter can still be oppressed in a number of other ways – socially, emotionally or psychologically. For example, historically women were not given the same privileges and opportunities as men in terms of education, freedom or rights. In addition, women have also been subjected to male violence due to their generally weaker physical nature. In other words, it can be safely assumed that women are oppressed everywhere in the political, social, and economic domains. Sometimes, they are not even allowed to vote, to take part in political, social and economic activities. They are not even allowed to challenge gender discrimination, marginalization and oppression.

In illustrating such situations, creative writers have played their part in this struggle by challenging prevailing assumptions and stereotypes about women. For instance, they have highlighted women's suffering by providing them a space so that their voices can be heard and the views listened to. Accordingly, the development of theatre had also played its part: women playwrights helped to foreground issues about women's struggle against patriarchal dominance in their plays. It is worthwhile to note that theatre had provided an avenue for women's voices to be heard in the public arena. In other words, theatre was not just a performance to be appreciated aesthetically but incorporated social criticism. Aston declares that "theatre can help women to see their lives politically: to raise awareness of oppression and to encourage women's creativity" (Aston, 1999, 2).

Accordingly, several feminist playwrights such as Pam Gems's *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi* (1975), Michelene Wandor's *Care and Control* (1977) and Megan Terry's *Comings and Goings* (1966) have attempted to articulate women's oppressed state in their works.

Such performances bring into focus the issues of social identities and subcultures of class, race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality into mainstream theatre, and created many great roles for women. Issues about sexual orientations and the painful experience of men's behaviour towards women have

been some of the themes of such plays. For instance, Gem's *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi* (1975) is a play that explores issues related to oppressed young women living apart from their lovers or husbands who struggle against all odds to pull together the crushed strand of their lives. With regard to this, Keyssar notes that "each woman's battle for strength and survival inspires the others and points to deep social structures that support patriarchy and women's own weak self-image" (Keyssar, 1984, 133).

In order to pay more attention to women and their lives, feminist playwrights have also used another technique which is the absence of men on stage. Megan Terry is one of the feminist dramatists who used this technique. In *Hothouse* (1974), for example, all central characters are females. Caryl Churchill and Pam Gem are other feminist dramatists who have also used this technique. The aim of these dramatists has been to 'dismiss' the role of men while highlighting the role of women.

Women's role in a historical context has also been one of the techniques employed. Caryl Churchill's *Vinegar Tom* (1976), *Light shining in Buckinghamshire* (1976), and *Cloud Nine* (1979) and Wendy Kesselman's *My Sister in This House* (1988) are examples of plays that highlight the social roles of women through history.

It ought to be noted that the establishment of different theatre companies was an important milestone for feminist playwrights, as they invited women to write for them. This provided the opportunity for women playwrights to write scripts that could be performed on stage. Women playwrights have also been specially commissioned by certain production companies to work with the players and director to develop scripts. Pam Gems, Michelene Wandor, and Caryl Churchill have all had the opportunity to do this in Britain. Such a development had augured well for women playwrights attempting to explore themes related to oppression and gender inequalities. For the period of seventies, Feminist theatre groups with the aim of considering women's subjects established. Godiwala expresses that "with the gradual incorporation of women in all walks of life came the awareness of women's issues in mainstream theatre; as more and more women wrote for the mainstream, the interest in a ghettoized women's theatre diminished." (Godiwala, 2003, 51)

In relation to the above, the researcher strongly believes that Churchill's collaboration with Joint Stock Theatre group had provided an avenue for her to use innovative theatrical devices that

helped to conceptualize the internal dialogue related to women issues of her characters. In the introduction section of *Vinegar Tom*, Churchill claims that she is appreciative of the opportunity that provided her with an avenue to exercise innovation in the field of drama.

In this study the researcher conducts a close feminist reading on Churchill's plays for various reasons. Apart from the fact that she has been a prolific writer of plays that deals with politics and oppression, she has been noted as one of the first leading women playwrights in England who managed to incorporate successfully a feminist style of writing in plays that mainly focus on the social roles and subjugated position of women in society. This study however, aims to shift this focus by showing how Caryl Churchill, a woman feminist playwright has played a significant role in contemporary literary studies.

Method

Different feminists scholars suggested methods and theories on literary works. For example, a study of the way Caryl Churchill presents various oppressions of marginalized groups derived from patriarchal studies and class differences. In addition, several feminist researchers attempted to examine Judith Butler's gender study in relation to the marginalized groups in Churchill's plays. Borrowing from Butler's concepts, the researchers focuses on the subversive groups in this study. In this sense, the researcher looks closely at two of the key terms of Butler's writing in an attempt to clarify subjectivity, agency and social construction of gender that relate to subversive characters of this study.

Agency

Normally, agency refers to the capacity of subjects to cause an event or action to happen, so it underpins the claim that women and other marginalized groups can liberate themselves from oppression because, that is, they are agents who can make things happen. Accordingly, agency in the context of this paper can be defined as: "the social conditions for and requirements of action, as well as with the internal and external barriers to action" (Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories, 2002, 15). Hence, the notion of agency is vital for feminist theorists and activists seeking to identify the causes of women's subordination and oppression, and possibilities for their self-realisation and freedom

Butler takes a different view to subjectivity than those conventionally used which assumes a self with free will, and thus the capacity to act – a signifying social practice that allow women to act freely.

Critics of Butler, some of whom look at it through voluntarist politics perspective or as a form of determinism, however, argue that if women are socially constructed, it will be improbable for them to have free will as evident in the following observation by Lloyd:

Some interlocutors, including the sympathetic, regarded Butler as legislating voluntarist (even hyper-voluntarist) politics where subversive gender identities could be fabricated and reshaped at will; where subjects could deliberately make ‘gender trouble’. Paradoxically, other argued that performativity was a form of determinism where, depressingly, subjects were inextricably locked into oppressive relations of power but unable to change them. Contemplating this paradox Julia Walker comments that Butler’s theory ‘appears to be premised upon a contradictory model of agency’. On the one hand, it suggests a limited, discursively constituted subject, while on the other; it implies ‘a voluntarist subject capable of exerting a parodistic will’ (Lloyd, 2007, 57).

Butler asserts that “The controversy over the meaning of construction appears to founder on the conventional philosophical polarity between free will and determinism” Agency is a complex term with a long history (*Gender Trouble*, 12).

In Lloyd’s view, agency has a long history:

Historically and culturally dominant idea of agency is the opposition of freedom to power....Historically, of course, these attributes of agency were seen to accrue to men only (or rather to men of a certain kind). Feminists, nevertheless, appropriated this conception (sometimes in partially revised form) for themselves. They argued strongly for women to be recognized as agents capable of acting on and thus transforming the world (Lloyd, 2005, 92).

Butler also tends to locate “agency in resistance, in the “possibility of a variations of repetitions” of those various sustained social performances which constitute our identities” (Webster, 2000, 11). Unlike De Beauvoir who believes that “agency is clearly a capacity of the subject, for

Butler it is an effect of the subject. That is to say, it is not, for Butler, a quality or attribute which subjects somehow possess and deliberately exercise, but rather is an effect of the very processes through which they are constituted as subjects.... Insofar Butler also emphasizes the sense in which there can be no separation of the 'doer' from the 'deed'. The 'doer' for Butler, is always constituted in and through the 'deed'" (Webster, 2000, 12).

Subjectivity

The work of Butler raises important questions about subjectivity, and calls for a re-conception of the subject as unstable. "This instability is the result of the disruption of the sequence of desire following from gender, following from sex....Butler argues that the only way for the subject to exercise agency is through the variance of performance within constituting discourses and the occupation of multiple roles. Though Butler insists on the agency of the destabilized subject, she has never explained precisely how this agency is possible to the satisfaction of her critics" (Whitaker, 2007, 4).

Results

This study focuses on the impressive subversive characters of Caryl Churchill's three plays. However, before concentrating on these characters, the plays are introduced briefly. The first selected play, *Vinegar Tom* is written for Monstrous Regiment, a theatre company that focuses on issues related to women and feminism. Regarding *Vinegar Tom* the company initiated the idea for a play about witchcraft. Churchill scrutinized the interaction of witches with gender issues and socio-economic conditions. The play is written in twenty-one short episodes. She focused on "the material conditions of characters' lives [which] are constantly in the foreground functioning as an active antagonist with which all facets of the society struggle" (Merrill, 1987, 76). Churchill dealt with economic inequalities and patriarchal attitudes which work together to concentrate on witches, witchcraft and women as the victims of this notion as well as how Christianity and society confront with them.

Cloud Nine (1979) another Churchill's play and the second play to be analysed in this study was first staged in 1979 by Joint Stock Theatre group. The major theme of the play is "sexual

politics". As stated by Churchill herself the term is implied from the idea that "the starting point for our research was to talk about ourselves and share our very different attitudes and experience" (Churchill, Introduction to *Cloud Nine*). The idea of "sexual politics" caused some writers such as Elizabeth Russell, Phyllis R. Randal and Joanne Klein to concentrate on this notion. Some like Russell to connect it to Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1968) especially when she maintains that "the term "politics" shall refer to power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another" (Millet, 1987, 23).

Top Girls, the third play to be analyzed in this study was also first staged in 1982 by Joint Stock Theatre group. In order to pay more attention to women and their lives, Churchill used a theatrical technique in *Top Girls* through which only females are cast on the stage. This way, Churchill tended to revolutionarily highlight the role of women which was long forgotten throughout the history. She also intended to break the silence of women in drama. The way Churchill employed innovative theatrical devices while working with Joint Stock Theatre Group assisted her to conceptualize the dialogues about women's issues.

In all the above-mentioned plays, Churchill depicted oppressed and powerless women who live in patriarchal societies in which they are placed at a disadvantageous and deprived position. A patriarchal society in this sense can be considered as a male-dominated society that allows the subjugation and oppression of women by men. In such societies, it is a norm to accept the male as more valuable than the female as reflected in the following claim by Zalewski: "what gets associated with men and masculinity is generally given a higher value than things associated with women and femininity" (Zalewski, 2000, 11-12).

Demonstrating these characters Churchill aimed to force the audience to understand female problem. She compelled the audience to take sides with the oppressed women. By illustrating these subjugated characters, Churchill strikes the attention of the audience and make them to criticize the established social and economical norms. However, in researcher's opinion she also illustrates some subversive characters among these oppressed women that although cannot change the present situation, they defy the conventional norms and challenge for their rights. This study places its critical lens on portraying these impressive female characters in Churchill's selected plays.

***Vinegar Tom* and the Stereotypical Witches**

The setting of *Vinegar Tom* is seventeenth century English witchcraft. Five women in the play are accused of witchcraft: Joan, who is an old poor woman; Alice, who has sex outside of marriage; Susan, who attempts birth control; Betty, who does not want to get married; and Ellen, a “cunning woman” who practices healing. Joan and Ellen are hanged, Alice and Susan probably will be, and Betty is tortured until she agrees to get married.

The women then accused of being witches. Indeed, as Churchill asserts, accusing women of being witches “existed in the minds of its persecutors” (Churchill, 1985, 129). These women are “subordinated social groups through stereotypes” (Cassidy, 2002, 4566) and the weakest members of the community.

These working class women are the objects who are not subjects in patriarchal-capitalist social context in which they live. In such a society they cannot live freely as they belong to the “unliveable and uninhabitable” zones of social life (Butler, 1993, 3). Also as according to Butler “subversion must be a cultural practice”(Lloyd, 2007, 54), the unconventional women are culturally subverted. Indeed, according to Showalter these women are dwellers of a place described as “the wild zone”. In patriarchal dominated society, they are regarded as rebellious and unconventional. In this sense, they belong to the “wild zone” proposed by Ardener's “model of women’s culture” (Showalter, 1981, 199). This cultural model for women speaks of “women's culture spatially which stands for an area which is literally no-man's-land, a place forbidden to men.... For some feminist critics the wild zone, or “female space”, must be the address of a genuinely women-centred criticism and theory whose shared project is to make the invisible visible, to make the silent speak” (Showalter, 1981, 201). The working class women who are known as witches are according to Ardener “constitute a muted group, the boundaries of whose culture and reality overlap, but are not wholly contained by, the dominant (male) group... A model of the cultural situation of women is crucial to understanding how they are perceived by the dominant group” (Showalter, 1981,199). The dominated group (patriarchal-capitalist) withdrew and “treated [them] as deviant or simply ignored” (Showalter, 1981, 199) them from society as they entered the wild zone, to a no man’s land in which they can be

unconventional. The following sub-section will discuss the most subversive witch in the play who reflects the above assertion.

The Autonomous Liberated Alice

Alice is the major subversive character of the play who is opposite to all other stereotypical witches. She is a woman who is given voice and agency to re-delineate patriarchal and heterosexual conventional terms more than other stereotypical women. She is according to some feminists like Lisa Cassidy a “self-confident, self-assertive woman [who] is out of step with prevalent gender norms, and a mother who is not unstintingly devoted to her child is likely to be perceived as selfish and face severe social censure” (Cassidy, 2002, 4568).

Although from the beginning Alice searched for freedom and tries to challenge the patriarchal and capitalist notions, she is unable to change the norms. In order to annihilate women’s agencies including Alice’s agency, patriarchal society regarded them as subordinate. Moya Lloyd in *Beyond Identity Politics Feminism, Power & Politics* asserts “Women’s agency is effaced; their negotiation of gendered identity and practices of femininity occluded; and they are presented, instead, as creatures upon which gender stamps its imprint” (Lloyd, 2005,91).

As these statements illustrate, lacking the right to voice and obtain agency make the stereotypical witches to be subordinate. From the beginning, she subversively freed herself from the hegemonic norms and lived according to her own desires. She was not similar to her mother and other silent women who unwillingly surrendered to the patriarchal and capitalist agents. These agents imposed witchery on the stereotypical witches and constituted socially subjugated witchcraft over them. However, Alice did not accept that she is a witch so, from the beginning she has agency. Also, at the end when Alice bravely wishes to be a witch to revenge the patriarchal and capitalist agents who wickedly jailed her is a subversive character who obtains agency and subjectivity as she threatens their power and authorities.

Alice, the revolutionary character, could be the feminist voice in general and Churchill’s voice in particular. She is granted voice, whilst other marginalized groups of stereotypical witches remained muted and submissive. Alice who speaks up is also given agency to challenge about gender

discriminations in the world of patriarchy and capitalism from a subversive view point which is not to be spoken about or represented by the Churchill herself. Alice's agency overtures Churchill's voice. Indeed, Churchill transmits her feminine voice which condemns these two authorities through this subversive character. Alice who has agency is also more impressive for the audience than other silent marginalized groups as opposite to other women she struggled for her rights. Her revolutionary statements at the end of the play could act as a starting point for women's revolution aiming at restricting the patriarchal-capitalist forces by opposing the society's oppressive agents. Here we conclude that Churchill against de Beauvoir believes that women are subjects rather than "Other" with a negative sense. For de Beauvoir "to be the Other is to be the non-subject, the non-person, the non-agent" (Cassidy, 2002, 4564). However, Churchill proves that women can be subject and can have agency. Although the women are regarded as "subordinated, diminished, and belittled" (Cassidy, 2002, 4564) by patriarchal and capitalist agents, some women like Alice struggle the norms of these authorities and demand their rights.

Neglecting Alice as the "Other" lead us to give her subjectivity. Sahih proposes, "The idea that the subject is not a pre-existing, essential entity and that our identities are constructed, means that it is possible for identities to be reconstructed in ways that challenge and subvert existing power structures" (Salih, 2000, 11). Opposite to some other working class objects (women) of the play, Alice is the subject. Her identity as Salih claims is constructed as although she is from working class communities "who are routinely marginalized or objectified may come to see themselves as less worthy or capable human beings whose role is to support, or even service, men...These forms of socialization can prevent women from formulating or embracing any personal system of values. (K Abrams, 1999, 819), her identity is constructed somehow to challenge and subvert the existing power of patriarchal and capitalist agents. In addition, according to Simone de Beauvoir men are subject and women are Other:

He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the "Other," sums up why the self is such an important issue for feminism. To be the Other is to be the non-subject, the non-person, the non-agent—in short, the mere body...and in cultural stereotypes, women's selfhood has been

systematically subordinated, diminished, and belittled, when it has not been outright denied (Cassidy, 2002, 4564).

***Cloud Nine* and Subversive Gender Identity**

Cloud Nine consists of two Acts with different settings: the play's first Act presents an unconventional, white British family. It is unconventional because there are members in the family who are queer, the effects of which remain obvious in their lives as shown in the second Act. On the surface, the family of Act One appear to be very strict and conventional whereas in Act Two the family is anything but traditional and the members of the family are not under the oppressive forces of patriarchy.

In the play there are different kinds of subversive gender identities. For example, a man plays the role of a woman (Betty, the mother of the family, oppressed). A woman plays the role of a man (Edward, the son of the family, oppressed). An adult man plays the role of a child (Clive, the father of the family of Act One, oppressor). A white man plays the role of a black servant (Joshua, the servant of the family, oppressed). A stuffed doll is used to show a baby girl (Victoria, the daughter of the family of Act One, oppressor of Act Two). In this regard, the play could be seen to be the story of marginalized communities who in common sense are considered as abnormal. One of the abnormal subordinate members of family is Betty. In the following sub-section I focus on this most impressive character of the play.

Betty, the Independent Woman

An obvious point in the character of Betty is that she is doubly casted as she is played by an actor in Act One and an actress in Act Two. In Act One Betty, the mother of the family is played by an actor in order to hyperbolize the notion of femininity. In this act during the Victorian period, Betty, the stereotype mother and the angel in the house lives according to her husband's norms and desires. She is silent and remains within the domestic spheres, raising her children under patriarchal forces. The oppression over Betty is showcased in the fact that she was not allowed to live as she likes.

In contrast, Betty in Act Two is played by a woman. She attempts to free herself from traditional norms of domestic sphere and patriarchal agent (Clive) as an oppressor who oppressed her.

Hence, the second act shows how Caryl Churchill's female character tries to overcome patriarchal subjugation. "Women now predominate as the males take a back seat, and the children are by no means silent spectators" (Godiwala, 2004, 15). Hence, the audiences witness Betty who informs her son and daughter that she has left Clive and she has decided to live independently without the presence of her husband. Now she goes against the traditional roles of the angel in the house and values her own needs above her husband's needs. She is no longer Clive's slave and seeks for independence. For example, she tells Edward, "I'm going to leave your father and I think I might need to get a job" (*Plays One* 294). Therefore, she learns to become economically independent in order to live autonomously.

Betty is Butler's subject "the subject that Butler is discussing is very much a subject-in-process. It is never actually completed, rather, the subject is in a state of perpetual constitution.... It is precisely the instability of the subject that generates agency" (Lloyd, 2005,98). Considering Butler's argument that "there need not be a "doer behind the deed," but that the "doer" is variably constructed in and through the deed" (1990, 181), Betty as a constituted and unstable subject is culturally constructed through Clive's normative heterosexuality. As such in Act One this doer is not behind the deed and consequently, the body does not follow the gender, and hence this subject is not stable. For this reason we see the body of a man who plays the role of Betty in Act One. In this act Betty is a subject who does not have agency or free will. However,

Butler contests the claim that having an account of subjects as constituted necessarily gives rise to an account of subject as determined. Insofar as the subject is the site of endless transformation and resignification, and insofar as its constituted character is never fixed but in process, Butler claims that resistance is always possible. Agency is therefore located by Butler in the very instability of the subject (Webster, 2000, 8).

In this sense, in Act Two Betty searches for her freedom and tries to defy the stereotypical representation of woman. In this act her voice moves from silence to speech as she struggles to change patriarchal norms and consequently is given agency. Lloyd believes that "within feminism the dominant way of thinking about agency is where actors are assumed to be independent of the socio-

political world around them and where agency is construed as the capacity both to envisage particular projects and then to implement them according to one's free will" (Lloyd, 2007, 57). Accordingly, Betty in Act Two challenge the hegemonic norms of heterosexuality and concede her subjectivity.

She is also no longer associated with Clive, the symbol of order in her life. This freedom reflects women's ambition to achieve independence. The reason why she leaves Clive is to enable her to live independently without a need for a man and to be her own person. Like the character of Judy in Howard Brenton's political play *Sore Throats* (1986), Betty "has successfully cast off her old life and has discovered herself" (O'Connor, 2005,7). Hence, the role is played by a female actor and now she has subjectivity and "agency which is located by Butler in the very instability of the subject" (Webster, 2000,8) .

Top Girls and Defusing the Oppressive Forces

The main theme in the play revolves around the struggle between the two sisters of the play, one from upper middle class (Marlene), and one from working class (Joyce). It is in Act Two that we are first introduced to Marlene's "ordinary housewife" (Aston) sister, Joyce, and her niece/illegitimate daughter, Angie, who is raised by Joyce. In comparison to Marlene, Joyce and Angie are inferior, poor and belong to the lower class.

From the beginning, Marlene is depicted as a dominant, wealthy, well-known and successful middle class woman in comparison to her sister who is a poor working class woman who has to earn a living by working for others. Tong's statement mirrors the situation between the two sisters when she states that "there is the class of wealthy, property-owning employers; on the other hand, the class of poor, propertyless workers. Whereas the employer lives in luxury, the worker lives in squalor, receiving only a subsistence wage for labouring to exhaustion under inhumane factory conditions" (Tong, 1994, 42).

Tong's claim is evident during Marlene's visit to her family: she shows her wealthy characteristics by bringing gifts, a perfume for her sister and an unfit dress for Angie. In relation to this, the sub-text as Aston asserts is the inability of Angie to become part of Marlene's world: "Angie in her ill-fitting dress reflects her inability to fit into Marlene's life and world... Marlene's

inappropriate present buying demonstrates the middle and working class economic and cultural clashes” (Tong, 1999, 135).

In Act Three, we are exposed to the past and present lives of the two sisters. Their conversation which leads to a quarrel between the two consists of such topics like their parents, Angie and job. It is also through their talk that we begin to understand that they are from a working class family with an alcoholic father and a poor mother. In a conversation between the sisters Marlene blames their father for their mother’s wasted, unhappy life. Joyce responds that their father was equally oppressed as he worked “in the fields like an animal” (Churchill, 1990, 138). This reminds us of Marilyn Frye’s (2008) argument that oppression can be oppressive to both the oppressed and the oppressor. Frye also argues that oppressed people who are faced with oppressed situations every day become insensitive to them, that is, the oppression that they face becomes invisible to them. So, in this context, the father is equally oppressed as the mother.

Marlene could not bear the miserable situation she was in: where both her parents were in an oppressed state. So, after giving birth to an illegitimate child, she gives the baby to her sister and leaves the family. Given such a circumstance, Marlene had to make a choice between business and family. Her choice could be seen as either being typically masculine or typically feminine. In relation to this, she enters the patriarchal society and climb the social ladder.

Marlene’s sister, meanwhile, remained in the same wretched working class situation while raising Marlene’s daughter. The relationship between the two, thus, can be also viewed as a husband-wife relationship, with Marlene dependent on Joyce to take care of the domestic sphere and raising her child.

It must be noted that Joyce censures Marlene for her inconsiderable behaviour towards their parents and wonders how Marlene could leave her own child and angrily says: “you didn’t want to take her with you” (Churchill, 1990, 133).

There is also much to be gleaned from Marlene offer of money to her sister during her visit which Joyce does not accept. This act -offering money reveals the economic disparity between the two sisters and highlights “the relationships between class positions and work” (Ramazanoglu ,1986, 103) in which Marlene is depicted as belonging to a higher class with a better work situation.

Joyce, the Subversive Sister

Although in the beginning of the play Marlene seems to be the subversive character as she has promotion in patriarchal male dominated society, Churchill gives voice and agency to Joyce in order to criticize capitalist society. Joyce resists the oppression forces of Marlene over her by not accepting her policies and her donated money. Joyce can be Churchill's voice as a socialist feminist as she transmits Churchill's critical message. Churchill in the guise of her aggressive character expresses herself. Joyce's critique of Marlene is given agency to challenge about social and economic discriminations in capitalist world.

At first it seems Marlene is more impressive for the audience in comparison to Joyce as opposite to her Marlene is successful in business, dominated, wealthy and reputed woman and she struggles for her rights in a patriarchal and capitalist society, however as the play proceeds, it is obvious that Joyce is more impressive. The character of Joyce shows the ability of Churchill in giving voice, superiority and priority to subverted and muted groups and make them subversive.

Social Construction of Gender through Cross-Gender Casting, Cross-Dressing and Role Reversals

The idea of social construction of gender is taken from Simone de Beauvoir that we are not born women and men but we have to learn how to become women and men by learning what is expected of the role of woman or man in our society. This means that my biological sex as female doesn't automatically determine my identity as a woman, since that is something learned. The importance this has for feminist theory is that it suggests that if patterns of interaction between men and women are learned as a part of learning one's gender identity and they involve women deferring to men and other aspects of male dominance, then this gender inequality is not inevitable, but could be changed by teaching children different ideas about what it is to be a man or woman.

The three selected plays of this study display social construction of gender through theatrical devices such as cross gender casting, cross-dressing and role reversals. In this section, the researcher will concentrate on these theatrical devices, which are related to the construction of gender as a focus of this study. The cross-dressing device demands men to wear women's clothes and women to wear

men's clothes. The cross gender-casting device invites men to play the role of women and women to play the role of the opposite sex in order to dismantle the notions of gender. In the role-reversals device, an actor or an actress plays the role of more than one character.

Butler wants to show that gender construction is not stable. According to her "drag is a way to trouble - subvert- gender norms" (Lloyd, 2007, 55). The technique of drag causes the impersonation of gender, that is, the appearance of a gender is not real, but an illusion. "The drag aspect of the [play] shows that gender isn't natural and naturalized" (Carver, 2007, 4). Hence, a character that appears to be masculine is actually feminine and vice versa (Butler). This technique dismantles the binary oppositions between men and women and emphasizes "the construction of gender" that is, one's gender is not real, but is constructed in special situations.

Drag or cross- dressing is a technique that explains the performativity and unnatural aspects of gender. Gender is performative rather than having a stable identity (Butler, *Gender Trouble*). This is apparent in *Vinegar Tom's* two characters, Kramer and Springer, who are in drag and play cross-gender casting. This technique is also obvious in the characters of Betty and Edward in *Cloud Nine*. Their impersonation reveals that their gender is fictional rather than real.

In an attempt to deploy the notion of gender instability to grapple with the performativity of gender, Salih asserts that "gender is not just a process, but it is a particular type of process, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame" (Salih,2002, 63) making gender identity performative (Salih, 2002, 64). In a similar vein, Butler contends that "gender proves to be performative- that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed...There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expression" that are said to be its results" (*Gender Trouble*, 25).

The above notion of gender performativity is apparent in the three plays where Churchill uses cross gender casting as a theatrical device to deconstruct the conventional norms established in the society. Butler suggests that the:

Impersonation of women implicitly suggests that gender is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real. Her/his performance destabilizes the very distinctions between the

natural and the artificial, depth and surface, inner and outer through which discourse about genders almost always operates (Butler, 1990, 8).

Similarly, Moya Lloyd asserts “One never is one’s gender, but only in a condition of doing it” (Lloyd, 2007, 42). In this regard, an example of gender instability is seen in the outcome of social construction of gender, in the last scene of *Vinegar Tom* whereby Kramer and Springer, two male inquisitors (played by female characters) appear on stage and Betty (played by a man) and Edward (played by a woman) in Act One emerge on stage. The four characters display Butler’s subversive politics. Accordingly, “when Butler advocated a subversive politics predicated upon the parodic (that is, imitative) nature of identity, this was taken (by some) to mean that drag- or, more loosely, dressing up- symbolized subversion per se” (Lloyd, 2007, 55). Kramer and Springer play the roles of the male authors of the book *The Hammer of Witches* as the representatives of strict patriarchies over women. Here, these two characters are played by female actresses because Churchill wants to highlight the fact that the victimized women are condemned by those of their own sex. In the researcher’s opinion, this brings into focus the exploitation of women by both men and other women.

Basically, the above mentioned characters are gender constructions and their gender is not the result of their sex. Here, it is females who are made to play the roles of men, and males play the roles of women effectively showcasing that gender is not the result of sex divisions. So, in their male/female impersonations (see, Godiwala) they do not denote a “stable notion [and] its meaning is as troubled and unfixed as [men consequently] question the primary of identity” (Butler, 1990, 9). In this regard, we once again see the manifestation of Butler’s idea that gender is not a stable construct. In fact, Kramer and Sprenger and Edward played by actresses in male clothing depict an aspect of identity crisis.

In *Vinegar Tom* we also note that the actor who plays the role of Packer, the witch finder representing patriarchy also plays the roles of the unnamed man, Doctor and Bellringer, a local man, who are the other patriarchal agents in the play. Here, too, the notion of performativity is obvious and highlights the notion of gender instability. Similarly, Kramer and Springer are played by the two actresses who played the role of two witches Joan, and Ellen. Another example is when two lower-

class oppressed women also play the roles of two upper-class oppressor women, again suggesting that the gender a woman possesses, does not have a fixed and stable identity.

Rabascall (2000) brings a thorough explanation on various multiple roles playing in the characters of *Top Girls* in order to demonstrate that gender and class are socially constructed. For example, the same actress acts the roles of Lady Nijo and Win. They are shown to have similar characteristics – neither of them think of herself as an independent woman. Although Nijo belonged to the Emperor, she had affairs with two other men. Win also prefers not to get married and spends her time with a married man without the awareness of others as she confesses to her colleagues, “I had to lie down in the back of the car so the neighbours wouldn’t see me go in.” (Churchill, 1990, 103)

The double casting of the Pope and Louise draws our attention to the similarity between them. Both women had to sacrifice their femininity to gain promotion and prosperity. Joan sacrifices her femininity physically and is forced to hide her femininity to be educated and gain promotion to become Pope. On the other hand, Louise sacrifices herself mentally in the patriarchal workplace situation which leaves her without any prospects for promotion.

Both these characters also resemble Marlene as she also had to sacrifice her home and family in order to be successful in a patriarchal society. However unlike Marlene, both women have presumptuous feminine identities which place them as subordinate objects in comparison to men: Joan is stoned to death and Louise cannot gain any promotion in the male dominated workplace.

The waitress in Act Two is a ‘voiceless’ and is waiting for other women to give her orders. Like the witches of *Vinegar Tom*, she is a symbol of oppression of some women over other women. All Marlene’s guests give orders to her and indeed, can be seen as oppressing her as she complies and brings dinner to the guests without any word. On the other hand, Kit who is also from a lower class thinks about the brilliant future of becoming a nuclear physicist. She does not feel humiliated if she is a working class girl but thinks of a promotion and a change of class in her future life.

We also can note some similarities between Angie and Dull Gret who are constructed culturally as lower class women and who played by the same actress. Both characters belong to the working class and have the same origins. Both hate the situation they live in and want to rebel against it. However, they are both unsuccessful.

Gret hates those who killed her children and call them bastards and try to take revenge of them by encouraging other women to follow her in fighting the devils. Angie also hates her mother and wishes to kill her. By attempting to leave Joyce and the gloomy situation of working class people in the countryside, she hopes to live with Marlene in the city and 'defy' her lower class state.

Despite these similarities between Gret and Angie, we also note a contradiction between them. For instance, Gret is, in a way, portrayed as a symbol of femininity who wants to defeat masculinity. So, we see the image of a strong and empowered woman in Gret. On the other hand, Churchill depicts Angie as a clumsy teenager who cannot cope with her situation and searches for a better life but fails in gaining her goal. As she cannot have any protection from either Marlene or Joyce, she feels defenceless. So against Gret, Angie is portrayed as dull, defenceless and oppressed.

In order to show the similarities among characters with different social classes, Churchill uses the same actress to play the roles of Joyce (a working class woman), Mrs. Kidd (the dependent middle class woman) and Isabella Bird (the nineteenth century independent upper class traveller). Like Mrs. Kidd, Joyce is a socially dependent woman. Mrs. Kidd is dependent on her husband as a patriarchal agent and the dominator of women while Joyce is dependent on the upper class people for work and money. On the other hand, Marlene like Isabella is an upper-middle class independent wealthy woman who is not dominated by any forms of patriarchy; instead, it is they who impose their own form of "patriarchy" over men and other women. This also highlights the main contradictions between the two sisters that is, Joyce and Marlene.

According to Rabascal another trebling can be found in the case of the characters of Patient Griselda, Nell and Jeanine. Again, "we witness a variety of types: Patient Griselda also suffered a slave-like treatment on the hands of her husband, who made her believe he had deprived her of her sons just for the sake of exerting oppression over her. Nell, on the other hand, works as a contraposition to the previous character, being another of the women executives we come across in the play, and behaving in quite a bold way. Finally, Jeanine is a woman who embodies the doubt between a professional life and a private life" (Rabascal, 2000, 166).

In researcher's opinion, the reader can associate Churchill's use of this cross gender casting technique, cross-dressing and role reversals to Judith Butler's assertion on the distinction between sex

and gender. To her, gender is a production of cultural construction, not that of sex; thus, capable of being changed. So, it can be interpreted that the characters are the result of gender construction, not based on sexual divisions and thus, is subject to change. Butler explains: “Originally intended to disrupt the biology is destiny formulation, the distinction between sex and gender serves the argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed: hence gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex” (Butler in Kirby, 2006, 22).

In the three selected plays for this study, the researcher explored some subversive characters among other oppressed women that defied the conventional norms and challenged for their rights. The blatant abuse of these women in male dominated societies had resulted in their struggle for equal opportunities as they attempted to improve their positions in the society they lived in.

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