

Reading *Top Girls* by Caryl Churchill as Postmodern text

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Abstract- This paper studies the postmodern elements in *Top Girls*, written by one of the prominent playwrights of postmodern drama, Caryl Churchill. By the close reading of the text, the postmodern aspects such as intertextuality, simulation, tone of irreverence, identity crisis, dominance of power are explored. Furthermore, socialism and the third wave of feminism are other concepts that are highlighted in this paper are popular trends during postmodern era. Foucault's notion of the exercise of power and marginalisation, Baudrillard's ideology on simulation, where he states that the difference between reality and fiction is blurred and Roland Barthes comments on the play of intertextuality are the major elements of this study. Finally, this paper runs through the specific details of the play, which provide the stance for studying postmodern factors and understanding the changes in the postmodern society in terms of equality, the shift in the role of women in capitalist society, and its consequences, dominance, and the play of power politics.

Key words: postmodernism, intertextuality, power, and identity.

INTRODUCTION

Postmodernism still continues to be a popular trend in literature, as features like celebrating fragmentation, intertextuality, digital technology, and questioning the rational explanation for established conventions are widely depicted in many works by writers across the world. One among them is Caryl Churchill, who became prominent in British drama. This paper focuses on exploring the postmodern elements in play and draws upon the ongoing political and social changes happening during the 1970s and 1980s. This paper begins by studying the background of Caryl Churchill and understanding the play's relation to the socio-economic aspects of Britain during the time when the play was written, then moves to the postmodern particulars by providing the stances of Michael Foucault on marginalisation and exercise of power, Jean Baudrillard on the blurred difference between reality and illusion, and Roland Barthes on

intertextuality. Moreover, the third wave of feminism and its impact on women of different classes are also discussed in this study.

The story revolves around Marlene, who got promoted to Managing Director of Top Girls Employment Agency, and her colleagues' reactions to her promotion. Later, it moves on to the conflict between her sister-Joyce, and Marlene's daughter-Angie. Marlene, Win, and Nell, who are the women executives of the Top Girls Employment Agency, do not fight for equality but try to compete with each other to prove their potential. The play was written in 1979 and performed in 1982, relating to the changes in politics, law, and economy. The play opens with five guests who are historical and fictional personalities who have created an identity for themselves. The collective struggles of women in the past are discussed in the non-linear narration. As the play moves forward, Marlene's past is revealed.

TOP GIRLS IS A PROMINENT PLAY IN BRITISH DRAMA

Churchill is known as a prolific playwright in postmodern drama, with her unique writing style addressing contemporary issues. She experimented with portraying the political scenario after the establishment of Thatcher's government. She depicts women from different parts of society and their struggle to find a place in a competitive world. Through the narration, she projected the disturbed scenario, which is the result of the shift from a socialistic to a capitalistic society. She also tries to provoke the audience to question the ideologies of feminism and express the need for sister solidarity. The chaotic narration with non-linear progression creates a need to understand the personalities of the characters. Through their conversation, it can be observed that Churchill is trying to question social conventions, which is a major element of

postmodernism. The questions are not raised by the characters in the form of dialogue but are posed through the situations and actions of the play. The characters in Act I are women from history and fiction who are given a chance to give their perspective on the roles designated by patriarchal society. The overlapping dialogues, which have become a popular technique in British drama, are used extensively in *Top Girls*. The conflict and disorder in Act I make the audience question the rationality of the play. Almost all the characters appear only once in the play, as there are many characters, and Marlene does not just act as a main character but also a link between all the characters.

IRONY

The ironical aspect of Act I is that the celebration of achievement in the present is accompanied by the sharing of agonising experiences of women in the past. Both of them are presented in the same tone as they are evaluating their lives in a restrictive patriarchal society by embracing and regretting their actions. Especially Griselda, when she says "I do think—I do wonder—it would have been nicer if Walter hadn't had to". Another ironic incident in Act I is that the purpose of the meeting is to celebrate Marlene's success. Instead of celebrating success, they end up discussing their debacles in life. Even though Marlene is the protagonist of the play, the play turns around different characters, and their personalities are reflected through their conversations. The focus lies more on the struggles of unsuccessful people than Marlene. And also, the success of Marlene is showcased in such a way that it looks like it is the result of sacrifices made by her family. She became successful at the expense of her sister and her daughter. Marlene is not able to share her happiness and the result of that success with them. The absence of men in the play makes it incomplete in creating a realistic competitive world that involves everyone, irrespective of their gender.

The women in the office are depicted as successful women for overpowering the men and breaking down the patriarchal dominance. But, they have become successful and have taken over the power and its system, which were already established by men. They have not created anything but replaced men and their ruthless power, which does not bother to take care of

the underprivileged and less capable members of society. Churchill tries to project that the women who are successful are not completely happy because they have to let go of something in order to achieve something else.

DOMINANCE OF POWER POLITICS IN CAPITALIST SOCIETY

Britain was going through major political change in the 1970s with the rise of Margaret Thatcher as a political figure. She became popular for her monetary policies. Thatcher was addressed as 'Maggie' in the play, and she acts as a source of inspiration for Marlene, who defends her policies. Her government implemented policies that put an end to monetary assistance for the less privileged. There is a shift from socialism to capitalism, and Marlene seems to appreciate that, while Joyce opposes it by questioning the faith of Angie, who needs support for survival in the competitive capitalistic world.

On the other hand, in the 1970s, feminists formed pressure groups to support women in creating employment opportunities for them. Foucault states that power exists within the system and not in the individuals who are part of it. In the play, the dominance of power remains the same as men are replaced by women, and the system remains the same. They are following the order of dominance created by men rather than destroying it and creating something new out of it. The exploitative nature of power is carried forward by women as they thrive on the struggles and sacrifices of others. Especially women at the agency are thriving at the loss of others. Marlene made her sister and daughter bear the burden of her success. Nell and Win have become narcissists as they want to focus only on their growth and did not bother to have a humanitarian approach when they heard about Howard's condition.

SMUDGED DISTINCTION BETWEEN REALITY AND FICTION

One of the major features of postmodernism is the blurred difference between fiction and reality. Jean Baudrillard's theory suggests that "we have lost the ability to make sense of the distinction between nature and artifice." He also says that "representation precedes and determines the real". Now in Act I, at the

celebration of Marlene's promotion, the guests are not the people from the present. They are from different places and different timelines. They all have unique life experiences that determine their identity, for some as rebellious and for others as ideal. But the scene is depicted realistically by Churchill as if they have come to a restaurant and are having dinner. The audience are provided with some references to believe that the gathering is realistic, like a female bar attendant serving them.

INTERTEXTUALITY: PRESENTING HISTORICAL, FICTIONAL, AND REAL-LIFE PEOPLE IN THE PLAY

As the play mirrors the societal changes during the 1970s, which also included political changes, there is a representation of the political figure in the play. Margaret Thatcher, who had become prime minister of Britain, is referred to as Maggie by Marlene. The debate between the sisters- Marlene and Joyce revolves around the monetary policies of Thatcher and their impact on the working class and less privileged people.

Saint Joan, a historical figure known for leading the French army during a war, was changed in the way she was portrayed by Churchill to question the conditions imposed by the patriarchy. Isabella Bird, who is known for her travel stories, is another historical figure who shares her travel experiences. Lady Nijo, a courtesan who later turned into a Buddhist nun, also shares her experiences. Dull Gret, who is a fictional figure, features in a surrealistic painting by Brueghel; she tells her adventures of fighting with creatures in hell. Lastly, Griselda, who is known for her patience and the tests put forth by her husband, finally expressed her concern over her husband's action. Through all these stories, Churchill presents the female perspective, which has been ignored in the past.

MULTIPLE IDEOLOGIES OF FEMINISM

Feminism is the major theme in this play. But the focus lies on the modern perspective of the role of women. Through play, Churchill poses many questions regarding the definition of success for women. All the places presented in the play—the restaurant, Top Girls Employment Agency, and Joyce's kitchen and

backyard—are dominated by women. There is an absence of male characters on the stage to show that women have successfully broken the glass ceiling. But the play also depicts the complexity and contradictory opinions on feminism. Women from the past and present are given a voice to express their true feelings and opinions. Women in the office discuss their work and the need to make their presence known. Different types of perceptions of women are presented through different characters in their conversations at the employment agency. Women at Top Girls Employment Agency, in a male-dominated world, are portrayed as ambitious, skilled, and successful women. On the other hand, naive and fragile women who could not withstand the competition are presented in Joyce's house, a conventionally designated place for women.

The political policies of the 1970s brought a sense of independence for women. The Women's Liberation Movement was widely spread throughout Britain during this time focusing on raising awareness for women regarding their rights. The publication of Kate Millet's *sexual politics* and Eva Figes's *patriarchal attitudes* had an impact on raising female consciousness.

On the surface, the women in the employment agency sound confident and successful, but through their conversations during interviews, it is revealed that their employment opportunities are limited to women. Jeanine and Louise had to compromise on their job roles as one was offered with less pay than what she was already receiving and the other had to settle for something that the company offered. Angie became the victim of Marlene's success. Through this play, Churchill provokes and questions the true meaning of success for women and seeks a unifying definition of feminism for modern women.

CONCLUSION

Through the play *Top Girls*, Churchill raises several questions addressing the changes that are taking place during the 1970s in Britain. As one of the major playwrights of postmodern drama, she proved her stance through her writings by provoking her audience. Her narrative and character progression shows her as a genuine postmodern writer. The play carries postmodern elements from the very beginning to the end. Though feminism is the major theme of the

play, a lot of other aspects also stand out, including the dominance of power, the change from a socialist to a capitalist economy and its consequences, the impact of competition in a capitalistic society on individuals, and the blurred difference between reality and fiction. Hence, the play proves to be a postmodern text that raises several questions about the fragmented contemporary society of Britain during the 1970s and its impact on the later generation.

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