



EVOLUTION OF CARYL CHURCHILL AS A TRENDSETTING FEMINIST DRAMATIST

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Abstract:

Caryl Churchill was born on September 3, 1938 to Robert Churchill, apolitical cartoonist and Jan, a model and film actress. Hence, Caryl had a fair understanding of dramatic feelings and socio political scenario. Churchill, Caryl once said, "Cartoons are really so much like plays,"... "an image with somebody saying something. I grew up with his cartoons of the war of Goebbels and Mussolini." However, at the time of her birth no one could actually foretell how amazingly the child was going to revolutionize the world of theatre with her radical perspectives and projections in her literary work. From 1948 to 1955, Caryl lived with her parents in Canada which was quite a progressive society, so she developed her own exclusive ideas about women existence. She progressed confidently into the jurisdictions of theatre, challenging its limits by employing its own vivacity against the obsolete theatrical conventions. She graduated from Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford University in 1957, she developed a strong sense of drama. Deeply influenced by the dramatic artworks of Samuel Buckett, John Osborne and T.S. Eliot, she started writing short plays. With Churchill, as critic Benedict Nightingale once commented, "We can no longer patronise women playwrights as peripheral."

Key Words: Socio Political, Progressive Society and Obsolete Theatrical Conventions

Introduction:

Churchill, Caryl was married to a struggling lawyer in London, which caused an undue financial pressure on her. Pursuing her writing career in the midst of financial issues helped Caryl Churchill to understand and project the first hand economical subjugation experienced by women in the patriarchal society. Caryl Churchill, Interview in Ms., May 1982 "One of the things I wanted very much to do, in *Cloud Nine* . . . was to write a play about sexual politics that would not just be a woman's thing. I felt there were quite a few women's groups doing plays from that point of view. And gay groups. . . . There was nothing that also involved straight men. Max [Stafford Clark], the director, even said, at the beginning "Well shouldn't you perhaps be doing this with a woman director?" He didn't see that it was his subject as well.

Child birth and rearing is always expected to be solely a women's job as a result unimaginable sacrifices are expected from her in due course of life. Well! Caryl Churchill was also not an exception. The pain of giving birth to a child is not unknown to anyone on the face of the Earth, however the pain of successive miscarriages adds more to the already ongoing torment. Caryl Churchill had to go through successive miscarriage and could easily share the real physio-psychological agony endured by women in that situation. In such phases of life women usually turn oblivious to their individual aspirations. So, her readers can very well connect to the challenges faced by women to keep their aspirations up and going when her ability to give birth to a child is doubted. During, 1963-69, she became a proud mother of three sons. After proving her ability to give birth to three sons, it was her turn to prove that she was a good mother. Hence, she found it very tough to pursue her writing career even when it was at the most crucial and demanding stage. The most important question was lurking over her head- What is really more important – to be a mother or to pursue her career?

In most of the segments of society across the globe, the job of child rearing compulsorily falls upon the female partner, hence the women goes through the pains, sacrifices and adjustments in giving birth and rearing the kids. Caryl Churchill was very concerned with such agonized status of women in conventional framework of social order. Hence, her mind was wedged between two claims – one of motherhood and another of her dramatic art. Women have to keep herself in restraint about her desires and aspirations since the primary concern narrows down to giving birth and rearing a child. Though she hired a nanny to look after her kids and tried to accommodate with her writing career, but every time she sat for her writing work, the question of not being a good mother used to haunt her. Most of the women in almost all of the branches of the society struggle with their conscience every time they try to share their motherhood time with any of their ambitions.

Caryl Churchill's Evolution as a successful Dramatist:

In an interview, Caryl Churchill quoted, "I was fed up with the situation I found myself in in the 1960's,... "I didn't like being a barrister's wife and going out to dinner with other professional people and dealing with middle class life. It seemed claustrophobic. Having started off with undefined idealistic assumptions about the kind of life we could lead, we had drifted into something quite conventional and middle

class and boring. By the mid-1960's, I had this gloomy feeling that when the Revolution came I would be swept away."

In 1972, Caryl Churchill finally joined, "The Royal Court Theatre" – a heaven for aspiring playwrights since 1956. For sure, it was not an easy journey to The Royal Court for Caryl Churchill, as being a female she was tested and subjugated at every stage of life. Hence, she took her long detour- reroute which none of her male colleagues had to as they shared the superior sex in the society.

Churchill explained, "You don't collaborate on writing the play,"... "you still go away and write it yourself. . . . What's different is that you've had a period of researching something together, not just information, but your attitudes to it, and possible ways of showing things."

Just like any women in the society, Churchill was actually trying to balance a more challenging life than she could ever acknowledge for herself. The myriad bottlenecks conditioned Churchill's imagination which was a continual challenge to the conventional theatrical stereotypes. The types of themes she dealt with were somehow the reflection of the experiences she experienced through different stages of life. The different theatrical forms fascinated her as much as her insurgent themes and questions on the frameworks of society. After a long juggling with her responsibilities and aspirations, Caryl Churchill moved to South Africa to receive first-hand experience of a free society.

English society was still not free of the dogmas of conservatism about sex and premarital sex relations; hence the image of women was always at stake. However, in due course of time there were considerable changes in the English society as sexual relations were no more a public affair to be talked about and women felt comparatively released and their sexual relationships were nothing to do with their social image. In her play, *Vinegar Tom* set in 17th century England, Churchill has appealingly expressed the female subjugation in a patriarchal framework where being oneself by a woman is considered as a heinous crime consequently earning titles like witches and whore for such women who try to live life on their own conditions. In this play four women are accused of being witches who are not at all witches in real life but chose to pursue their own instincts.

"In *Vinegar Tom*, Churchill attempts to not only deconstruct the subjugation of women, especially with respect of class issues, but also create a psychological realism and multiple subjectivities for her female characters. One of the ways she does this is through the structural manipulation of time frames." She recognizes the structuring of time as a symbolic social act, where the perpetuation of linearity and causality mystifies the authorship of history and gender. This manipulation serves to alienate the spectator." (Khozaei, *Gender Politics and Deconstruction of Patriarchy in Caryl Churchill's Selected Plays*, Pg.575)

In *Top Girls*, Caryl Churchill deals with different obstacles women need to come over in order to realize her fate. In this play famous strong women personalities from history and fiction come together to vent out the myriad of tormenting experiences in the course of their lives. The character, Lady Nijo stands of every woman in the patriarchal society who tries to reach out the powerful males for some help and the aftermath. When Nijo visited the emperor of Japan in hope of some help she was raped by him. Lady Nijo also talks about the indecent behaviour of the emperor during a festival when he allowed his assistants to beat her and his other concubines. However, she churns out a plan to beat him while he was alone in his bedroom with a stick until he learnt that he must never allow anyone to hurt any woman again. "And I hit him with a stick. Yes, I hit him with a stick." - Lady Nijo, Act 1, p. 27

Joan had to hide her existence as a woman just to achieve what she could have never achieved as a woman in her career. She disguised herself as a man and became the Pope but only to be beaten to death when she delivered a baby in the public and her true identity as a woman was exposed. "I thought God would speak to me directly. But of course he knew I was a woman." - Joan, Act 1, p. 14

Griselda's futile efforts to prove her chastity to her husband costed her life of her two innocent children. Caryl Churchill herself had experienced the pain of successive miscarriage so the depiction of a mother's loss is well justified by the writer. Marlene had to give up on her child in order to achieve the success she deserved in her professional life. Knowing to Marlene's sacrifice on personal front reminds us of the struggle Caryl Churchill went through in order to pursue her career as a playwright.

"Harry: I supposed getting married wouldn't be any worse than killing myself." Caryl Churchill, *Cloud*

"Martin: Yes, I'd like to go home and do some work. I'm writing a novel about women from the women's point of view." Caryl Churchill, *Cloud* 9

Churchill's approach has unanimously accepted as dazzling as to stun the world by most of her critics as she always has something new to offer, the new ways of telling and dramatizing the conditions and situations of troubled and subjugated women who have been socially, economically and culturally repressed in most of the segments of the society. Ibid P.17, "Her work to date shows an active progression from the radio plays' examination of individual dilemmas in a societal context, through disrupting unity of the patriarchal aesthetic vision and developing a socialistic-feminist analytic approach in the television and early stage plays, to creating alternative theatre conventions that challenge traditional ways of situating the self in relation to play's formal and thematic presence."

Conclusion:

This was Caryl Churchill who started her dramatic career with a view point, “Playwrights don’t give answers they ask questions” and turned out to be a trend setter as an outstanding feminist dramatist with beautiful hues of her own experiences in her writings. By 1980 Churchill achieved the height of success rare to achieve by any woman playwright in such a short span of time as women playwrights have to take a longer route with various bottlenecks on the name of responsibilities they need to carry only because they are women. She changed the fate of theatre through her insistent recreation of the relationships between social and theatrical roles and gender” Ipid P.17. John A. Price, ‘The Language of Caryl Churchill’, In [www.Womenwriters.net / editorials/pricedl.html](http://www.Womenwriters.net/editorials/pricedl.html), “Feminist critics from area as diverse as socialist feminism, materialistic feminism and cultural feminism have claimed Caryl Churchill as a representative”

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