

A Marxist Feminist Interpretation of Caryl Churchill's Top Girl

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ABSTRACT: Caryl Churchill is a representative figure of contemporary British feminist playwright, whose works have always focused on the dilemmas faced by modern women. As her most representative play, *Top Girls* portrays female characters from different periods and shows the suffering of women in the course of history including in family, economy and family. Marxist feminism is a branch of feminist literary critical theory that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, emphasizing that capitalist private ownership is the root of inequality between men and women in all aspects. This thesis applies the theory of Marxist feminism to interpret the oppression suffered by women in *Top Girls* from three dimensions — domestic environment, labor market, and patriarchal education, which provides readers with a new perspective to explore the feminism embodied in the play.

Keywords: *Top Girls*; Caryl Churchill; Marxist feminism; capitalist ownership; patriarchal society

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Introduction

With the wave of feminism, Caryl Churchill and her masterpiece *Top Girls* have received increasingly attention. This part will present some basic information about Caryl Churchill, *Top Girls* and the theory of Marxist Feminism.

1 Caryl Churchill and Top Girls

It is not hard to see that British theater has long been monopolized by men. However Caryl Churchill, a representative of contemporary British feminist playwrights, has made it possible for the work of female dramatists to receive equal attention. She has been hailed as the most influential female playwright in contemporary theater and won the Obie Awards and the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize for several times.

Caryl Churchill was born in London in September 1938. She attended Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, and since then has demonstrated a great passion for playwriting. In 1958, she published her first one-act play *Downstairs* (1958). After graduation, Caryl Churchill went on to publish several excellent plays, including *Vinegar Tom* (1976), *Cloud Nine* (1979), *Top Girls* (1982) and *This is a Chair* (1999). Her plays are skillfully written in a distinctly postmodernist style. Not only that, almost all of her plays are concerned with caring for women and reflecting on patriarchal society, showing her strong sense of social responsibility. *Top Girls*, one of Caryl Churchill's masterpieces, was written in 1980 and premiered at the Theatre Royal in London in August 1982, and it won the Obie Award the following year. The play quickly became a classic of female play because of its prominent feminism theme.

Top Girls focuses on a modern woman Marlene who hosts a dinner party to celebrate her promotion to the director of the "Top Girls' Employment Agency". She invites five other women, from different periods of history and with different cultural backgrounds. While at the party they share their experiences as women and gain empathy, revealing the suffering of women in the course of history. The rest of the play is about Marlene's plight as a modern woman in the workplace as well as in her family life. *Top Girls* was written in the 1980s, at a time when feminist and Marxist thought was flourishing. Caryl Churchill boldly portrays several distinct and representative female characters in this play and uses them to express her views on Marxist feminism. As a result, the play is one of the greatest feminism plays of the 20th century, and the only one by a female playwright to be included in *Landmarks of Contemporary British Drama* (1986).

2 Marxist Feminism

As one of the major branches of feminist criticism, Marxist feminism emerged in the second wave of Women's Movement in 1960s and 1970s. During that period, feminists turned to Marxism as they tried to find the root cause of the inequality women suffered. Marxist feminism inherits the Marxist view of women and they regard the capitalist system as the source of women's oppression. In other words, gender inequality is derived from class inequality. The capitalist mode of production gives more power to men, leaving women in a subordinate position in politics, economics, and ideology. Therefore, the elimination of private ownership and patriarchal society is the ultimate path to the liberation of women.

However, some Marxist feminists have continued to reflect on and add to the theory. They point out the inadequacy of attributing female oppression to private ownership alone, which ignores male oppression of women. Thus, Marxist feminists argue that the oppression of women is not only due to capitalism and must be examined in depth from the perspective of patriarchal society and gender. Based on this, many Marxist feminists have expressed their specific views. Juliet Mitchell argues that patriarchal society and capitalist system are equally crucial causes of inequality between men and women in her "Women: the Longest Revolution" (67). One of the most recognizable contemporary American Marxist feminists is Nancy Hartsock, who is known for her unique and committed Marxist vision of women. She argues that "contemporary Marxist feminists should develop Marxism from the perspective of feminism as feminism should be developed and studied from the perspective of Marxism" (Tian Qingmin, 19).

Marxist feminism skillfully combines class analysis and gender analysis, broadening the perspective of feminist studies and pointing out a new direction for feminist criticism. Caryl Churchill expresses her Marxist view of feminism with the experiences of female characters in *Top Girls*. Therefore, this paper will use the method of close reading to interpret the Marxist feminism in the play.

2.1 Literature Review

Since its publication in the 1980s, *Top Girls* has been hotly debated in the international academic community mainly from three perspectives ---- theatrical technique, feminist themes and social significance.

Churchill used many innovative techniques in *Top Girls*, such as time-traveling gatherings, a mix of real and unreal characters, and her original "overlapping dialogue" (Bi Fengshan, 95). As a result, many scholars have analyzed its theatrical techniques. Kim Solga points out that the use of the Brechtian way of alienating elements, the out-of-sequence plotline, and the character doubling contribute to the "overall clash-of-civilizations feel" (300). Kritzer analyzes several techniques that stand out in *Top Girls* and argues that "juxtaposition, rather than integration, of related episodes, overlapping of dialogue and action, as well as the time shifts and visual paradoxes for which Churchill has become known, give the stage plays their complexity" (130).

As an outstanding feminist play, feminist studies of *Top Girls* at home and abroad are manifold. In his "Churchill the Playwright", Tracy Davis attributes the success of the play to its portrayal of the plight of contemporary women and the insight about female power with the living pressure (271). Jenny M. Djundjung in "Feminist Perspective of Cross-Gender Power Relation in Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*" claims that the female characters in *Top Girls* "all have experience dealing with the misery of living in a patriarchal society and are victimized" and further discusses unequal relations between men and women (165). The same feminist themes have received the most attention from domestic scholars. According to Yang Jianmei, Churchill reflects the whole history of women by portraying the various experiences of women in different periods, revealing the repressions and restrictions that women have long suffered in the male-dominated society and the living conditions of women nowadays (15). Fu Jun argues that *Top Girls* applies Brechtian dramatic techniques to express the author's own socialist view of women (57).

Caryl Churchill's play has always focused on social issues and has presented many contradictions existing in the society. Zahra Ravari in "Investigating Voice and Agency in Caryl Churchill's Selected Plays" views *Top Girls* as a play that describes social class conflicts and reveals "how middle class women oppress working class ones" (410). Elaine Aston analyzes the character Angie who "highlights the gap between Churchill's socialist-feminist commitment and the new feminism" (24). Similarly, Chinese scholar Fu Jun argues that *Top Girls* convey Churchill's socialist view of women that focuses on the disadvantaged women (57).

All in all, Top Girls are increasingly being discussed both at home and abroad. This essay will analyze the plot of Top Girls based on Marxist feminism theory.

3 The Oppression Suffered by Women in Top Girls

This chapter will deconstruct the oppression of the female characters in Top Girls from three perspectives: family, workplace, and education.

3.1 Domestic Environment

In the first act, six women share their experiences at the feast, with domestic life making up a large part of the story. Of the six characters, Lady Nijo and Griselda are the most prominently oppressed in their family lives.

Lady Nijo is a Japanese woman who, as the Emperor's courtesan, receives none of the warmth of her family or the Emperor's respect. She was raised by her father to be able to dedicate herself to the Emperor when she grew up. However, when the Emperor got tired of her, he offered her to his brother, treating her as an object rather than a person. Nijo had four children, but they either died or were raised by others, while the fathers were so indifferent to the deaths of their children that Nijo herself was numb by the time the fourth child died, and she said "I didn't want to see anyone, I stayed alone in the hills. It was a boy again, my third son. But oddly enough I felt nothing for him" (124). These words show that the oppression that Nijo has suffered in her family life has caused her to lose the feelings that normal people should have, even for her own children. As a result, she eventually turns to religion and like she says, "Religion is a kind of nothing and I dedicated what was left of me to nothing" (107). The indifference and oppression she suffers in her domestic environment has led her to seek solace only in her religious beliefs.

Griselda is a wife who is completely submissive to her husband, and her story shows the remarkable inequality between men and women in old-world marital relationships. In her opinion, "of course a wife must obey her husband. And of course I must obey the Marquis" (129). Marxist feminists believe that women have long been in a subordinate position in marriage and Griselda is the best example of such a woman, which is the result of both class and gender conflicts.

3.2 Labor Market

The plot of Top Girls revolves around Marlene's promotion, while behind her success lies the discrimination women suffer in the labor market and the sacrifices they have to make. The second act of the play reveals to the audience Marlene's family relationships, as she is successful in her career at "Top Girls' Employment Agency", but has left her daughter with her sister and does not care for her family at all. When her daughter came to visit her, she just kept asking "what bus are you going back on?", and she did not want to spend time with her daughter and said "I haven't got a spare bed" (183). According to her sister, Marlene does not know what her daughter is like because she never comes and sees her (205). At the same time, due to the absence of her mother while growing up, her daughter Angie's personality has become distorted and she repeatedly tells her friends "I'm going to kill my mother and you're going to watch" (146). All of this have proved that Marlene has completely sacrificed her family life in order to achieve professional success, which leads to the paradox of women's dual responsibilities in modern society ---- traditional family responsibilities and independent workplace responsibilities. Ultimately, the power that Marlene has gained in the workplace has only been gained by mimicking powerful men, that is, by neglecting their own family responsibilities.

The famous Marxist Feminist Mitchell argues in "Women: the Longest Revolution" that the economic element is the most fundamental one in any emancipation movement, and she therefore emphasizes the importance for women to have full access to the labor market (34). However, Marlene's experience as a "powerful woman" shows the audience clearly the price women have to pay to enter the workplace. The fact that society has long placed family responsibilities on women as a matter of course is actually an implicit oppression that women suffer in the labor market.

As Marxist feminism points out, it is necessary for women to take their place in the job market. But if every woman had to be like Marlene, then this inequality could never be eliminated.

3.3 Patriarchal Education

In order to enter the job market, educational situation is an important factor. As

Daniel Defoe says, "A women well bred and well taught, furnished with the additional accomplishments of knowledge and behavior, is a creature without comparison" (98). Inequality in educational resources due to gender and class is one of the main focuses of Marxist feminist concerns. However, almost all female characters in *Top Girls* have had a rocky educational experience, with Pope Joan and Isabella being the most typical.

Joan is a pope disguised as a man between 854-856. In those days, women were not allowed to study and even "women weren't allowed in the library" (109). But Joan is a very intelligent girl who "wanted to study in Athens" (109). Also it turns out that there is no actual difference in intelligence between boys and girls, so it is not reasonable to disallow girls to learn. Joan even knows more than her male friend who is four years older. As Joan herself says, "I thought I knew more science than he did and almost as much philosophy" (109). In order to receive the equal education, Joan left her home disguised as a boy and devoted her whole life to study. She said "First I decided to stay a man. I was used to it. And I wanted to devote my life to learning" (114). Eventually, due to her outstanding performance, she was elected as a pope. Her experience actually is a strong proof of the fact that given the equal opportunity, what a person can accomplish is independent of gender. However, all Joan's success is based on her fake identity as a male, which gives more emphasis on the importance of education.

In *Top Girls*, another example of a woman not being properly educated because of her gender is Isabella, an obedient wife. Isabella was raised to accept the educational stereotype that women must be feminine and fulfill socially mandated responsibilities. Through her conversation, Isabella mentions her father many times. "I certainly never saw my father drunk. He was a clergyman" (100). "But my father was the mainspring of my life and when he died I was so grieved" (102). She lives in an educational environment controlled by the patriarchy and has lost the ability to think independently. In this case, "father" goes beyond the sense of blood, instead, it represents the patriarchal power and male sovereignty that permeate the educational system. However, all human beings are born equal and should have the right to think independently. Deep in her selfhood, Isabella is not willing to be the obedient daughter and wife, despite the way she was raised and educated.

All characters are effected by patriarchal education during their construction of female identity. At the same time, Churchill makes it clear that education will always play an important role in the course of equality between men and women.

4 Conclusion

As Caryl Churchill's masterpiece, *Top Girls* manifests various oppression suffered by women. Churchill hits the nail on the head by showing the dilemmas women have faced through the ages through the experiences of the characters in *Top Girls*. In domestic life, women are often placed in a subordinate position and are not given the respect they deserve. Secondly, given the same objective conditions, women always put in more efforts in the workplace. Not only that, the patriarchal education system prevents women from having equal access to education. In conclude, the social problems that Churchill identifies in the play are of universal value and are what Marxist feminist criticism seeks to emphasize.

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