

## Mapping Female identity in *Top Girls* by Caryl Churchill

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### Abstract

Caryl Churchill, a celebrated writer, gave cutting edge to theatre with thought-provoking content and innovative structures. In *Top Girls* Churchill projects, a career driven woman, Marlene who tries to dismantle the oppressive system and reflects upon broader societal dynamics. The play, *Top Girls* is a statement of how women have been on a receiving platform across ages. History, literature and Art stand witness to how women have been constrained by men. Caryl Churchill explores the path of women's development in different historical periods. Churchill is a writer with change who pens from the real experiences and has the courage to vividly express the same in truest colours. The play shows how women strive hard to claim their own identity. The struggle to break the chains of subjugation and exploitation can be traced back to ancient times. Society believes that women are confined to domestic chores or they are born only to obey their husbands and never to question their authority. In the play, the protagonist Marlene has changed the viewpoint of society by working hard and became a successful woman. Marlene is an ambitious woman who defines and assert their identity. She has the urge to live a life of purpose which is set by her own self.

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Caryl Churchill objectively presents lives of women from different society, history, literature and art to highlight the fact that patriarchal domination has been a common factor that repress and limit women's growth. Marlene throws a party to celebrate her promotion as Managing Director of Employment Agency and invites women like Isabella Bird, Lady Nijo, Dull Gret, Patient Griselda and Pope Joan, where they share their stories. Distinct perspectives on women are portrayed by various personalities during their interactions at the job agency. Women at *Top Girls* Employment Agency are presented as self-driven, competent, and successful in a society where males predominate. The play depicts in clear light that women are clear sighted and have their own guiding self like men. They do set achievable targets for themselves and strive with unwavering determination to conquer their goals.

The women in this play demonstrated a range of strategies to mitigate the oppression of men and society. Churchill believes that British women's life can never be easy and happy as she is either stuck in the role of wife/mother or has to sacrifice something in order to get success. The play's gender relations are clarified from the thought provoking discussion. Like Joyce, the other five legendary historic figures which includes Pope Joan, who became pregnant by an unknown man but disguised herself as a man to have been the Pope between 854-856; Isabella bird, (1831- 1904) travelled extensively between the ages of 40 and 70; Dull Grit, subject of the Brueghel painting; Lady Nijo (b 1258), an Emperor's courtesan and later a Buddhist nun who travelled on foot through Japan because of her father's command; and patient Griselda, the obedient wife whose story is told by Chaucer in "The clerk's Tale" of the Canterbury Tales, all of them battled against the male dominated culture to succeed in their different sectors. But ultimately they were unable to find fulfilment and delight which led to unhappiness in their lives, as indicated by the dialogues in the play.

Pope Joan, for instance, desired to further her education but was denied access because she was a female. As a result, she dressed like a man and abandoned her identity in order to pursue her education. Such instances break the myth that education and intellect are not men's prerogative only. Joan becomes the Pope but gender bias traps women - whether they rebel against the system or try to work within it. Nijo recounts her life at court, where she was expected to be sexually available to the emperor and nobles. When she loses favours of the King, she embarked on a pilgrimage, which too has been asked to her by her father. This is how men has been the most important figure in their lives who decides the trajectory of their lives even when they are dead. In Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* Portia has to follow what her late father has decided for her. Another guest, Gret is mostly silent but bursts into aggressive monologues. She has suppressed rage toward men in her life, which suggests that sometimes the only response to endless suffering is violence and rebellion.

Historically, women's voices have been faded out and so during the play they are desperate to tell their stories because they have never been heard before. The proposition that women live an unheard life is still prevalent everywhere though it has decreased by some degree. The women at the party shares their experiences and questions patriarchal structures. The play opens with dinner party, where women were sharing their stories. Marlene has been the connector for all women who have been deliberately called from different genres, like literature, art, history etc. Women in 18th century were oppressed and denied their potential in

the society, they were treated as subordinate beings. In the play, Patient Griselda was one of those polite guest who accepted all forms of harassment from her husband, she defends her husband by saying, "I had to obey him. He wanted me to help prepare his wedding." (Top Girls, P. 26) Pope Joan had to hide her gender to achieve success, and was punished horribly when found out. She moans, "Oh God, why are we all so miserable?" (Top Girls, P. 20) Somewhere deep down her heart Marlene too had made such compromises in her life.

Gender bias is deeply inherent in the world that even the strongest too have to subdue. Physiology of women is such that they are supposed to be nurturing mothers, but Marlene chooses career over motherhood. She is the sole guide for this choice, and Churchill shows how women are criticized when they are indecisive and they are even rebuked for taking strong decisions in their lives. Marlene is the only character who appears in both the dinner party as well as in rest of the play. The play portrays the marginalized women who are repressed, reliant, and denied the opportunity to live free and independent lives. Apart from the challenges faced by various women like Isabella Bird, Jeanine, Lady Nijo, Dull Gret etc. women from the contemporary world are also shown who still are leading a restricted life. When Win interviews a forty-six-year-old woman, Louise tells him that she is taken for granted for salary hikes and other works at Office. She has done everything but couldn't get a chance to go higher in her career and those men whom she has trained have been promoted over her. Louise says, "I've lived for that company, I've given my life really you could say because I haven't had a great deal of social life, I've worked in the evenings." (Top Girls, P.57) This is a kind of human predation where women are dominated by those men who chairs the office and control the trajectory of women's lives.

Jeanine and Louise presents the problem of women and employment when they were interviewed for jobs. Jeanine who is looking for a job that will let her travel, but Marlene has limited her options to non-travel jobs because she is getting married. Marlene shows professionalism in interviewing Lousie and practically guides women for job opportunities, as;

Marlene: Lampshades./ This would be my first choice for you.

Jeanine: Just Lampshades. (Top Girls, P.55)

This shows how women who secure a place for themselves become ignorant even of other women. The play raises the question whether it is possible for women in society to maintain

the balance between successful career and family life as society think women are well suited to satisfy men's lust for sex, giving birth and raising the children. This play is an attempt to show that economic, social and political transformation of women can be attainable reality. In the contemporary literature woman has been depicted in various colours by the writers across the globe. Churchill presents contemporary middle-class society that has different yardsticks to measure man and woman. Her works encompass a galaxy of women characters ranging from docile, submissive, obedient, uneducated to determined, asserting, self-reliant and educated. With the passage of time women have come out of the dark cave of oppression and realized truth of the assertion made by Simone de Beauvoir that, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman." Churchill presents character like Marlene to show that women should adopt independent traits to break gender roles.

Churchill places contemporary struggles in a broader historical context and in last two acts the play throws light on the life of twentieth century women. With the aid of the character of Angie, who demonstrates assertiveness and a refusal to fit in with the social norms, Churchill also demonstrates how girls try to have their say from the very childhood. Like Angie, for example prefer a contemporary life, similar to that of her aunt Marlene, rather than a life similar to Joyce, her mother. She states, "It's where I most want to be in the world." (*Top Girls*, p. 66). Angie's love for her aunt is evident in her statement and she demonstrates her strong will to defy the society norms. Women being aware have started quest for achieving their personal goals which had been otherwise missing in previous ages. By speaking her mind, Angie empowers herself to assert her own agency and challenges the traditional gender roles. Commonly women are limited only to few options and society restrict them like her mother Joyce tries with Angie. This results in creating so much hate that she states in a conversation with her friend Kit that, "I'm going to kill my mother and you're going to watch." (*Top Girls*, p.36). Such kind of verbal aggression was a part of tantrums to scare Kit. The other statements like, "I put on this dress to kill my mother." (*Top Girls*, p.46) It too shows how Angie inherited free spirit from her biological mother, Marlene. It emphasizes the complex nature of history and there is need for feminist and socialist opinions in understanding women's development and experiences.

Patriarchy has proven to be a major obstacle for women in personal and professional lives. Caryl Churchill depicted the unsettling situation which the outcome of society's transition from socialism to capitalism—through the narration. *Top Girls* explores themes of feminism,

identity, authority and power; especially through the lens of main character, Marlene. When Marlene understands that she has paid the price for success in a male dominated corporate world, leading her to question her value and prime concern. The shift challenges the audience to think over again about the societal expectations and the sacrifices often needed to gain success in a male dominated society. Caryl demonstrates successfully and convincingly the sources of traps, and violence awaiting women at various stages of their existence, and also suggests some way, and means of how they can possibly overcome the same through courage, and confidence. Alice Walker also writes in her novel *The Colour Purple* that the most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any. Women have always been presented as dependent on men which they have internalised to a degree that they start believing it as a fact. All the guests in Act I share such traits but its only Marlene and Pope Joan who comes out and stand distinct.

*Top Girls* stands out for its non-traditional structure, overlapping dialogues and usage of language with variations to reflect the gender norms. Language is the most basic and strongest medium for communication and to establish cultural identities and social values. "She's changed the language of theatre. And very few playwrights do that." Mark Ravenhill has aptly summed up how Caryl Churchill skilfully employs dialogues to convey complexity of human lives. The use of language in *Top Girls* is a key tool for challenging traditional gender roles and highlighting the multifaceted nature of women's experiences. The play serves as a significant contribution to feminist literature through nuanced portrayal of women's voices.

Marlene, in the play who proved that her success made her more powerful than Howard. In Past times, men didn't work under women but now the situation has changed. Women are working hard to be free and independent. Howard's wife, Mrs. Kidd, urges Marlene to resign from her job because her husband cannot accept the fact that women hold high position in the workplace but Marlene denies. Then Mrs Kidd accuses her by saying that how can a man work under a female as she says:

Mrs Kidd: "You're one of these ball breakers/ that's what you are. You'll end up"

Marlene: I'm sorry but I do have some work to do

Mrs Kidd: miserable and lonely. You're not natural. (*Top Girls*. P. 65-66)

*Top Girls* is not just a celebration of Marlene's success but a sombre reflection on the contradictions of feminism in a capitalist world. Churchill forces the audience to confront

uncomfortable questions about sacrifice, privilege, and the meaning of empowerment. The play raises many such questions which are related to the political, moral and social issues that provide the thematic core of the play. In the play, Churchill presents other issues like poverty, class distinction but the major focus is on sacrifices gender inequality. Women are shown as adopting masculine traits in order to become competitive and successful like Marlene. The play explores the nature of success of women in the contemporary world, one still run by men, most of whom expect the successful women to follow a male model in economic, social and also in personal ways. Marlene in the play thinks that her family is a burden or an obstacle to be independent and successful women so she chose career life by sacrificing her family life. The issue of Men's control over women which is well presented in the play, and through Marlene it is highlighted that how she controls everyone and became powerful from man like Howard as she has attained higher position in this unforgiving patriarchal society.

In Caryl Churchill's play *Top Girls* Marlene undergoes significant transformation throughout the narrative. In the beginning of the play Marlene is portrayed as a confident, ambitious career woman. She has succeeded in the male dominated corporate world and is celebrating her recent promotion to Managing Director of the Top Girls Employment Agency. Marlene's dedication to her career is evident from the beginning. She is willing to sacrifice personal relationships and even her own happiness to achieve success in her profession. Her ambition drives her to seek power and success though it comes through a series of compromises and adjustments in personal life. There is a cost of her success. She has had to make many sacrifices in her personal life, including leaving her hometown and leaving behind her family, particularly her daughter Angie, in pursuit of her career goals. This decision weighs heavily on her throughout the play. She also feels for her aging parents and later tries even to meet them. Such kind of events shows her tender heart.

Through various encounters with other women, including historical figures in the surreal dinner party scene, Marlene encounters different perspectives on femininity, success and sacrifice. These interactions challenge her own beliefs and values, forcing her to reconsider the choices and the cost of her success. One of the most significant moments of transformation for Marlene occurs when she reunites with her estranged niece, Angie. Marlene is forced to confront the consequences of her past actions and the emotional toll of her ambition on her relationships. This encounter prompts Marlene to reflect on her priorities and reconsider the meaning of success.

Towards the end of the play, Marlene's transformation is not neatly resolved. She is faced with the dilemma of whether to continue pursuing her career at the expense of her personal relationships or to prioritize her family and emotional fulfilment. The ambiguity of her final decision reflects the complexities of balancing ambition and personal fulfilment as a woman in a patriarchal society. Overall, Marlene's transformation in "Top Girls" is a nuanced exploration of the trials faced by women striving for success in a male dominated world. Through her journey, the play raises important questions about the nature of ambition, sacrifice and identity. Each guest represents a different experience of womanhood across time, culture, and class — yet they all share stories of sacrifice, oppression, and survival. The thirst for independence and selfhood too has been stated in the play as each character wants to have a world of their own. Caryl Churchill has presented the way of the present world which tries to chain them in the mould of the previous times which no longer is able to restrict them. The new woman is a liberated soul who have a different perspective which allows them freedom and option to see the world in a different light. The play puts forth the woman protagonist who are repertoire of transitional society. Such women who have thrust for autonomy form part of Caryl's works but she parallel presents those who are somehow confined by ages old social order. The play portrays a time of transition, where women are aware of their rights and freedom.

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