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Gender Politics in Caryl Churchill's Cloud Nine

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to show how Caryl Churchill explores the issue of gender politics in her play Cloud Nine. The paper reads Caryl Churchill's Cloud Nine as a dramatic text and focuses on the playwright's response to the essentialist ideas of gender. One of the key aspects of the paper is the 'social construction of gender', and the process of subjugation and categorization of women within patriarchy. The paper is based on literature survey and analysis of the concerned text in relation to the issue of gender politics.

Key Words: Sex, Gender, Gender Politics, Patriarchy, Patriarchal Society

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“Gender is to be distinguished from essential conceptions of sexual
IDENTITY or
SUBJECTIVITY founded on a natural ‘core’ of biological sex or
the BODY.”

— Peter Brooker

The question of gender has drawn attention of the feminist critiques with the publication of Simon de Bevoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) and her bold assertion that ‘one is not born a woman: but rather becomes one’ (quoted in Freedman, 13-14). This has led feminist critics to a distinction between physiological and social identities of women. The term ‘sex’ came to be understood to refer to the biological body called women; while, ‘gender’ came to be widely recognized as social, cultural and historical construction of the said biological body. Thus, ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ began to be equated respectively with what we commonly understand to be ‘female’ and ‘feminine’. In a nutshell, all the roles and behaviour, being the social constructions based on the biological category of women, have been incorporated within the purview of the term ‘gender’.

Caryl Churchill, a notable British woman dramatist of the late twentieth century, emerged as a leading playwright in the 1980s. Her plays largely focus on social criticism with radically strong views on feminism and gender issues. In her plays Churchill often raises philosophical questions pertaining to contemporary life, most of which are resolutely unanswered. Most importantly, Churchill's plays are theatrical and are product of her experimentation in the theatrical arena. She constantly experiments with dramatic form, which energies



the process of open-ended questioning and leads to the investigation of alternatives. In other words, Caryl Churchill, as a playwright, challenges conventional perceptions and thought patterns, particularly those that relate to woman. In the words of Amelia Howe Kritzer:

“Churchill's plays enlist a wider range of theatre's potential for multiple, diffuse, and paradoxical meanings to confront the audience with deconstructions of artificial unities.” (Kritzer, 130)

Gender politics often find its place in the works of Caryl Churchill. Her plays explore the values set by patriarchal society, and examine gender roles and power relationships in the society; and thereby brings forth such issues which tend to deconstruct traditional ideas of sex and gender. In *Cloud Nine*, a play consisting only of two acts, Caryl Churchill discards the idea of gender essentialism and of stereotypical representation of the same. Side by side in the play, Churchill establishes a parallel between colonial domination and sexual oppression. She does this by deliberately subverting gender and racial stereotypes, and using cross-gender and cross-racial casting.

In *Cloud Nine*, the role of Betty, a compliant house wife, is played by a man in Act I, but by a woman in Act II; Joshua, the black servant, is played by a white; and Edward, the son of the colonial administrator Clive, is played by a woman in Act I and by a physically weak man in Act II. Churchill uses these tropes to unsettle preconceived expectations of the audience as well as to show that gender is an artificial and imposed construct.

The artificial construction of gender within patriarchy also finds its place in the thematic concerns of *Cloud Nine*. In the very opening scene of the play, Clive introduces his family as:



“This is my family...I am a father to my family...My wife is all I dreamt a wife should be. And everything she is she owes me.”
(Churchill, 251).

This suggests the process in which images and ideas of women that circulate in a patriarchal society are shaped by the males. Clive, in this play works as an agent and representative of patriarchy. He provides Edward, his son, the patriarchal ideology by forbidding him to spend much time with women. He rather suggests Edward to be with Harry, a friend of him. Clive also suggests his friend Harry that effeminacy is a contagious disease which is more dangerous than diphtheria. Churchill, in the play, deals ironically with the standpoint of Clive to make it clear that sexual behaviour is a product of acquisition and learning.

On the other hand, Betty, Clive's wife, stands in the play as a stereotypical female figure created by patriarchal values. She admits that “she is a man's creation” and wants to be whatever men want her to be (Churchill, 251). This self denial of Betty is an example of the relatively powerless situation to which women are conditioned to live within patriarchy. The position of Betty is clear when on her complaint Clive pretends to punish Joshua, the black servant, while in reality he simply winks at him (Churchill, 254-55). It is significant to note that Joshua, who has been dominated by Clive all the time; has suddenly become an associate of him to share this secret.

Clive's power to compel Mrs. Saunders to sex with him and his act of shifting the blame upon her while the matter became obvious, is another example of the condition to which women are subjected within patriarchy. The subordinate position of women within patriarchy reminds Churchill of colonization and colonial dominance. She sees both the form of dominion to be



similar and interrelated. In fact, in the play Clive explicitly draws parallels between women and colonized people. In her speech to Mrs. Saunders, Clive says:

“You are dark like this continent (Africa). Mysterious. Treacherous.”

(Churchill, 263)

The above remark of Clive clearly reflects how women have customarily been associated with negative aspects of the world. She is exotic and alien as the Africa; and lacks in logic and enlightenment. Another point that becomes obvious from the above quoted remark of Clive is that Churchill is more concerned with the attributes of women and the construction of her identity within the society rather her body or physiological aspects. Caryl Churchill further makes this clear by representing issues of homosexuality in the play.

The passive homosexual is equally disliked and disrespected within patriarchy as a woman is. The dialogue between Edward and Gerry in Act II Scene III is an indication of this:

GERRY. You're getting like a wife.

EDWARD. I don't mind that.

GERRY. ...Stop it.

EDWARD. Stop what?...Everyone's always tried to stop me being feminine and now you are too... I like cooking. (Churchill, 306)

As it is evident from the above lines, patriarchy takes 'masculinity' as the norm; and anything falling short of this becomes a matter of scorn and contempt. In other words, in whatever form 'femininity' appears, it would be condemned within the patriarchy.

Caryl Churchill criticizes these essentialist notion gender imposed superficially by patriarchy in the play *Cloud Nine*; and she asks her audience to



forsake such unified and coherent viewpoints and to be critical about them. She is very ironic and suspicious about the roles played by various characters in the play which indirectly support patriarchy. She holds such perceptions to be narrow which simplify the complex dynamics of gender politics to its own advantage. In other words, gender roles are imagined and superficially imposed by the agents of patriarchy; and as such they are arbitrary. To make it clearer, Churchill highlights the possibility of multiplicity gendered existence by using cross-cultural and cross-casting devices.

In *Cloud Nine*, Caryl Churchill further breaks linearity of perception of the audience by setting the two acts at two different places and social backgrounds. In the play, Act I is set in British colonial Africa in Victorian times, and Act II is set in a London park in 1979. The complexity is further heightened with the reference at the preface that between the acts only twenty-five years pass for the characters while in reality there is a gap of almost a hundred years. She also makes dialogues of various characters in the play overlap with each other for the same purpose. Caryl Churchill, thus, appeals to her audience to abandon essentialist ideas of 'gender' which has always already been a 'construct' to support patriarchy and its ideology, and to adopt a more complex view of the same. To put it in the words of Janelle Reinelt, Caryl Churchill in *Cloud Nine* "challenges notions of fixed identity and normative sexual identifications."

(Reinelt, 28)



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