

The Portrayal of Female Leadership in Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*

Meram S. S. Mohamad, Ala B. Ahmed

Department of English, College of Education and Languages, Lebanese French University,
Erbil, Kurdistan Region – Iraq

Abstract—This article is an attempt to discuss the notion of feminism in Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* (1982). The plot mainly surrounds the success of women in a society in which they had been considered as the second sex, as described by the French feminist figure Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949). Her theories on feminism and gender roles have been continuously applied to interpreting literary texts. Therefore, this article tries to integrate de Beauvoir's theory on feminism into *Top Girls*. It explores how different generations of women are presented in the play and the way they have struggled with patriarchal rules. Moreover, it tries to explore how the play discusses the themes of; sisterhood, motherhood, abortion, socialism, and capitalism. The article shows how women are perceived in society when they choose a career over motherhood. It discusses the main character's role as she reaches the top of her career, despite all the obstacles she faces as a female in a patriarchal society.

Keywords—Abortion, Leadership, Motherhood, Simone de Beauvoir, Top girls.

I. INTRODUCTION

Top Girls was published in 1982 by Caryl Churchill; it examines the various ways in which women might accomplish social and economic success. It addresses both political and social topics. In 1979, Britain faced a watershed moment, with Margaret Thatcher, a Conservative Party member, becoming the first female Prime Minister. *Top Girls* depicts the chasm between the wealthy and the working class that Thatcher established (Rowbotham and Segal). This article focuses on grasping the basic, initial capacities of an individualistic female playwright. Caryl Lesley Churchill was born on September 3rd, 1938, in England. She deals with feminist issues, sexual politics, and the abuse of power in her plays. Caryl Churchill had an upstanding successful career in theatre. Despite the success of other female playwrights, Churchill and Pam Gems were the only modern female playwrights who received academic recognition (Aston, 2003). Churchill's career had an immense influence on the upcoming female writers and the constant growth of representing feminism on stage. Churchill's work is often described as "feminist" and "socialist," she declares in an interview: "I feel strongly about both and would not be interested in a form of one that did not include the other" (Aston, 2003, p. 18). Churchill in her plays focused on criticizing the prejudice and inequality that were the results of capitalism and patriarchy.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many scholars have previously conducted academic studies on feminist drama. These studies have tackled the role of women with relation to culture, financial status, social lives, and politics. Angela McRobbie article *TOP GIRLS? Young women and the post-feminist sexual contract*, (2007) discusses that governments in progressed countries are dealing with women and gender issues differently. It seems that they give women more freedom and power. Women are confident of their success in capitalist culture. To gain more sexual freedom, and pursue careers. Hence, women would have to sacrifice what have been fought for. Abandoning the fight against traditional male dominance, known as patriarchy, and setting aside the principles and efforts associated with feminism. Fundamentally, it indicates ending to challenge the societal structures and norms that perpetuate male superiority and advocating for gender equality rather than women's rights or feminism. Eventually, the article suggests that this would benefit the governments, corporations, and capitalists, but not women's rights. They intend to make women busy in working on themselves and being perfect consumers, which makes them too busy to challenge the patriarchal rules and male dominance. A thesis by Petra Smazilova *Reflection of Gender and Political Issues in Top Girls and Cloud Nine by Caryl Churchill* (2008) focuses on the basic rights and

conflicts of women. Ravari's and Naidu research, titled *Top Girls: Implications of Predominance, Wealth, and Reputation of Women* (2011) analyzes the roles of women and their independent sources of income is a move toward creating a better life for women. Meanwhile, *Deconstructing Gender Stereotypes in Caryl Churchill's Top Girls* (2019) by Athma Priya argues gender and sexuality in feminist theater. The author explores the theorists that traditionally used these concepts to control both personal behavior and public image. The article showcases how the full female cast pictures women's roles and challenges through history. By staging women's diverse roles and stories, the playwright shows how women argue for their rights and to hold positions of power within the theatre and in society.

There was a transformation on the women's domestic roles; they no longer wanted to be associated with being the ideal wives and mothers. Women wanted to have significant roles in society and to have successful careers. Beside the main character, five female characters are at the dinner party to celebrate Marlene's promotion. The characters are from paintings, literature, and fiction, Erkan (2018) explains that these characters are self-involved and are not particularly listening to each other while speaking: "It points to differences in ideology and practice as well since they come from different ages. Women in the play voice different visions due to their different backgrounds" (p. 723). These six characters may have different ideologies, but they share the same struggles that started in the past and continue into the present. As declared by Erkan (2018) "nothing has changed: The modern women like Marlene try to survive and take their place by challenging the patriarchal system. This time they adopt "the new woman" identity, which is a challenge to the conventional role model of women imposed by patriarchy" (p. 723).

During the dinner party, Marlene refuses to mention anything about her role as a mother or her daughter. She obliged her sister to adopt her daughter because she believes that becoming a mother would keep her away from being a successful working woman. Marlene also had two abortions before giving birth to her daughter. As Djundjung and Yong declare: "For the young Marlene, her pregnancy is a leap backward, because her pregnancy threatens the realization of her future plans and puts her on the brink of repeating her mother's story." (2002, p. 164). Her mother was a victim of her father's abuse; thus, she did not want to repeat the same mistakes. The society views working women differently from housewives, they "risk being reduced to one of two subtypes: homemakers – viewed as warm but incompetent, or female professionals – characterized as competent but cold" (Cuddy et al., 2004, p. 701).

Abortion and motherhood are two intertwined concepts in feminist thought. Abortion is a societal problem, not just a personal one. It has an impact on family and women's healthcare: "Feminists should aim to establish a society in which the problem of abortion would not occur," says Mary Daly, an American radical feminist (Daly as cited in Humm, 2003, p.2). Pregnancy is one of the topics discussed in the feminist movement. The British Women's Liberation Conference in 1970 was founded on the belief that women

have control over their bodies and they worked on "Abortion on Demand" which was a demand of radical feminist groups, despite the health-care system's dismissive attitude, arguing that the number of abortions should be limited. Abortion is linked to economics and women's helplessness; therefore, legalizing it lessens the likelihood of unwanted birth and has an impact on women's involvement in the workforce.

The play attempts to show the struggles and obstacles that women face to become successful. Marlene receives the promotion instead of the male character named Howard, thus he and his wife judge her for focusing on her career instead of carrying the traditional gender role (Lama, 2021). Furthermore, Lama shares the view that Marlene is not the villain of the story, rather it is: "the bourgeois feminist enterprise, which falsely accepts the notion of competition. These women mistakenly believe that the only viable standard for success is the bourgeois concept of glamour, which is linked to power and wealth." (p. 5). Thus, from this quotation, we can understand that the female characters of this play seem to have "shallow" characteristics in that they seek high positions and power and they will achieve it no matter the consequences. This article differs from all the mentioned literature reviews about feminist theatre in general and *Top Girls* by Caryl Churchill specifically, for it focuses on the role of women as leaders and how they would survive the male dominance, patriarchy, and capitalism to reach to the top.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The French feminist Simone de Beauvoir is one of the major philosophical thinkers of second-wave feminism with her most influential book *The Second Sex*. Her ideas have been incorporated into feminist criticism; therefore, this article attempts to apply her theories while analyzing *Top Girls*. The book is a rallying cry for women, explaining how they are often involved in their own subordination. She claims that women have always been treated as the "other" and that women frequently agree to live as dolls rather than to live their lives to its fullest potential. Furthermore, she explains that men have turned women into the "other" for their own economic advantages, which made women dependent on men. Even laws were against women, and they were considered outsiders in every important decision that was made concerning their own private lives and societal issues (de Beauvoir, 1953, p.159).

As a result, de Beauvoir mocks the illusions that keep women passive, as in a romantic love fairy tale that promises rescue by the male character (de Beauvoir, 1949). De Beauvoir explains multiple theories on the formation of gender; she believes that gender roles are socially constructed, as it is explained through the following quotation:

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. (de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 273).

Furthermore, de Beauvoir explains that women of the twentieth century had the advantage of breaking the stereotypical roles and changing the “myth of femininity.” She wants women to be independent in their lives and not to rely on men. However, she declares that it is not something easy for women to achieve as most of their destinies end in marriage, which is society’s way of ruling women and making them live as inferiors and subordinates to men (de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 29). This is an unconventional thought of marriage.

In *The Second Sex*, a whole chapter is dedicated to the discussion of motherhood, contraception, and abortion: titled “The Mother.” de Beauvoir explains that even in bourgeois societies abortion seems to be viewed as a crime, furthermore; she declares when an author explains the pain and joy of giving birth it is considered to be wholesome. On the other hand, when abortion is portrayed or discussed it is considered to be vulgar and offensive, abortion has always been a taboo topic to discuss which in her views it shows the hypocrisy of society (1949, p. 476).

IV. ANALYSIS

The play is structured into three acts; the first act of the play starts with five historical characters to celebrate Marlene’s achievement in the workplace. She is the newly promoted managing director of Top Girls Agency. The play explores how women’s identities are shaped by their quest for power and status. The aim of bringing these characters to celebrate Marlene’s success at a dinner table is an indication of showing the difficulties that women of the past have faced. And what they went through to make the situation better for modern women. “Marlene: We’ve all come a long way to our courage and the way we changed our lives and our extraordinary achievements” (Churchill, 2013, p.45, 1,1).

The above quotation from the play depicts how women struggled for their rights in particular countries, and each figure appears to portray a picture of how women have been treated over time to highlight their relationships with both sexes. The evening continues with their discussion on family ties and parenthood. Marlene fought for the role of Top Girls Agency director against Howard, who failed to receive the position. Here, we can see that the play is trying to portray that fighting male domination causes the protagonist to evade her maternal responsibilities. We do not hear Marlene mention this herself during the dinner, implying that the celebration is about her status as a woman. Whereas others open up about their role as a parent and the challenges they had through their pregnancy. Adrienne Rich writes in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976) that one of the fundamental causes for women’s subjugation and mothering is the weight of motherhood.

Marlene had two abortions before forcing her sister to adopt Angie. She gave birth to Angie when she was 17 years old; the abortions and her abandonment of the daughter suggest that Marlene, as a working woman, rejects parenting. Her ambition drives her to throw away anything that stands

in the way of her being a successful independent woman. This might suggest the notion that women believe parenthood will stop them from having a successful career.

Therefore, this indicates that Marlene did not want her coworkers to view her as incompetent if she were to be a mother, and she believed by giving up on her child she would be more efficient at her job. When interviewing for her agency’s employment, she mentions that employing a single woman is preferable for the agency. The patriarchal practice of objectifying women is the sexual subjugation of women. Through the heroine, this play adapts the denial of masculine sexual authority, while other characters from the past relate their experiences with problems ranging from pregnancy to mothering and childcare. When one of the characters; Pope Joan describes her duty as a pope, she portrays women as being almost equal to males in practically every way except pregnancy and labor.

Pope Joan: Yes, if it had not been for the baby I expect I’d have lived to an old age like Theodora of Alexandria, who lived as a monk. She was accused by a girl/who fell in love with her of being the father of her child and- (Churchill, 2013, p.120, 1,1).

Some readers might find Marlene to be the villain for having an abortion. Simone de Beauvoir shows how abortion is considered to be offensive by society and readers. Moreover, she points out that society seems to be concerned with the life of an “embryo,” however, when the child is born; they have no interest in him/her. She continues explaining that it is riskier and more dangerous for a child to be brought into the world by a mother who did not want him/her (1949, p. 468). Thus, the family plan for having children and one of the demands of the first British Women’s Liberation Conference (1970) was “Abortion on Demand,” it is based on the perception that women have full freedom on decide about their own bodies and domestic life (Humm, 2003, p.1).

From Marlene’s character, we can understand that “female leadership” is not as easy to achieve as it is for men, these characters face multiple obstacles to establish success. It also tries to show that when men are leaders they are celebrated by their coworkers, but women are perceived differently because men do not want to work under female leadership, or women might judge them for focusing on their job and not having a family. For instance, when Howard loses the position, he feels ashamed to work for Marlene, which shows the different societal views on male and female leadership. Howard’s wife also has the same negative perspective as her husband. The way Howard and his wife view Marlene’s character aligns with Simone de Beauvoir’s theory concerning gender roles, meaning these roles are created by society and not something that women are born with. Because women in societies have always been restricted into being homemakers rather than leaders, when Marlene tries to have a role in society that is not gender stereotypical role male and female characters believe she is incompetent and incapable of doing her job successfully. To further explain this, *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir clarifies that women themselves face the difficulty of starting to define themselves without

mentioning that “I am a woman” (p.15) when a man never finds the necessity of defining himself as a specific individual of a certain sex.

Marlene grew up seeing her mother be submissive to her father who was a victim of domestic violence. Her mother was never interested in defending herself which illustrates Simone de Beauvoir’s theory on women being treated as the “other” in society. Marlene’s father is the dominant figure in the family and her mother was oppressed. De Beauvoir’s theory on women living as the “other sex” is that women are either considered by men as impersonal property that they have no sympathy treating them as humans or; “she submits passively to man’s will and permits assimilation, so that he takes possession of her only through consuming her, that is, through destroying her” (1949, p.159). Moreover, this theory explains that some women willingly submit to men’s order, perhaps because this is what has been expected for women to do in a patriarchal society. Therefore, Marlene appears to be afraid of repeating her mother’s past, she wants to be in control and powerful, so marriage and having children seems to be too big of a commitment for her. “Marlene: Because where do prospects come in? No kids for a bit” (Churchill, 2013, p.172, 2,1).

Marlene’s refusal to carry traditional roles intertwines with Simone de Beauvoir views on marriage, which asserts that women need to be independent. Furthermore, she explains that marriage is an act of controlling women to be dependent on men financially which at the end of the day benefits the men in the society (1949, p. 29). Her abandonment of the motherhood role and focusing only on her career life seems to be linked to women being oppressed for hundreds of years and creating the stereotypes that women only belong to the kitchen and the bedroom. These women lived in a capitalist society which only gives value to those individuals who have money and they are trying to seek validation from the society with success and money. Marlene’s daughter also appears to be a victim in the play, she represents the new generation who had to suffer due to a feminist capitalist society. The play ends with Marlene not confessing to her daughter that she is her biological mother although she had a nightmare. There are many interpretations of the play ending with “nightmare,” according to this article’s analysis it is the representation of women who live in a feminist capitalist society and its consequences. Marlene’s actions toward her family show that she has become cruel due to her seeking validation from money and a high position. Which is ultimately a representation of modern women who have been badly influenced by a patriarchal society (McRobbie, 1990), this article showcases ambiguity of the last lines of *Top Girls*, giving a chance to the audience and readers to deal with the unsolved puzzle between one women’s individual ambition and feminist solidarity. Angie’s waking up from a nightmare reveals her anger toward Marlene, addressing her as “Mum.” Marlene chooses to keep the disguise, which highlights the sacrifice she made for career development. Joyce’s bitterness reflects the emotional toll of raising a child alone, it stages the capitalism and how it serves a group on the backs of some others. Marlene represents the “have-it-all” ideal of capitalist feminism. She prioritizes professional success, suggesting that women can achieve both power and personal fulfillment within the existing

system. However, the ending exposes the limitations of this approach. Marlene’s choice has come at a cost – a broken family and a strained relationship with her sister.

V. CONCLUSION

This article discussed the portrayal of female leadership in Caryl Churchill’s *Top Girls* interpreting the play according to Simone de Beauvoir’s theory in *The Second Sex*. It gave an understanding of the struggles of female roles. For instance, abortion, motherhood, and leadership, it focused on the roles that different women from different generations had and their intention to achieve success. The article discussed how the protagonist shows one woman’s reaching to the top would make her to struggle in society by facing both genders. As well as, how capitalism has forced women to disregard the role of motherhood and domestic life. It concluded that female characters find it hard to balance career and feminine expected roles. The article showcased the role of Marlene as a leader in *Top Girls* Agency by sacrificing her domestic life. It also tried to shed light on how working women and men are perceived in a patriarchal society. Marlene’s success on the expense of sacrificing domestic life showcases one women’s success and feminist’s achievements in having women reaching her goals.

REFERENCES

- Aston, E. (2003). *Feminist Views on the English Stage: Women Playwrights, 1990-2000*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Athma Priya, S.S. (2019). Deconstructing gender stereotypes in Caryl Churchill’s top girls. *Language in India*, 19(9), 1-5.
- de Beauvoir, S. (1953). *The Second Sex*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Churchill, C. (2013). *Top Girls*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Cuddy, A.J., Fiske, S.T., & Glick, P. (2004). When professionals become mothers, warmth doesn’t cut the ice. *Journal of Social Issues*, 60(4), 701-718.
- Djundjung, J.M., & Yong, Y.B. (2002). Feminist perspective of cross-gender power relation in caryl Churchill’s top girls. *Studentjournal*, 4(2), 160-178.
- Erkan, A.Ü. (2018). Reinterpreting history and restructuring female identities in Caryl Churchill’s top girls and Timberlake Wertenbaker’s our country’s good. *Kastamonu Eğitim Dergisi*, 26(3), 721-728.
- Humm, M. (2003). *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*. Edinburg: Edinburg University Press.
- Lama, S. (2021). *Rupturing the Boundary in Caryl Churchill’s Top Girls* [Master’s Thesis, Tribhuvan University]. Nepal: Ratna Rajya Laxmi Campus.
- Martin, C. (1996). *A Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre and Performance On and Beyond the Stage*. London: Routledge.
- McRobbie, A. (1990). *Postmodernism and Consumer Culture*. London: Routledge.
- McRobbie, A. (2007). Top girls? Young women and the post-feminist sexual contract. *Cultural Studies*, 21(4-5), 718-737.
- Ravari, Z.K., & Naidu, S. (2011). Top girls: Implications of predominance, wealth, and reputation of women. *Canadian Social Science*, 7(1), 25-37.
- Rich, A. (1976). *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: WW Norton and Company.
- Smazilova, P. (2008). *Reflection of Gender and Political Issues in Top Girls and Cloud Nine by Caryl Churchill*. Available from: <https://dk.upce.cz/handle/10195/29007> [Last accessed on 2024 Jun 01].