

# **‘The Significant Other’: Motherhood Discourse in Caryl Churchill’s *Top Girls***

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This paper attempts to trace the representation of motherhood in *Top Girls* (1982) with a view to assess the evolutionary pattern of motherhood as an institution throughout ages. As Kimberley Reynolds points out motherhood is the simplest and the most complex of relationships. It is simple because it is associated with the inbuilt biological and physical capacities of a woman; it is complex, as it is bitter, time and identity consuming, pleasure sacrificing, guilt pricking and non-unitary experience. In last quarter of the twentieth century world mothering has been entwined with social, psychological and ideological issues, and process has been transformed from simple procreation and basic caring to profession, obsession and a paradox ultimately.

The year 1993 is a significant year as far as motherhood debates are concerned, as the Tabloid Press marketed mothering as a sensitive issue. It sensitized the world when the actress in Britain went on a holiday leaving her daughter “home alone”. It also highlighted the issues of fifty eight year old woman in Rome giving birth to twins after undergoing treatment for infertility. The Tabloid Press branded them “irresponsible” mothers and it arose a caustic campaigns against mothers who put their own pleasures and interests ahead of their children and thereby violating the rights of their own children.

Peculiarly, Caryl Churchill has prophesized the similar alert in her *Top Girls*, where a high profiles self-made business woman Marlene renounced her daughter Angie and preferred profession to motherhood. Generally, the ideology of femininity goes along with motherhood, and the fantasy of good motherhood has been fueled through sources like advertising, painting, calendar art, films, school books, religious scriptures and legislative documents. The reinforced images of good mothering demands compassion, self-effacement, nurturance and above all unfailing love. But the image of the good mothering changes time to time. Earlier in Britain, there has been a tradition of paid mothering in the form of wet nurses, governess, nannies and boarding schools. Leaving the historical evolution of mothering and motherhood, this paper treats *Top Girls*

as an alternative history of motherhood as it problematizes and documents the different shades of motherhood from different socio-cultural, economic and cultural backgrounds.

*Top Girls* is a play with two disconnected acts that affirms the transnational, trans-historical documentation of motherhood and sisterhood. It highlights the transformation of motherhood from a romanticized emotion bound entity to duty bound biformity. Adrienne Rich distinguishes between two meanings of motherhood – the potential relationship of any woman to her power of reproduction and to her children; and the institution which aims at ensuring the male dominance over the aforementioned potential of all women. The former view of motherhood goes along with the experience and later version is the institutionalized form of motherhood. The Act I of *Top Girls* highlights the mother's experience within the institutionalized form of motherhood and the Act II highlights the impacts of motherhood while adopting it as an experience.

As a creative writer, Caryl Churchill mixes the historical and fictional character together in order to float her theory on woman, womanhood, sisterhood and motherhood. This story has been set up in the 1980s in a contemporary high powered business oriented, outcome based, emotionless, multinational companies filled, metropolitan British society. The Act I of the play is a surrealistic experiment of Caryl Churchill in which the contemporary character Marlene gets into dialogue with historical and fictional characters. The strength of the play lies in presenting women from different socio-economic, political, cultural and spacio-temporal background to assert the idea that having gender as the base one cannot draw all women under a single umbrella as a uniform community with single identity. The class, religion, family structure, and customs are diverse. Moreover, there is no unity in their functioning. Most occasions the dialogues are not the direct responses to the earlier delivery and their sharing of experience remains isolated from one another's. Towards the end of the act the characters speak in different languages without making sense to one another. This kind of articulation is an attestation of condition of women under patriarchy where all women are oppressed but the nature of their oppression differs. Bell Hooks' remarks on the commonalities and differences go along the Act I of *Top Girls*:

Imagine a group of women from diverse backgrounds coming together to talk about feminism. First they concentrate on working out their status in terms of sex, race and class, using this as the standpoint from which they begin discussing patriarchy or their particular relations with individual men. Within the old frame of reference, a discussion might consist solely of talk about their experience as victims in relationship to male oppressors. Two women – one poor, the other quite

wealthy – might describe the process by which they have suffered physical abuse by male partners and find certain communalities which might serve as a basis for bonding. Yet, if these same two women engaged in a discussion of class, not only would the social construction and expression of femaleness differ, so too would their ideas about how to confront and change their circumstances. (qtd. in Vasile 242).

Among the six character who actively take part in the plot development – Lady Nijo (b.1258) from Japan, Pope Joan who is thought to have been Pope between 854-856, Griselda from “The Clerk’s Tale” of *The Canterbury Tales*, Dull Gret from Brueghel painting and of course Marlene, the protagonist – are mothers. All these mothers, except Marlene who never agrees the fact of her motherhood, who have mothered within the patriarchal institution experienced the loneliness, isolation, emptiness and boredom.

The autobiographical note of Lady Nijo, a Japanese courtesan who later becomes a nun is a mother of four children but owns none of them. She is a dependent on the Emperor and she is nothing “without the Emperor’s favour” Her life is testimony of the traditional view of motherhood that fathers are the owners of children and the bearer does not have any role to play in their life. She is a mother of three boys and one girl baby but none is with her and she does feel nothing for the child. During the thirteenth century, Japanese society respected the sons rather than daughters. Nijo narrates an incident that made her and other courtesan angry. During the Full moon Ceremony, the Japanese men make a special rice gruel and stir it with a stick and then they beat the women with same stick across the loins so that they will bear sons, not daughters. During this ceremony, instead of the Emperor, the attendants performed the beating ritual. As a response all the courtesans joined together to plot against the practice and the practitioners. Nijo beats him with the same stick until he promises that he will order anyone to hit him again.

Dull Gret’s powerful physical presence throughout the Act I has been used for illustrating the impact of war on mothers and children. Dull Gret’s family is the victim of Spanish invasion and Gret has lost her eldest son and her baby has been killed by the soldiers. Dull equates hell with her war inflicted village after it has been fired and looted by the soldiers. As she is unable to fight against the soldiers she leads all women to hell to fight against the devils. The devils in hell here symbolically refer to the soldiers on earth who mercilessly kill the innocents in the name of political wars. According to Sara Ruddick (1989), for women the conscious alienation from “men’s war” is positively grounded in a history of caring labour. Sara Ruddick quotes the

declaration of patriotic East German women who make their maternal standpoint against the government thus:

We women do not regard military service for women as an expression of our equality, but as standing in contradiction to our existence as women. We regard our equality as consisting not in standing together with those men who take up arms, but in solidarity with *those* men who have like us recognized that the abstract term “enemy” in practice means destroying human beings....We feel that as women we have a particular mission to preserve life and to give our support to the old, the infirm and the weak. (147)

In terms of Sara Ruddick’s theory, Dull Gret’s attitudes reflects notion that war is masculine and abstract, whereas peace is feminine and concrete. All women’s work is threatened by violence caused by war. According to the feminist maternal standpoint, there is a contradiction between mothering and war. Mothering begins in birth and promises life whereas the military thinking aims at war. A mother aims at protecting the lives of children whereas the war endangers. Mothering ensures the nurturance and psychic health of the children, whereas war fragments the consciousness in the name of victory.

Pope Joan is an ultimate illustration of how patriarchy domesticated women by subverting the physical power that the woman possesses to have a baby. Joan is interested in theology and metaphysics. Her inquisitiveness is on the knowledge oriented theology but not inclined towards the ritual oriented religion. She leaves home at the age of twelve in a disguise of a boy. Joan has not been allowed inside the library. Her obsession with knowledge seeking makes her to go to Rome. As she excels in theology, she becomes the Pope. Due to her relationship with a Chamberlin she becomes pregnant and unaware of the changes that goes on in her body, she embraces an unexpected delivery during the procession of all Roman clergy on Rogation Day. She narrates:

Then something changed, my breath started to catch, I couldn’t plan things any more. We were in the little street that goes between St.Clement’s and the Colosseum, and I just had to get off the horse and sit down for a minute. Great waves of pressure were going through my body, I heard sounds like a cow lowing, they came out of my mouth. For away I heard people screaming, ‘The Pope is ill, the Pope is dying’. And the baby just slid out onto the road....One of cardinals

said, “The Antichrist”, and fell over in a faint....They took me by the feet and dragged me out of town and stoned me to death.(Churchill 17)

To women, children and lunatics becoming the Pope they introduce a pierced marble chair on the Chapel of the Saviour to confirm the sex of the Pope. Feminist theology is against the discrimination of sex within religious order. Feminist theories of Christianity fall into three categories. They are :

1. Those that challenge the theological view of women and the androcentricity of traditional theology
2. Those that challenge the theological laws that bar women from ordination
3. Those that evaluate the church as an institution and aim to upgrade the professional status of women in the church.

Among these categories, Caryl Churchill critiques on the second category through Pope Joan. Besides, feminist theories too recognized the importance of women's freedom from reproductive control. Feminist researchers investigate how women's bodies function within the context of their lives and argue that women's biology develops in reciprocal and dialectical relationships with the way in which they live.

Contrary to the earlier images of motherhood in *Top Girls*, Griselda's glorified and romanticized image of motherhood reflects the contemporary attitudes of popular culture towards motherhood. She reflects the images of “good wife” which the popular culture demands to be a primary quality to become a good mother. She is known for her patience and never interferes in her husband Walter's decisions. As she is the daughter of a peasant, her son was not allowed to be the heir of the kingdom. Walter understanding the political situation takes all her children without consulting her. Accepting her ill fate she never tries to identify her children. Finally as a ‘reward’ to her patience, Walter gives back all her children. Unlike Lady Nijo, she gets back her children. She is the best illustration of patriarchal motherhood which gives to mothers all responsibilities but none of the power to make decisions. Women who mother within the institution of motherhood perform their duties under the rule of men with no control over the material conditions of their mothering. According to Adrienne Rich, the expectations laid on mothers are insane expectations.

In Act II, the motherhood questions revolve around Marlene, Joyce and Angie. Marlene reflects the contemporary status of womanhood. She considers child bearing and children as the

heart of female oppression. Marlene is a highflyer and a strong self-made successful professional. She never thinks about “sitting still”(Churchill 1) and aims at moving upwards in the professional ladder. Can this kind of a woman possible in 1980s? If so, how could it be possible and what could be the socio-political situations that have proved her possible?

*Top Girls* in a sense encapsulates the socio-political situation of the 1980s British society. During 1980s, the iron Lady Margaret Thatcher has been serving as Prime Minister. She, hailing from a working class background, has achieved top positions in the politics. During her period, Britain was under severe economic instability due to high inflation. Unemployment was also another major crisis of the society. So Thatcher privatized major nationalized industries, educational and healthcare organization. Thatcher's politics succeeded in reducing inflation, but could not control unemployment issues. Because of Thatcher's emphasis on individualism, the society witnessed two entirely different outcomes. Marlene represents the status that the state offered to minority group a chance to earn more than before and Joyce on the other hand represents the majority of population who were deprived of employment opportunities. Like Thatcher, Marlene emerges as a “Super Woman” symbolizing the ultimate capitalism. She mimics Margaret Thatcher in every aspect of her life but at the same time she articulates the difference between them as follows:

I know a managing director who's got two children, she breast feeds in the board room, she pays a hundred pound a week on domestic help alone and she can afford hat because she's an extremely high powered lady earning a great deal of money.(Churchill 80)

Marlene clearly highlights the fact that all women cannot be one and the same. A woman like Marlene is possible not only because of Margaret Thatcher's image projection but because of the emergence of polemical writings, women's press and legislative provisions of 1970s. Major feminist works like Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970) and Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970), the Virago Press (1973) and the Women's Press (1975) influenced feminist consciousness throughout the world. Moreover, during 1970s there emerged many more notable Euro-American feminist journals like *Feminist Studies*, *The feminist Art Journal*, *Feminist Times*, *Her-Self*, *Ms*, *Gold Flower*, and *Feminist Monthly*, etc.

During 1970s, due to the impact of Second Wave feminism, several acts such as the Abortion Act of 1967, and the Divorce Reform Act of 1969 which was passed in the parliament

supported the personal and professional assurance. Further, feminism made itself clear that it aims at the right to self-determination and women experimented their own ability in different professional sectors like civil service, medicine and politics. During 1970s and 1980s, it is not only Margaret Thatcher occupied a prominent position in Britain, but women like Indira Gandhi and Sirimavo Bandaranaike served as Prime Ministers in India and Srilanka respectively. Marlene too asserts this in her speech thus: “We’ve come a long way. To our courage and the way we changed our lives and our extraordinary achievements” (13). Marlene preferred profession to motherhood and she represents a new type of society. On the other hand, Marlene has abandoned her own daughter and she keeps her daughter under the care of Joyce, her sister. Marlene is not domestically oriented woman, she is a committed worker who views children as a potential threat to her career. She fears that motherhood would upset the delicate balance of her personal and professional life.

For Marlene, child rearing seemed to be an alienating experience. Alison Jagger explained how contemporary child-rearing practices ultimately alienate or estrange mothers from their children:

The extreme mutual dependence of mother and child encourages the mother to define the child primarily with reference to her own needs for meaning, love and social recognition. She sees the child as her product, as something that should improve her life and that often instead stands against her, as something supreme value that is held cheap by the society. The social relations of contemporary motherhood make it impossible for her to see the child as a whole person, part of a larger community to which both mother and child bearing. (qtd in Tong 126)

Joyce represents the fate of working class mothers who do not have enough financial support to run their family. Unlike her sister who is financially stabilized, Joyce works hard to run the family. Angie, Marlene’s daughter becomes an additional burden to her and she never fulfills her duty as a surrogate mother. She blames Angie for her childless status that brings ruptures in the relationship with her husband. Joyce’s husband blames her for miscarriage and urges her to have child. In a case study done by Katheleen Gerson the attitudes of men who urges their wives to have child/ren has been summed up as follows:

...male partners’ motivation went beyond the desire to reproduce offspring merely to prove manhood or to perpetuate the family name and genetic structure. A least,

in the eyes of their family partners, these men possessed genuine desire and ability to nurture children. (163)

Nancy Holmstrom states that the women constitute a class, and all women are oppressed as women, but the nature of oppression is not the same. There are differences between the ways in which working class women are oppressed and the ways in which middle and upper class women are oppressed.

Working class women are super-exploited in their wage work and exploited in their domestic work. In other ways as well they suffer more from sexism than middle - and upper-class women. They have less reproductive freedom in that they have less access to abortion, contraception, and child care, and are often subject to sterilization abuse. They are also more subjected to sexual abuse on the job and in the streets. Hence the interests of working class women are more consistently opposed to sexism as well as capitalism than are the interests of middle- and upper-class women.(qtd in 110-111)

The surrogate motherhood creates destructive divisions among women. The issues of solidarity are questioned based on class structure. Because economically privileged women are capable of hiring the economically disadvantaged women. Thus, there emerged a division between the two.

Hence, Caryl Churchill juxtaposes two views of motherhood as an experience and an institution. As long as motherhood functions as an institution with the control of patriarchy, it will remain a hindrance for the empowerment of women and girl children because mothers not only reproduce children but they reproduce motherhood itself through their girl children. Motherhood must be liberated from patriarchy and it must be left to the choice of women. Marlene and Joyce are caught in liminal space between these views. The last word of the text “frightening” highlights the dangers of reproducing not of children but the motherhood itself as mother-infant relationship has been exclusive, mutual and special. The mother figures represented in *Top Girls* authenticates the fact that mothering as a natural entity is liberating, but as a cultural construct, it brings in a devastating culmination on both mothers and children.

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