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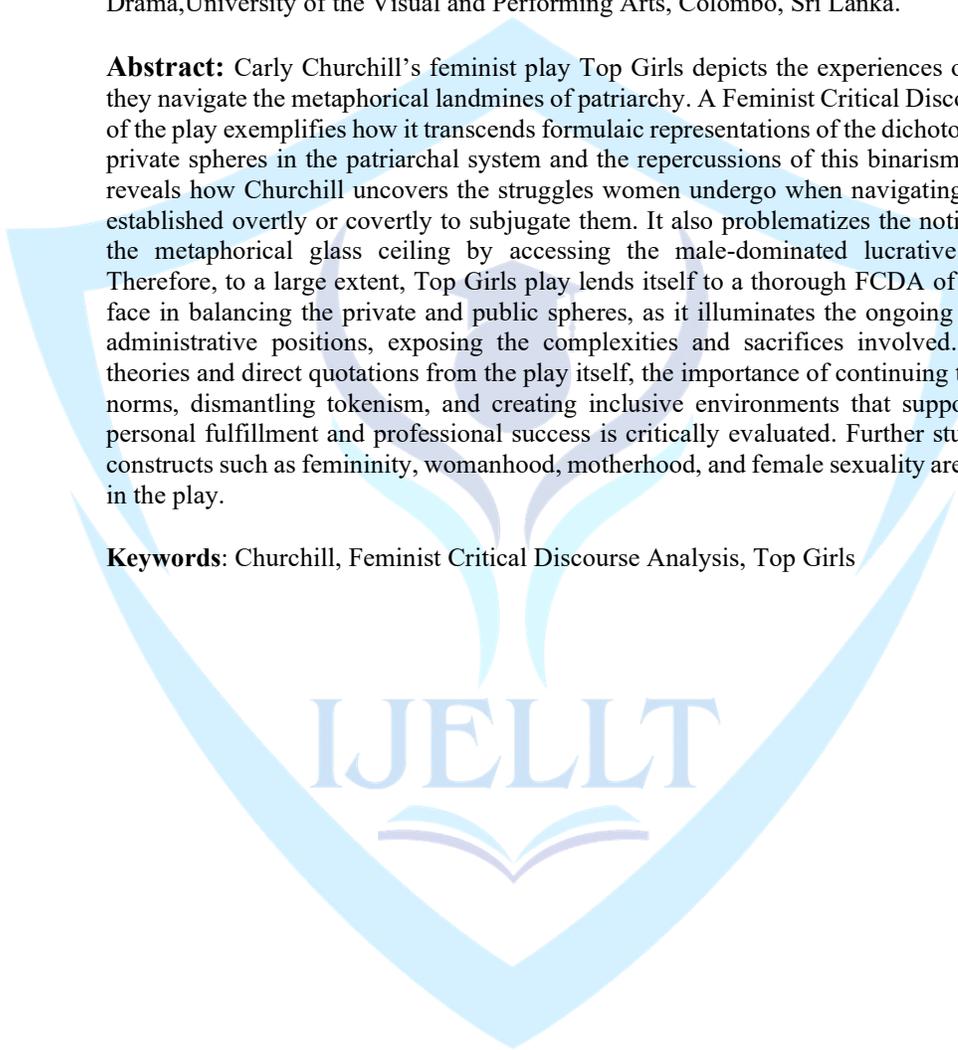
Unshattered Glass Ceilings: A Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis of Gendered Spaces in Caryl Churchill's Top Girls

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Abstract: Carly Churchill's feminist play Top Girls depicts the experiences of an all-female cast as they navigate the metaphorical landmines of patriarchy. A Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) of the play exemplifies how it transcends formulaic representations of the dichotomy between public and private spheres in the patriarchal system and the repercussions of this binarism on women. The study reveals how Churchill uncovers the struggles women undergo when navigating such gendered spaces established overtly or covertly to subjugate them. It also problematizes the notion of women breaking the metaphorical glass ceiling by accessing the male-dominated lucrative professional domain. Therefore, to a large extent, Top Girls play lends itself to a thorough FCDA of the constraints women face in balancing the private and public spheres, as it illuminates the ongoing struggle for women in administrative positions, exposing the complexities and sacrifices involved. Drawing on feminist theories and direct quotations from the play itself, the importance of continuing to challenge patriarchal norms, dismantling tokenism, and creating inclusive environments that support women's pursuit of personal fulfillment and professional success is critically evaluated. Further studies can consider how constructs such as femininity, womanhood, motherhood, and female sexuality are discursively presented in the play.

Keywords: Churchill, Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, Top Girls

Introduction

Top Girls, written by Carly Churchill (1984), features an all-female cast, primarily revolving around ten female characters who have seemingly made their mark in a predominantly male-centric world by either conforming or rebelling against patriarchal norms (Luckhurst, 2019). The play's title suggests a focus on accomplished women who have gained success in their respective spheres. Nonetheless, when considering Churchill's play through a critical lens, it is evident that its trajectory goes beyond the mere exaltation of female emancipation and upward mobility by unraveling the complexities and challenges accompanying such triumphs. Despite the play's seeming focus on the achievements of its female cast, it does not take long to realize that although these women have somehow gained popularity either by conforming to or challenging patriarchal norms. Top Girls delves into a multifaceted exploration of female experiences, with a specific emphasis on the dilemmas of women as they navigate their assigned roles in both the domestic and public spheres (Gottfried, 2007). In this paper, a critical feminist discourse analysis of the play aims to delve deeper into one of its main themes: that of the intricate web of female experiences and subjectivities within gendered spaces. Through the exploration of the characters' struggles and choices, it is expected to provide insights into the broader feminist discourse surrounding women's roles, societal expectations, and the pursuit of gender equality.

Literature Review

The depiction of women within the private and public spheres has long been a subject of interest in feminist discourse. In examining the representation of women in Churchill's play through a feminist perspective, it is essential to explore the broader scholarly conversations surrounding these gendered spaces. Concerning the period in which the play was written, scholars have discussed the sociocultural, economic, and historical context of the 1980s during which the play was written and performed. Faludi (1991) highlights the widespread public discussions on women's equal rights during that era and critiques of gendered roles within the patriarchal system. In such a context. Top Girls offers a fertile ground for examining feminist themes and an all-female cast that attempts to destabilize traditional gender roles and power dynamics. Innes (2000) asserts that the play confronts the audience with a surreal gathering of historical and fictional women, emphasizing the struggles and sacrifices females have made throughout history to gain their identities and sense of autonomy. This portrayal serves as a critique of the limited opportunities available for women in a male-centric system.

The concept of the glass ceiling, symbolizing the invisible barriers that hinder women's progress in their careers, is central to the critical feminist discourse analysis of Top Girls. Gottfried (2007) argues that the play explores the complexities of women's experiences in male-dominated spaces, focusing on the constraints they face in their efforts to shatter the metaphorical glass ceiling that prevents them from reaching the top. Marlene, the protagonist, exemplifies this struggle as she navigates her way to the top of her profession while negotiating the obstacles thrown at her by a system designed to subjugate women. The plot unravels the dilemmas faced by Marlene as she makes unthinkable compromises in her private life to reach the top in her professional career. The fact that she was forced to undergo several abortions, added to her not being able to build a close relationship with her daughter, and unfolded by the obvious awkwardness of their interaction and the sense of disconnectedness in their relationship, is testimony to this claim.

The conflicts and trade-offs Marlene faces when attempting to balance her personal and professional aspirations depict her as an individual whose efforts to present a superficial picture of happiness and achievement are underscored by the pervasiveness of the patriarchal system that prevents females from achieving their professional ambitions. Innes (2000) suggests that Joyce, Marlene's sister, prioritizes her family responsibilities over her ambition, resulting in an embittered character who juggles several menial jobs to be financially stable. Moreover, Angie, Marlene's daughter, is portrayed as a rebellious teenage daughter struggling with her identity due to the disengaged nature of her relationship with her mother. These characters represent the sacrifices females have to make when conforming to societal expectations, ultimately highlighting the discrepancy between personal fulfillment and patriarchal norms.

When perusing the related literature, the critical reception of Churchill's Top Girls exemplifies its significance in feminist theatre and literature. Churchill's contribution as a prominent feminist playwright is emphasized by Luckhurst (2019), who depicts how this play challenges gendered norms and explores the complex realities faced by women across different centuries. The play's exploration of gendered spaces, power dynamics, and female struggles resonates with feminist scholars and audiences alike.

Methodology

This study employs Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) to examine the portrayal of the gendered spaces in Caryl Churchill's play, Top Girls. It aims to explore the representation of obstacles faced by women in breaking away from traditional gender roles and expectations while shedding light on how the play presents the impact of gender stereotypes on women's experiences in both historical and contemporary scenarios.

Fairclough (1995) defines discourse as the uses and functions of language in sociocultural contexts (p.7). FCDA concerns itself with a critical investigation of how dynamics of power, ideologies, and gender are reproduced or resisted through discourse in social contexts. The theoretical and methodological framework of this paper is grounded in the definition and explanations given to Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis by Lazar (2007) whose main premise is that gender incongruity manifests explicitly or implicitly in social practices, physical and emotional harassment, and that gender is an ideological structure that divides social hierarchical classes whereby males are the dominant gender while females are the subjugated ones. As such, through FCDA, this paper closely examines the play's dialogues, character interactions, and thematic elements to identify and analyze the gendered spaces and challenges women encounter in different intersections of space and time. In the process, attention was paid to the language, characterization, and plot development related to gender roles. The scenes and acts in the play were critically evaluated to identify instances of gender discrimination, tokenization of women, and the struggles faced by the female characters in navigating their gendered roles in both the private and public spheres. In addition, a comprehensive review of the pertinent feminist theories and relevant literature was conducted to provide the theoretical framework for analyzing gendered spaces and gender stereotypes in the play.

Analysis and Discussion

Critics have asserted that Top Girls offers a thought-provoking exploration of the challenges faced by women who have either achieved noteworthy positions in public spaces or endured subjugated status as domesticated women. Despite being written over three decades ago, the play remains highly relevant, shedding light on the intricate dynamics women encounter as they strive to balance their roles in the domestic and public spheres.

Concerns Regarding Female Labour

In Top Girls, Churchill brings to the foreground issues women face as they ascend to positions of power in white-collar jobs while striving to balance their responsibilities in the private sphere. The protagonist, Marlene, exemplifies this dilemma as we discover how, although she manages to break the glass ceiling by becoming the managing director of an employment agency, it merely becomes a superficial metaphor of a woman's access to the patriarchal domain of paid labour. As the drama unfolds, the audience is made to realize that Marlene's success comes at a price. This is made clear in the final scene during her conversation with her sister Joyce, in which she realizes her disconnection from her role as a mother and her general discontent with how her life has turned out, despite the sacrifices she had to make to get to where she is at present:

Marlene: I've been on the pill so long/ I'm probably sterile

Joyce: Listen when Angie was six months old I did get

pregnant and I lost it because I was so tired looking

after your fucking baby/ because she cried so much

– yes I did tell

Marlene: You never told me.

[….].

Marlene: I've had two abortions, are you interested?

Shall I tell you about them? Well, I won't. It's boring, it

wasn't a problem. I don't like messy talk about blood.

[….].

Joyce: That'll be fine, yes, six years would suit me fine.

Marlene: I was afraid of this.

I only came because I thought you wanted to …

I just want …

Marlene cries

Joyce: …. Fucking stop it will you?

Marlene: No, let me cry. I like it. (Churchill, 1984, p.81)

The emotionally loaded instance is the only time when the audience witnesses the true pathos and the vulnerability of Marlene's and Joyce's mentality. Their dilemma, as they grapple with work ethics and motherhood, captures the societal expectations imposed on women that compel them to make difficult choices and sacrifices to function as either a member of the working class or the middle class. The two sisters, with Joyce as the one who 'stayed' and Marlene as the one who 'escaped', represent divergent lifestyles, both unfulfilling and complex.

Other instances in the play also reveal the unsettling paradox of conformist notions women have internalized and their discursive resistance to them. In Act 2, Scene 2, the audience finds themselves witnessing the employment agency where Marlene is now in charge. Two characters, Win and Nell, are employed as recruitment officers at the agency. Their exchanges reveal the pathetic status of women who call themselves "tough birds" who refuse to "play house". Radical as this decision may appear, it does not take long to realize the sense of dissatisfaction in their lives. Even though these two women have broken free from the confining space of the domestic sphere, their shallow outlook on life and materialistic perceptions (exemplified in the claim Nell makes, "Most of them can't afford us.") make them less than appealing characters to model one's life on.

In addition, this claim also exemplifies the commodification of female labour. Here, then, is a capitalist-feminist contradiction as these women mistakenly estimate their worth in terms of their employability in the capitalist economy rather than in a more emotionally emancipated state that embraces female solidarity instead of masculine competitiveness and exclusivity. This is made obvious in their cold and rationalistic approach to guiding potential employees to finding new employment opportunities. In the discourse, neither female solidarity nor female bonding takes place. During the interviews with job-seeking women, Marlene, Win, and Nell's lack of empathy strips bare the unconscious way in which women have embedded masculinist traits that refuse to acknowledge the realities of women striving to balance their private and work life.

Feminist theorists have long analyzed the challenges faced by women in reconciling their professional aspirations with their familial obligations. Friedan (1963), who introduces the concept of the "problem with no name," indicates how, despite achieving professional success, women are discontent with their lives due to the compromises they have to make when trying to reach the top in their career ladders. Mostly, they feel unfulfilled and as failures in their roles as wives and mothers.

Such a premise is exemplified through the characterization of Marlene, whose incapacity to feel like she has truly succeeded in her life echoes the critique of the limitations imposed on females as a result of patriarchal gender roles: "Oh God, why are we all so miserable?" (p.18).

To overcome this dilemma, Fraser's theory of "gender justice" stresses the need for social policies that provide women support in maintaining a work-life balance and the importance of a judicial balancing of the public and domestic spheres, which requires shared responsibilities in the domestic space by both genders (Fraser, 1997).

What is noteworthy is that although this play was written more than four decades ago, the complex dynamics encountered by women as they try to juggle the domestic and public spaces are still evident in most contemporary societies. This predicament is most obvious among females who become administrators in the corporate world whereby the incapacity to maintain a balance between private and public responsibilities greatly burdens them due to the unjustifiable expectations placed on them which do not attribute the same level of burden to the men who are free to ascend in their careers since they have fewer obligations in the home front. The protagonist of Top Girls could only become the managing director of a company at the cost of relinquishing her role as a mother. Sadly, despite her success in being able to "break the glass ceiling" (Morrison et al, 1987) by being promoted to this position over a man, as the plot unravels, it becomes obvious that her life is discontented and disjointed. This is well-exemplified in the dialogue between Nell and Win, Marlene's subordinates:

Nell: It's not often you get a woman in a job like
        that.
Win: No, women aren't usually in charge.
Nell: I don't know why not. They're capable enough.
Win: It's just the way things are, I suppose. Men seem to end up running everything. (Churchill, 1984, p.47)

The above exchange highlights the difficulty of finding a woman in leadership roles. This type of tokenism perpetuates the illusion of equal rights for women while concealing the systematic discrimination faced by them when accessing high-ranking positions in oppressive patriarchal institutions. Nell and Win's conversation sheds light on the systemic barriers that women face in ascending to influential positions. Marlene has been tokenized to symbolize a generation of supposedly liberated women in high corporate positions.

Nonetheless, its impact does not destabilize the status quo. The exchange highlights the limited opportunities for women to rise to leadership roles, exposing the pervasive underrepresentation of women in the private sphere.

The female protagonist's character underscores the prevailing gender discrimination women face in positions of power. It resonates with the present reality as reflected in formal documents analyzing employment opportunities and benefits for men and women. The report presented at the "World Economic Forum" 2014 acknowledged that although the percentage of women occupying leadership positions globally has increased, they remain significantly underrepresented in elite levels of corporate and political systems. This disparity persists even with the presence of a few token figures like Marlene, who have seemingly reached the pinnacle of their careers. The available statistics worldwide indicate that females are still notably outnumbered and face significant obstacles to accessing leadership positions (Catalyst, 2015; Center for American Women & Politics, 2015; Lawless & Fox, 2012). For instance, according to Catalyst (2015), females are frequently underrepresented in top leadership positions. This claim is substantiated by the statistics presented, which state that only 27% of chief executive officers in the largest traded companies are women, with the majority being males. Moreover, according to the International Labour Organization, women across the world have to spend more than double the time men do on unpaid care work, such as household chores and caregiving responsibilities (International Labour Organization, 2020). The character of Joyce, Marlene's sister, is a good example of the troubles faced by a working-class woman. Joyce faces economic hardships due to her low wages and limited job opportunities. This character depicts the struggles faced by working-class women in the early 1980s, demonstrating the intersection of gender and class that perpetuates gendered inequality. The challenges Joyce faces as a working-class woman juxtapose with those encountered by her sister Marlene, demonstrating the different challenges women face in their pursuit of success and independence.

The Glass Ceiling

The concept of the glass ceiling, coined by Wall Street Journal reporters Hymowitz and Schellhardt in 1986, is a significant aspect of the play that reflects the barriers women encounter in their ascent to top corporate leadership positions (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986). The glass ceiling refers to the invisible barrier that hinders women's progression in their careers solely based on their gendered status.

Traditional patriarchal norms perpetuate the myth that men are the primary breadwinners, while women are relegated to domestic roles. This systemic discrimination continues to hinder women's access to leadership positions and reinforces gender inequalities in the professional sphere. Obviously, Marlene is a mere token figure in the status quo, being simply one person from the underrepresented group of women whose inclusion as a person who broke the "glass ceiling" does not convincingly address the issue of the lack of opportunities for advancement in their workplaces. Here, the concept of tokenism, defined as "a superficial effort to include members of underrepresented groups without addressing the underlying issues of systemic inequality" (Sue, 2010, p. 245), is also relatable to the analysis. Thus, the tokenization of women, exemplified through the representation of Marlene, depicts how her promotion as a managing director is not indicative of broader gender equality in the gendered space of the corporate world.

The portrayals of Marlene engaged in a white-collar job and that of her sister doing a blue-collar one, in addition to references to real-world statistics, validate the premise that despite the advancements made by feminist movements in certain communities, overt as well as covert forms of female discrimination still persevere. As noted from the discussion above, it is crucial to recognize that a few women in top positions do not signify gender parity; on the contrary, it highlights the systematic barriers women encounter in inegalitarian gendered workspaces. Thus, by confronting the issue of tokenization and the limited opportunities for "shattering the glass ceiling", Churchill's Top Girls provokes us to critically examine the underrepresentation and oppression of women, which inadvertently makes us realize the importance of fighting for inclusive environments that foster equal opportunities for women while challenging systematic biases that permeate gender inequality in the workforce and domestic spaces.

Female Administrators as Male Castrators

The portrayal of female leaders as male castrators in 'Top Girls' sheds light on their challenges even when they break through barriers and achieve leadership positions. The encounter between Howard's wife, Mrs. Kidd, and Marlene reveals the psychological trauma experienced by men when a woman surpasses them in the corporate hierarchy. Mrs. Kidd's belief that a man would easily accept being led by another man but struggle with a woman in a position of power reflects the deep-seated prejudice rooted in patriarchal norms and implicit theories of leadership.

Through Mrs. Kidd's voice, Churchill exposes the societal expectations that men should be the ones to occupy leadership positions and be dominant in the corporate world. These beliefs assume that men are born leaders while women are seen as unfit for such roles. The emasculation experienced by Howard, resulting in his heart attack, exemplifies the anxiety and threat posed to traditional notions of masculinity when women rise to positions of power. The derogatory labels assigned to Marlene, such as "not natural" and "ball-breaker," further highlight the formulaic understanding of female leaders as castrating figures who challenge male dominance.

Gender Performativity

Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity asserts that gender is not an inherent identity but a social and cultural construct that individuals perform (Butler, 1990). In the case of female leaders, their mere presence in positions of power disrupts the traditional gender order and threatens the established power dynamics. The reaction of characters like Howard and Mrs. Kidd reflects the anxieties and resistance generated by the subversion of gender norms.

Top Girls presents the profound impact of the binary logic of patriarchal discourse on women's decision-making processes, particularly concerning their roles in the private and public spheres. Churchill juxtaposes the concepts of "natural" and "unnatural" throughout the play, exposing the perpetuation of gendered stereotypes and the assigned social roles based on biological differences. Feminist theorists, like Simone de Beauvoir, have critiqued these gendered expectations, arguing that they limit women's agency and confine them to prescribed roles within the family and society (de Beauvoir, 1949). Top Girls underscores the need to challenge and transcend these limited roles, allowing women to pursue their ambitions without sacrificing their personal lives. For instance, the character of Patient Griselda, from Chaucer's "The Clerk's Tale," exemplifies the tragic circumstances of women bound by societal expectations of motherhood and subservience. One realizes that patience, a patriarchal female virtue, results in a woman getting raped and abused.

Griselda's unquestioning acceptance of her husband's orders and dependence on him for survival underscores the power dynamics and lack of agency experienced by women within the domestic sphere. This narrative highlights the impact of patriarchal discourse on women's lives and the limitations placed on their autonomy and self-fulfillment.

Yet another patriarchal institution that subjugates women is religious institutions, which are also considered a gendered space for female oppression. The character of Pope Joan in "Top Girls" refers to a legendary character cited in historical accounts and folklore. Pope Joan is known as a woman who disguised herself as a man and managed to ascend to the papacy during the Middle Ages. The fact that she pursued a career in the Church by hiding her identity as a female and her barbaric murder as a result of her deceiving the male-dominated religious institution results in the ultimate punishment: death.

Marlene: So what did they do? […]. Joan: They took me by the feet and dragged me out of town and stoned   me to death. (Churchill, 1984, p.17)

Joan's leadership is respected until her true gender is revealed when she gives birth to a child in public. Her punishment for transgressing her gendered role is public stoning, exemplifying the harsh consequences women face for breaking through the glass ceiling imposed on them. Joan's story serves as a poignant example of the struggles faced by women who challenge patriarchal norms and attempt to ascend to positions of power. There is so much impact behind the claim Joan makes soon after matter-of-factly explaining something as shocking as the manner in which she was murdered: "…I shouldn't have been a woman. Women, children, and lunatics can't be pope." (Churchill, 1984, p.18). By relegating women to the category of children and mentally ill persons, it becomes evident how low the status of a woman is in an inegalitarian male-serving social framework.

Through the characters of Marlene, Nell, Win, Joyce, Angie, Lady Nijo, Joan, Gret, and Griselda, Churchill exposes the tokenization of women in various roles. She further depicts how even when women manage to break through the glass ceiling and enter positions of power, they often face resistance, prejudice, and the perception of being "male castrators." Moreover, the impact of patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes on women's sense of self and fulfillment is revealed as the characters grapple with the dilemma of conforming to societal expectations of femininity or embracing qualities that challenge these traditional gender roles.

Conclusion

Through the weaving together of historical and contemporary female voices into a rich tapestry of women's experiences and dilemmas, Churchill (1984) urges us to question whether female emancipation was, has been, is, or will be truly present in our societies. It can be premised that Top Girls serves as a call for dismantling the systematic, implicit, and explicit barriers faced by women in both their private and public spheres in order to create an equitable society where both men and women can be treated without discrimination. Therefore, to a large extent, the play lends itself to a thorough FCDA of the constraints women face in balancing the private and public spaces as it illuminates the ongoing struggle for women in administrative positions, exposing the complexities and sacrifices involved.

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