Caryl Churchill's Top Girls as a Socio-Political Play about the Position of the Modern Working Woman

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Abstract

This paper examines Caryl Churchill's Top Girls (1982) as a socio-political play that interrogates the paradox of women's professional success under patriarchy. Set against the backdrop of Thatcherite Britain, the play dramatizes the costs of women's achievements when defined by masculine standards: personal sacrifice, complicity with patriarchal values, and emotional isolation. Drawing on feminist and Marxist criticism, as well as recent scholarship on female leadership and historical materialism. This study argues that Churchill critiques both the Thatcherite model of individualistic empowerment and strands of feminism that equate liberation with adopting masculine roles. Ultimately, Top Girls calls for a redefinition of women's success that embraces balance between personal fulfillment and professional ambition, rather than erasing the feminine in pursuit of the masculine.

Keywords: Caryl Churchill, Top Girls, socio-political drama, feminism, Thatcherism, patriarchy, modern working woman, motherhood

الملخص

تفحص هذه الدّراسة مسرحية «**توب جيرلز**» لكاريل تشيرشيل كونها عملًا دراميًّا اجتماعيًّا وسياسيًّا يتناول مفارقة نجاح المرأة المهنيّ في ظل النّظام الأبويّ. في سياق

بريطانيا تحت حكم ثاتشر، يصوّر النّصّ المسرحيّ تكلفة إنجازات المرأة حين تُقاس بمعايير ذكوريّة، مثل التّضحيّة الشّخصيّة، والتّواطؤ مع القيم الأبويّة، والعزلة العاطفيّة. استنادًا إلى النّقد النّسويّ والماركسي، إضافةً إلى الدّراسات الحديثة حول القيادة النّسائيّة والماديّة التّاريخيّة، ترى هذه الدّراسة أنّ تشيرشيل تنتقد كلًا من نموذج تمكين الفرديّ الذي تبنّته ثاتشر، وبعض تيارات النّسويّة التي تربط التّحرّر بتبني الأدوار الذّكوريّة. في النّهاية، تدعو إلى إعادة تعريف نجاح المرأة بحيث يشمل التّوازن بين الإشباع الشّخصيّ والطّموح المهنيّ، بدلًا من محو الجانب الأنثويّ في سبيل تقليد الذّكورة.

الكلمات المفتاحيّة: كاريل تشيرشيل، ، الدّراما الاجتماعيّة السّياسيّة، النّسويّة، ثاتشريّة، النّظام الأبويّ، العاملة الحديثة، الأمومة.

Introduction

The term political theatre refers to plays that engage with social and political issues to provoke awareness and stimulate change. In England, many theatre groups emerging in the 1960s and 1970s aligned themselves with socialist or Marxist movements, using performance as ideological critique (Shank, 1978). More recently, however, the boundaries of "the political" have blurred, leading scholars such as Reinelt (2008) to stress the slippage between the political and the social. She bases her argument on David Ian Rabey who states that all theatre is political, but that overtly political drama emphasizes the directness of its address to problematic social matters, and its attempt to interpret these problems in political terms (as cited in Reinelt 2008).

Along the same lines, Shank (1978) explains that a political play aims to present an analysis of our society from an ideological perspective. Thus, the spectator is called upon to relate the events depicted to what he knows of the real world and conscious thought that is required of him. As such, the stage action is an image of the real world but does not replace it in our consciousness. The political ideas are important, and usually the questions raised are not resolved because they are social or political questions not

resolved in the real world. Instead, these questions serve to stimulate discussion toward a solution (Shank, 1978). It could be contended that the emergence of a sub- genre entitled socio-political drama is a direct result of plays that intertwine both the political and the social at the same level.

There is an assertion that all theatre is political, states Reinelt (2008) citing George Szanto's Theatre and Propaganda, that is structurally similar to other familiar claims from the sixties such as the "personal is political". The term socio-political drama is derived from the political, yet focuses on social aspects of everyday life of the public as well as the private lives of individuals; the concerns, problems, economic worries and even personal ideologies resonate in plays that can be described as discussing or commenting on social aspects to promote social change. This new category of socio-political drama was particularly relevant for plays that intertwine public issues with private experience. In fact, it became extremely popular during the 1960s and 1970s, when new theatres emerged addressing women issues. Reinelt (2008) states that second wave feminists, including herself, wanted 'the personal is political' to address the lack of seriousness with which women's lives and concerns were often treated and to assert the appropriateness of looking at issues of reproductive rights, domestic labor, and psychological issues such as depression or eating disorders as legitimate foci for analysis and activism in both the public and private fields. Private matters like child rearing had public consequences, and had been customarily excluded from what was considered political (Reinelt, 2008).

One good example of how the issues of women and their private lives were of immediate consequence to the public sphere are the plays of Caryl Churchill who not only went beyond producing feminist plays but also sought to give women opportunities and work experiences in all areas of theatrical production—a domain controlled solely by men. "Caryl Churchill's body of work is prodigious," states Tamsen Wolff (2016, p. 1), "From 1958 to 2015, she has written nearly fifty plays for stage, radio, and television, not including her unpublished or unproduced scripts" (Wolf, 2016, p.1). Caryl

Churchill, thus, is a leading figure in this tradition. Her plays consistently challenge gender and class hierarchies while also expanding women's opportunities within theatre production. Among her prolific works, Top Girls (1982) occupies a central place, interrogating the paradox of women's liberation in Thatcherite Britain.

Along the same lines, this research tends to answer the following question: How does Caryl Churchill's Top Girls critique the paradox of women's professional success within a patriarchal society?

In the play, Churchill arguably wants to draw attention to feminine matters that were phenomenally taken as 'normal', private or apolitical and show that they are actually hegemonic, powerful and conservative. The story of her protagonist Marlene, a successful businesswoman who chooses to pursue her career at the expense of her family life, is actually reminiscent of the condition of every modern working woman of our contemporary world.

1.1 Thesis Statement. This research will argue that In Top Girls, Churchill exposes the contradictions of modern working women's success by showing how characters like Marlene achieve professional power only by reproducing patriarchal values. Through this portrayal, Churchill critiques both the Thatcherite model of achievement and strands of feminism that equated empowerment with masculine definitions of success. Ultimately, the play suggests that true liberation requires reimagining women's roles in ways that balance personal fulfillment with professional ambition, rather than erasing the feminine in pursuit of the masculine.

2.0 Literature Review

Scholars have long regarded Caryl Churchill's Top Girls as one of the most significant feminist plays of the late twentieth century. The critical discourse surrounding the play spans feminist theory, Marxist criticism, and socio-political studies, reflecting its multifaceted engagement with class, gender, and ideology. This literature review outlines the main scholarly

conversations that inform this study. It begins by examining interpretations of feminist solidarity and its breakdown, then considers women's complicity with patriarchy, the intersections of feminism and class during Thatcherism, generational tensions in feminist discourse, and finally, Churchill's engagement with historical and ideological frameworks. Together, these discussions establish the critical foundation for understanding Top Girls as a socio-political critique of women's professional success within patriarchal structures.

To begin with, some scholars associated feminist solidarity shown in the play with fragmentation. Rebecca Cameron (2009) states that Churchill's works are part of those feminist British productions with largely female casts from both ends of the twentieth century and which appropriated elements of pageantry to create a vision of sisterhood responsive to the feminisms of their day. As such, Top Girls' opening act incorporates elements of pageantry reminiscent of the suffrage pageants as colorful historical women gather around a dinner table in a spectacle that may at first seem to represent female solidarity across cultures and history, but soon dissolves into conflict and chaos (Cameron, 2009). According to Cameron (2009), Churchill's use of pageantry in Act I, where historical women gather to celebrate Marlene's promotion seemingly symbolizes solidarity, but the scene dissolves into conflict, revealing the fragmentation of women's experiences. Firdaus (2011) similarly argues that these women succeed by assuming masculine roles, leaving their lives empty and unfulfilled. She argues that the same gathering with all the disparate stories that those women present may signify their success in a man's world by assuming manly positions and behavior at the expense of their expected feminine roles of marrying and rearing children. As a result, all the women gathered during the dinner share a common feeling of "affliction". Firadaus (2011) further argues that it is possible that a woman can survive alone without registering in the conventional institution of marriage, even though some aspects of her life remain unfulfilled, empty and unyielding because it is

against the law of nature. In this case, a woman's success means the end of family, a fact that reflects the condition of the modern working woman. Churchill thus critiques feminist success stories built on sacrifice rather than holistic empowerment.

Joseph Marohl (1987) argues that women in the play are shown to be complicit with patriarchy. He states that these women in the dinner party of Top Girls "have made obvious and often extreme concessions to their various patriarchies, against which they utter no word of condemnation or complaint" (1987, p. 384). On the contrary, they seem to defend the social orders to which they belong, frequently pointing out to a disbelieving Marlene that they deserved to suffer at the hands of an unforgiving patriarchy (Bazin, 2006). Along the same lines, this research contends that the women in Top Girls do not explicitly denounce the patriarchal system that oppresses them because they are themselves deeply embedded within it. In their attempts to resist male dominance, they inadvertently reproduce its structures by adopting masculine roles and internalizing the very values they seek to challenge. In brief, Marohl (1987) observes that the historical women in Act I defend rather than resist patriarchy, suggesting that their success required compliance. Bazin (2006) further shows how Churchill's women internalize patriarchal expectations. Marlene embodies this complicity most clearly: though she rises to power, she mirrors male authority in her treatment of other women.

An interesting approach to the play is examined by Sian Adiseshiah (2009) who argues that drama scholars have focused to a fault on Churchill's feminist themes, stylistic innovations, and postmodern inclinations, leaving behind the Marxist and socialist frameworks that might better explain her plays and their overall trajectory. Thus, in her opening chapter, Adiseshiah (2011) puts Churchill's plays in conversation with British Left debates from the 1970's to the 1990's, tracing how artistic debates on the left developed in their encounter with feminist and ecological concerns, Thatcherite, monetarism, and the fall of communism (Spencer 2011).

Moreover, Adiseshiah takes up the politics of motherhood as it affects the play's female characters, the practices and identities of women as workers inside and outside the domestic spheres, and the 'implications of engaging with women as a unified class' (as cited in Spencer, 2011). With this argument, Adiseshiah situates Top Girls within debates on feminism, socialism, and Thatcherite economics. Churchill stages the clash between Marlene's Thatcherite individualism and Joyce's working-class socialism, revealing how definitions of women's success are inseparable from class and economic structures.

Bazin (2006) offers a distinct perspective on Churchill's Top Girls highlighting generational tensions in feminism. Bazin (2006) situates the play within the broader feminist debates concerning the relationship between second- and third-wave feminisms. She argues that these debates are shaped by an impulse to conceptualize feminism in generational terms, where individuals identify their political consciousness with a particular feminist "generation." Within this framework, tensions among feminists are understood metaphorically as conflicts between mothers and daughters—natural yet transformative outcomes of generational evolution. In Top Girls, this generational dialectic is dramatized through the relationships among Marlene, Joyce, and Angie. Marlene's Thatcherite individualism represents the ambitions and contradictions of second-wave feminism, Joyce embodies the socialist values it often neglected, and Angie, the disoriented daughter, signals both the failures of her predecessors and the potential for renewal. Thus, Churchill uses familial conflict to explore the ideological and emotional rifts between successive feminist generations. Bazin further illustrates:

Top Girls dramatizes the conflict between two sisters: Marlene, the competitive, gusty, ambitious Thatcherite and Joyce, her exploited socialist sister who raises the child Marlene abandons. While Churchill takes a swipe at the selfish and shallow values of the new free enterprise culture, Joyce's arguments are no match for her sister's drive, energy, and ambition. The

person who forces Marlene to hesitate is her daughter, Angie. It is Angie who represents the revolutionary force within the play, and it is Angie's 'frightening' vision of the future that suggests the possibility of political change. (2006, p.119)

In other words, Bazin shows that both Marlene and her sister Joyce resemble the different voices of feminisms while her daughter Angie is the new force that would eventually be the main reason for political and social change. "The conflicted nature of sisterhood in Churchill's plays" as worded by Bazin, "offers an image of feminism in dialectical terms" (Bazin, 2006, p.119). In this sense, Churchill tries to understand the place of feminism in relation to a wider social and political scope starting from a personal level.

Bazin (2006), thus, interprets Marlene, Joyce, and Angie as generational voices of feminism: the Thatcherite careerist, the socialist caretaker, and the potential force of future change. In this dialectical framework, Top Girls dramatizes feminism's tensions between continuity and renewal.

Finally, Poole (2022) expands the critical conversation by situating Top Girls within competing feminist and materialist histories in a most recent study. She argues that Churchill resists linear narratives of progress by dramatizing the sacrifices embedded in women's professional success.

Together, these scholars highlight Churchill's critique of feminist fragmentation, complicity with patriarchy, and the socio-economic contexts of Thatcherite Britain. These insights support the argument that Top Girls interrogates the costs of women's professional success when defined by patriarchal norms.

3.0 Discussion

3.1 Marlene as a Feminist Heroine in Question

The play initially presents Marlene as a feminist success story. Act I's celebratory dinner frames her promotion as a triumph against the odds,

echoing Churchill's stated intention of showing her as "a sort of feminist heroine" (as cited in Bazin, 2006). Yet, as the play unfolds, the audience begins to question Marlene's values and the ideological foundations of her success. Her career advancement is revealed to depend on abandoning her daughter Angie and embracing ideals closer to Thatcherite capitalism than to collective feminism. Ahmed and Mohamad (2025) argue that Marlene exemplifies a model of female leadership that prospers within capitalist structures but does so only by marginalizing maternal responsibility. Similarly, Poole (2022) situates Marlene within competing feminist and materialist histories, showing how Churchill destabilizes triumphalist narratives of women's progress by revealing the social costs of individual advancement.

Marlene's rise to the top of the Top Girls agency requires a total commitment to her career, leading her to relinquish motherhood and familial ties. Firdaus (2011) notes that Marlene's decision "reflects the hollowness and concavity in her life though professionally she proves herself as a successful and efficient woman," and that to achieve such independence, she "immolates her emotional, social and moral obligations," leaving her fearful and lonely (p. 57). This deliberate separation from domestic life exposes the paradox of feminist success within patriarchal systems: to thrive professionally, Marlene must reproduce the very hierarchies she seeks to escape.

Marlene's situation also echoes Simone de Beauvoir's (1949/2011) argument that women's pursuit of autonomy often compels them to adopt masculine patterns of selfhood. Churchill dramatizes this dynamic to illustrate that liberation achieved through assimilation is not true emancipation but an extension of patriarchal logic. Marlene's apparent empowerment is thus illusory, grounded in self-denial rather than self-actualization.

3.2 Professional Success vs. Personal Sacrifice

The women in Act I—and Marlene herself—illustrate that professional advancement often demands personal loss. Their stories are marked by abandonment, fractured families, and loneliness. Marlene's neglect of Angie epitomizes the emotional void that follows career-driven ambition (Firdaus, 2011). The CORE Repository (2020) reinforces this reading by showing how Churchill problematizes motherhood, exposing the political and cultural pressures that render it a site of sacrifice rather than fulfillment.

Angie's naïve admiration for her absent mother complicates the notion of success, revealing the intergenerational damage caused by Thatcherite ideals of individualism. Angie's repeated phrase, "I'm going to work for you when I grow up," expresses both aspiration and tragic irony: she idolizes a mother who has abandoned her, embodying the next generation's inheritance of alienation. Marlene's celebratory status in Act I collapses once her personal history is revealed. Churchill herself explained that she wanted audiences to see Marlene as a heroine "who had done things against extraordinary odds" so that later "we could begin to question what her values actually are" (as cited in Bazin, 2006). The shift from admiration to skepticism underscores Churchill's critique of empowerment built on emotional denial and family disconnection.

This theme aligns with socialist feminist perspectives, particularly those of Juliet Mitchell (1971), who contends that capitalism divides women's identities between production and reproduction. Churchill exposes this dichotomy dramatically: the professional and the maternal cannot coexist under a system that defines success through male-coded productivity.

Churchill further exposes how women replicate patriarchal norms in their pursuit of success. Marlene embodies the patriarchal employer in her interview with Jeanine, discouraging her from mentioning her engagement and implying that marriage or motherhood would hinder her career:

Marlene: …No kids for a bit?

Jeanine: Oh no, not kids, not yet.

Marlene: So, you won't tell them you're getting married?

Jeanine: Had I better not?

Marlene: It would probably help. (Act II, Scene I, pp. 29–33)

This dialogue positions Marlene as the embodiment of patriarchal authority. As Cameron (2009) contends, Churchill depicts female "martyrdom as the product of a misogynistic society that requires women to make unreasonable sacrifices in exchange for limited social power" (p. 159). Al-Khafaji and Al-Maraabi (2024) extend this argument, describing such professional victories as a "reversible image of success" that can appear either feminist or anti-feminist depending on the interpretive lens.

In adopting the logic of the very system she resists, Marlene becomes complicit in perpetuating inequality. Her behavior toward Jeanine mirrors the capitalist pragmatism of male employers, turning feminist aspiration into exploitation. As Butler (1990) might suggest, Marlene's gender performance replicates patriarchal power rather than subverting it—her success depends on acting the "masculine" role convincingly.

The confrontation between Marlene and Joyce in Act III dramatizes this contradiction:

Joyce: You couldn't get out of here fast enough.

Marlene: Of course I couldn't get out of here fast enough.

What was I going to do? Marry a dairyman who'd come home pissed? / Don't you fucking this fucking that fucking bitch

Joyce: Christ.

Marlene: fucking tell me what to fucking do fucking.

Joyce: I don't know how you could leave your own child. (Act III, Scene I, pp. 100–105)

Marlene's fury and defensiveness reveal her inner conflict: she has internalized the aggression, competitiveness, and detachment of patriarchal success. As Cameron (2009) observes, Churchill highlights "the disturbing, disempowering consequences of assuming a masculine role" (p. 159). Marlene's verbal violence against Joyce exposes the emptiness of her supposed empowerment and the psychic cost of success achieved within an oppressive system.

Despite their professional triumphs, however, Churchill's women end up isolated and miserable. Marlene's anguished cry: "Oh God, why are we all miserable?" (Act I, Scene I)—captures the emotional cost of defining success through patriarchal ideals. The heavy drinking at the close of the dinner scene underscores their futile attempts to numb discontent. Poole (2022) interprets this collective despair as Churchill's refusal to frame women's progress as linear advancement; instead, she exposes the cyclical nature of oppression under capitalism and patriarchy.

Ahmed and Mohamad (2025) similarly argue that leadership without empathy or solidarity inevitably results in alienation, as Marlene's Thatcherite individualism leaves her devoid of intimacy or belonging. The women's misery reveals that individual ambition, when divorced from communal care, becomes self-defeating. The historical figures—Isabella Bird, Lady Nijo, Pope Joan, Dull Gret, and Patient Griselda—mirror Marlene's own contradictions, each having achieved visibility only through suffering or submission.

Churchill thus suggests that professional achievement alone cannot constitute liberation. Her female characters illustrate what Marxist feminists identify as "false consciousness": a belief in personal freedom that masks structural subjugation. Their misery is not personal failure but ideological consequence.

By living a man's life, Marlene becomes an active participant in the misogynistic system she once sought to overcome. The same pattern is

evident in the historical women of Act I, whose success stories end in solitude and regret. Churchill's narrative functions as a critique of Thatcher-era feminism, where individual advancement was often celebrated at the expense of collective care.

The play ultimately suggests that genuine empowerment lies not in replicating masculine ambition but in achieving equilibrium between personal fulfillment and professional aspiration. In this sense, Top Girls anticipates later feminist discourses emphasizing intersectionality and care ethics. It rejects the binary between domesticity and independence, proposing instead a redefinition of success rooted in relationality.

Churchill's warning remains urgent: success defined by patriarchal norms is self-defeating. Authentic liberation must include emotional integrity, relational connection, and social responsibility. As contemporary feminism continues to grapple with the challenges of work-life balance, Top Girls endures as a mirror reflecting both progress and persistent contradictions in women's struggle for equality.

4.0 Conclusion

Caryl Churchill's Top Girls stands as a landmark feminist drama that interrogates the paradox of women's success under patriarchy. Through Marlene's story and the interwoven narratives of historical women, Churchill exposes the cost of empowerment when it is modeled on masculine ideals. The play reveals that personal fulfillment, motherhood, and emotional well-being are too often sacrificed to achieve professional advancement in systems designed by and for men.

Churchill's critique extends beyond individual characters to the ideological fabric of Thatcherite Britain. She exposes how neoliberal ideals of competition, meritocracy, and self-reliance infiltrate feminist thought, turning liberation into assimilation. By juxtaposing Marlene's ambition with Joyce's grounded humanity, Churchill proposes that authentic empowerment cannot emerge from isolation or denial of the feminine, but

from solidarity, empathy, and balance.

Ultimately, Top Girls dismantles the illusion of success defined by patriarchal standards. It calls for a redefinition of feminism that integrates care, community, and self-awareness, affirming that women's liberation must embrace—not erase—the complexities of their identities.

4.1 Future Studies

Future research on Top Girls can expand in several productive directions. First, scholars might investigate the play through the lens of intersectional feminism, examining how Churchill's representation of class, race, and gender anticipates later theoretical developments by bell hooks (1984) and Crenshaw (1989). Such analysis could highlight how Top Girls critiques not only patriarchy but also class privilege within feminist movements.

Second, the play invites exploration through eco-feminist and posthumanist frameworks, focusing on the relationship between capitalist exploitation and gender oppression. Churchill's emphasis on productivity and commodified labor aligns with contemporary critiques of neoliberalism's environmental and emotional toll.

Third, comparative studies could analyze Top Girls alongside other contemporary feminist works—such as Sarah Daniels's Masterpieces or Carol Churchill's own Serious Money—to explore how theatrical form and political ideology intersect in late twentieth-century feminist drama.

Finally, further research could consider performance studies and adaptation theory, examining how modern stagings reinterpret Marlene's character in light of 21st-century feminist discourse, particularly in the post-#MeToo era. Such readings can assess whether today's audiences perceive Marlene as a victim of patriarchy, a symbol of capitalist feminism, or both.

By pursuing these critical pathways, future scholars can continue to illuminate the enduring relevance of Top Girls and its complex interrogation

of gender, power, and success in both historical and contemporary contexts.

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