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Intersection of Enterprise Culture and Male Ethos in Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*

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In the Post-War period, with the fast-changing cultural scenario, it is taken for granted that women are emancipating from the man-made oppressive system. Various social legislations, welfare measures, emergence of new sexual morality and phenomenal increase in jobs for women seem to indicate that they are moving away from the cramping conventional life. They are marking their thumping presence in almost all fields of life outside home but the fact is that they are doing it by internalizing and prioritizing patriarchal values and standards of success because the enterprise culture governed by male ethos limits their chances of success and survival in a meaningful way. The new culture asks them for aggression, ruthlessness, complete commitment and concern to the careers they pursue. Caryl Churchill, the contemporary British playwright, dramatizes these changes in her plays, especially of the eighties. The present paper examines the intersection of enterprise culture and male ethos in Churchill's *Top Girls* (1982). In the play, Marlene, the central character, is left with only one option to get success by internalizing the dominant culture and isolating herself from intimate relations and social life because without masculine traits it becomes difficult for her to enter the system still governed by male ethos of success. Now doubt she gets success in material terms, but remains a great loser in familial and social life. The play demonstrates the bitter fact that there is no discernible change in the status of women despite the high claims of change in the contemporary times.

In the Post-War era, it is assumed that the feminist movement, in a way, has emancipated women from the man-made oppressive system. It has opened new opportunities and vistas to show their abilities and skills in social, economic and political spheres. These changes seem to be marking "the end of Victorianism" (Marwick 145) that restricted woman devolvement through social control. Various social legislations (the Abortion Act, the Divorce Reform Act, Sex-Discrimination Act and Equal pay Act) are provisioned to support the norm of equality between the sexes. The trend in these legislations is to recognize women "as independent individuals" (Marwick 152). In this way, the recognition of personal lives is an important part of their freedom and equality in public as well as private domain.

But in the eighties, under the regime of Margaret Thatcher, abolition of the various welfare measures and adoption of individual capitalism as mode of economy put tremendous impact on the familial and social lives of women. With the new policy of Thatcher women have got "chances to get to the top since "anyone can do anything if they've got what it takes" (Churchill 86). Hence, the economic and political changes have provided women with opportunities to acquire quite new values of success and survival. Moreover, they are inclined to adopt masculine traits of ruthlessness, domination and toughness. Caryl Churchill, the contemporary British playwright, succeeds in capturing and dramatizing these changes in her plays, especially of the eighties.

Churchill wrote *Top Girls* in response to Thatcher's elevation to the post of Prime Minister in England. It led the Western world to the belief that "the eighties are going to be stupendous" (Churchill 83) for women but the very beginning of the new governance proved that only a few women thought that they were "going up up up" (Churchill 83). The play dramatizes the sordid aspect of Thatcherism that creates masculine culture where the top women oppress the ones sitting at the bottom of social hierarchy. The new culture gets reflected in the way various female characters, in the play, interact with one another.

In *Top Girls*, Marlene, the central character, is elevated to the top position of Managing Director of the Employment Agency named Top Girls wherein she works. To celebrate her success she hosts a surreal dinner party inviting the top girls from various countries, cultures and centuries. At the party, the women guests try to share their experiences of survival and success, but the communication is often marked and marred by the parallel overlapping speeches. Janet Brown observes that "these women do not comprise a community of women as much as a group of competitors: egoists who interrupt one another continually" (127). The behaviour they demonstrate at the party is typical of masculine culture. It is evident that they "imitated and were obedient to male authority through their lives and whose toughness enabling them to succeed did not challenge but rather validated patriarchal power" (Kritzer 144). Hence, the self-interested 'top girls' "caught up in their own individual narrative" (Aston 39) ignore the common concerns of women in the same way as men do in the patriarchal capitalist system.

Undoubtedly, the new system provides women with an opportunity to make to the top of their career and improve their financial position but it turns them into tough and egoist beings. They take for granted the achievements of the second wave of feminism and seem to be detached from the movement. Thus, Marlene in *Top Girls* represents a woman who fully acquires Thatcher's statement that "there is no such thing as society: there are only individuals, and families" (Lovenduski and Randall 36). About Thatcher, Churchill herself explains: "She may be a woman but she isn't a sister, she may be a sister but she isn't a comrade" (Betsko and Koenig 77). Hence, Marlene can be connected with the powerful woman who ascends the capitalist ladder and claims: "I don't want to think about discrimination against women, and I don't have to.... All I have to think about is myself" (Friedan 59).

Thatcher's stress on an individual can be connected with three million of unemployed inhabitants. Segal remarks that Thatcher's policies "lowered the living standards of the poorest and most vulnerable" (Segal 218). It implies that Thatcher overlooked "the needs and aspirations of her less fortunate, less thrusting sisters" (Lusting 12). Thus, Marlene, like Thatcher, fails to fulfill Woolf's claim, "A woman who accepts any job should not prevent any other human being...from practising the occupation. On the contrary, the woman should do anything what she can do to help them" (Woolf 79). Marlene uses her position of power and authority to oppress other women in domestic as well as professional domain. In the domestic sphere, she exploits her sister Joyce and in the professional field, she adopts harsh attitude to her female colleagues and job seeker girls and women.

The new economic system adopted by Thatcher not only creates masculine culture but also causes antagonism among women in general. Undoubtedly, a few women make mark in the new field but by segregating themselves from the lower chunk of society. Moreover, instead of

becoming benevolent they become oppressors of women, replacing man. Competing with each other for the top post in the respective fields they lose human virtues of compassion and solidarity. These new women have distanced themselves from feminine concerns by adopting masculine temperament which is manifest in their interaction with the women they come across.

Marlene's interview with Jeanine shows her acceptance and enforcement of patriarchal attitude to women job seekers. She disregards Jeanine's desires for advancement and fulfilment. Viewing that Jeanine does not want a long-term job due to marriage plans, Marlene comes out with an excuse: "You haven't got the speeds anyway" (Churchill 86). When Jeanine expresses interest in an advertising company, Marlene asserts that she is inadequate, "I have got a few vacancies but I think they're looking for something glossier" (Churchill 31). It is evident that Marlene as representative of the masculine world is averse to Jeanine's plight and needs. The way Marlene behaves with Jeanine implies that she defends "the power base she has acquired by patronizing, intimidating, and further narrowing the options of women who come seeking opportunity" (Kritzer 145). Marlene does not hesitate to discriminate against women in the same way as men often do. In this sense, Marlene emerges as a stereotypical male oppressor in the guise of a woman. The interview shows that Marlene and Jeanine constantly talk over and interrupt one another. Marlene's interruptions are rude and competitive. Churchill suggests that women do not listen to or hear one another in any meaningful way, especially in the competitive climate.

Marlene also treats Mrs. Kidd, the wife of her male contender Mr. Howard, in a ruthless and apathetic way when the latter asks the former to resign the post for the sake of her husband and family. In response to her demand, Marlene replies, "I'm sorry he's been taking it out on you. He really is a shit, Howard" (Churchill 59). Marlene further says, "If he doesn't like what's happening here he can go and work somewhere else" (Churchill 45). Marlene's rejection of Mrs. Kidd's demand reminds us of the assessment that women in different situations "do stand in different relationships to each other....some women do have power over others" (Ramazanoglu 113). It is obvious that Marlene becomes unnatural as accused by Mrs. Kidd as is evident in her denial of sisterly attitude. Marlene's complete absence of solidarity towards women and manly behaviour is further characterized by one of her colleagues: "Our Marlene's got far more balls than Howard" (Churchill 46). It is more than clear that Marlene adopts male standards of success for females which make her "a female oppressor" (Brown 118). Thus, Marlene fails to perceive the problems of women by acquiring masculine harshness and indifference to women. Moreover, she overlooks the importance of opportunity that she has gained with her success to support the needy women though she is in a position to benefit them and help establish a better world where women can enjoy decent and dignified life.

Marlene's female colleagues, Nell and Win, also, more or less, represent masculine attitude while interviewing the job-seekers at the agency. They do not hesitate to exploit the job seekers from their own lower class. Like Marlene, they represent patriarchal authority and hierarchical system. Nell interviews Shona, a young girl from working class, who pretends that she is an experienced and prosperous girl. She associates herself with upper class people who do not consider working class people's needs. Nell perceives Shona as a potential top girl, she treats her with some regard: "Video systems appeal? That's a high-flying situation" (Churchill 60). Shona presents herself in the 'tough girl' manner, believing that it will be pleasing to Nell, "I never consider people's feelings" (Churchill 61). As the interview proceeds, Nell realizes that

Shona has misjudged her. Her lack of experience as a top girl becomes evident when she concocts a story about her life. Nell immediately responds, ‘Not a word of this is true, is it?’ (Churchill 65). Although Shona is not experienced in the working field, she proves that she is aware of the fact that she has to show aggression and dismiss any sense of solidarity to be successful. While talking to Win, Nell states: “I always want the tough ones when I see them. Hang onto them” (Churchill 48) that she proves while interviewing Shona.

Win interviews Louise who wants to leave her company after working twenty years in it as she feels that the male culture of the company does not appreciate her work. Though she has valid reasons, she fails to express her resentment as she dissociates herself from her sex in order to succeed in corporate sector:

I don’t care greatly for working with women, I think I pass as a man at work...there is a kind of woman who is thirty now who grew up in a different climate. They are not so careful. They take themselves for granted. I have had to justify my existence every minute, and I have done so, I have proved – well. (Churchill 66).

Louise seems to seek solidarity and understanding, something that she herself did not apply at work. Louise stands for many women who leave their job because they feel that their work and credits are not valued by the system governed by masculine rules. She wants to get rid of sexual discrimination by leaving the previous job in the hope that the Employment Agency would help her but she is not considered for a better job as she has lost her beauty and vigour, crossing the age of forty. Win reminds Louise that her age is a handicap: “It’s not necessarily a disabling handicap, experience does count for something” (Churchill 65).

Marlene, Nell and Win overlook the plight and needs of the female job seekers. Governed by male ethos they show the systematic domination of women by woman. It implies that they need to oppress other women to remain in the present position. They are shown to be dominating other women and depriving them of their “equal pay and equal civil rights” (Ramazanoglu 11). Though they find a chance to help women, they “dissipate it by slavish imitating of men”(Woolf 86).

Marlene neglects not only the helpless job-seekers but also her own family for a long period of six years. She gets so much engrossed in her professional pursuits that she forgets even the birthday of her daughter. She says, “I’ve no memory for birthdays” (Churchill 67). She not only feels suffocated in the presence of Angie but also undermines her ability by considering her fit for “packer in Tesco” because to her she “is a bit thick. She’s a bit funny. She’s not going to make it” (Churchill 66). Wandor aptly remarks, “Marlene, even more successful and powerful, did not become more receptive to Angie” (Wandor 125). Marlene’s apathetic attitude validates the fact that “you can’t count on any woman, once she gets some power, not to sell other women out” (Friedan 25). Like Thatcher, she keeps the view that working class no longer exists in British society. Thus, Churchill through the character of Marlene highlights that the empowerment of individual women makes them ignore the powerless and needy women.

On the surface, Marlene typifies feminine ways as evident in her assertion at the dinner party when she tells her guests, “I don’t wear trousers in the office./ I could but I don’t” (Churchill 62). But in essence, she is a patriarch with masculine mindset and behaviour. With such behaviour,

Marlene contributes to the breakdown in familial relationships and class solidarity. She does not recognize her own daughter Angie and becomes rude to her own sister Joyce who is languishing in poverty. She considers Angie a stranger and tries to get rid of her as soon as it is possible. The questions she asks Angie are a clear indication of apathy towards her. Marlene asks Angie, “What have you been doing? Shopping?... What time do you have to be back? Have you got a day return?... who are you staying with? Do you want me to put you up for the night, is that it? I haven’t got a spare bed” (Churchill 88). She treats Angie with “the same impersonal efficiency accorded clients and the unfortunate Mrs. Kidd” (Krizer 146).

Marlene’s relationship with her own sister Joyce is far from being cordial and reciprocal, though the latter brings up the illegitimate daughter of the former. Their relationship can be viewed in terms of husband and wife, not in terms of sisters. Marlene leaves her daughter to Joyce and enters the patriarchal male-dominated world to achieve a high position. Also, she does not have a sense of sisterhood towards Joyce and does not pay attention to her situation as a working-class woman. Like Thatcher, Marlene undermines the role of feminists and other women in her elevation to the top position, keeping the view that she gets to the top on her own through skills, hard work and determination. Like Thatcher, Marlene in a position of power and authority “must have made it seem more possible for women to be powerful, to succeed in a ‘man’s world’” (Lovenduski and Randall 53).

Hence, Marlene stands for all those women who ascend the ladder of social hierarchy from the bottom through collective efforts but refuse to perceive any “discrimination against women” (Friedan 59). Despite her success in the professional field, Marlene is loser in the sense that she has nobody to appreciate her achievement except the women at surreal dinner party. Like Thatcher, Marlene distances herself from the interests and miserable condition of women. Marlene’s focus just on herself is evident in her conversation with Joyce about their ailing and aged mother. Marlene believes that it is Joyce’s choice to visit her mother regularly since she does not have to; however, Joyce asks: “How would I feel if I didn’t go?” to which Marlene replies: “A lot better” (Churchill 79).

Though Marlene has become a power to influence the lives of other women, she is indifferent to female issues in the way men are. Churchill suggests that it is indifferent attitude of Thatcher that leads to economic disparities between women as we find in case of Marlene and Joyce. Marlene’s attitude to working class is evident when she says, “I don’t believe in class. Anyone can do anything if they’ve got what it takes...If they’re stupid or lazy or frightened, I’m not going to help them get a job, why should I? (Churchill 86). Marlene and her colleagues have the power to influence the prospects of other women; notwithstanding, they limit career chances of the job seekers and refuse to recognize the women who are not similar to them.

In the end, Marlene remains alone and is not very successful in finding any friends as Mrs. Kidd tells her, “Miserable and lonely. You’re not natural” (Churchill, 43). In fact, Marlene does not have any friends in her real life to celebrate her promotion. She is alienated from real women. So, she has to celebrate her promotion with the fancy guests, not with the real people as her promotion is not a great thing for real people. Indeed, Marlene’s pride and her class differences drive her away from her own gender. She is such a miserable woman who is withdrawn from the society as is evident in her final words at the dinner party “Oh God, why are

we all miserable” (Churchill, 72) In the end, Marlene seems to regret that she left her child and seems to think about taking Angie with her to London. This is the moment when Marlene can be seen as a lady who considers her feelings, who can express solidarity to other women. Marlene really considers her feelings only she gets upset. She tries to end the discussion with Joyce once her values are questioned: ‘I didn’t really mean all that...But we’re friends anyway” (Churchill 81). The scene closes with Angie’s awakening from a nightmare. She utters the final word of the play: “frightening” (Churchill 95). The word ‘frightening’ seems to suggest that the present situation of animosity can lead to frightening future as we see in case of Angie. Churchill stresses in the play that it is not the individual but the system itself is faulty and the loss of humanity is the loss of everyone.

The foregoing discussion reveals the fact that new culture of enterprise governed by male ethos deprives women of rights of meaningful and dignified life. The new culture provides them with opportunities to get success in material terms, but it rejects their familial and social lives. It is the new culture that distances them from the concerns and needs of women. The play shows that women can ascend the ladder of social hierarchy only by supporting the masculine world where sexual discrimination and economic oppression of women are rampant. The way women suffer alienation in their lives suggests that male culture continues to characterize man-woman relationships in the Post-War society.

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