

The Reversible Image of Successful Women in Caryl Churchill's Top Girls

الصورة المعكوسة للنساء الناجحات في مسرحية كاريل

تشرشل نساء القمة

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Abstract:

This paper deals with Caryl Churchill's famous play, Top Girls (1982). The focus of this paper is directed towards Marlene, the protagonist of this play, and her surreal guests whom she invited to her dinner party. Discussing Marlene's success, her way of life, and her treatment to other women around her, this paper analyses Marlene as a character and how she can be compared to Thatcher, the British Prime Minister. The paper also discusses the stories of Marlene's guests and the way they consider themselves successful. The paper exhibits the success stories of these women and how they suffer to reach their success. Measuring the success and fame they reached, the paper explores how the success of these women can be regarded a failure for the feminist case as their success cannot be regarded as a landmark for success for other women nor other women should exactly follow their steps.

Key Words: success, business, career women, feminism, women's oppression, children, motherhood, family, etc.

This paper deals Caryl Churchill's most famous play, Top Girls (1982). The play is one of the manifestations of Churchill's interest with women's problems. As she is a socialist feminist playwright, Churchill tries to reflect women's dilemmas in a political perspective. Just like Owners (1972), Vinegar Tom (1976) and Cloud Nine (1979), Top Girls deals "mostly with political and social problems related to issues on gender seen from a feminist point of view". 1 Top Girls is the most

discussed and analysed play of Churchill's works. The playwright's aim is to theatrically expose women's continuous oppression through different facets in history. Besides, "Churchill intends to highlights the role of women which has been long forgotten throughout history and to demonstrate women that has been hidden from view." 2 Many critics focused on the opening scene of the play in which Churchill presented a celebrity dinner for some historical and literary women as an 'innovatory' technique with its overlapping dialogue because there are many British dramatists were affected by this technique. For that reason, Caryl Churchill "has pioneered a notation in print for the deliberate overlapping of speeches in her plays." 3 Also, the play "attracted feminist interest for the way in which it fostered ideas about breaking up language in the interests of finding a 'voice' in which women's concerns might be heard, or heard differently." 4

The subject of the play is the most interesting because it reversed the notion which regards women as the most oppressed gender to be the most oppressive ones. Women's oppression trespasses all the known tyranny and it can be seen the worst if it is compared with men's. Women who receive higher positions might be harder in treatment than most men because their oppression is not only directed to the opposite gender; it also launches to their same gender, i.e., women. Besides, one of the most interesting subjects in the play is the unexpected meeting of some historical female characters and some from literary works to congratulate Marlene, the successful modern woman who swept away the men who competed her to raise the higher position in her company that most men long to. This womanly meeting and the chitchat between them are one of the most extraordinary images in the modern and post-modern drama. Caryl Churchill proves again that she is one of the greatest figures in the field of drama when she collected "women from history and literature in a contemporary setting." 5 Churchill's gathering of these historical and literary women proves her interest with feminist problems because "[T]he recuperation of women's histories is particularly relevant here and has been a fundamental task for women all over the world." 6

The idea of writing the play came to Churchill's mind in 1979 when she has been to the United States of America. "She heard women emphasize opportunities for women as top executives in business." 7 After visiting the United States, she started thinking about a play that gathers some dead famous women who are gathering to discuss their deeds and sufferings. She was affected by the American women who

The Reversible Image of Successful Women.....(67)

were successful business women because feminism in the United States has been connected to capitalism while, in England, it “is far more closely connected with socialism.”⁸ She applied this idea in the first scene of the first act in *Top Girls* which exhibits stories of some women from history, art, literature, and one real woman. These women are invited by Marlene, the only real woman in the group, to celebrate her escalation as an executive manager in Top Girls Company. Also, one of the aims behind Marlene’s invitation for these girls is to celebrate these women’s extraordinary deeds through which they accessed history; thus Marlene welcomes her guests:

MARLENE. We’ve all come a long way. To our courage and the way we changed our lives and our extraordinary achievements.⁹

These women’s extraordinary achievements are not achieved easily because they strived hard to gain their success. Going back in time one complete year, the last scene moves back to Joyce’s house as Marlene is misinformed by Angie, her biological daughter, to visit Joyce, Marlene’s sister. The visit reveals both sisters’ past and how Marlene handed her daughter to her sister to raise her for the sake of Marlene’s personal glory. Thus Marlene is ready to neglect her intuition of motherhood for her success as her success “is rooted in the rejection of motherhood together with her former life.”¹⁰ According to Marlene’s way of success, the play reveals how some women, especially business women, step on their hearts for the sake of their successes. The play criticises those women who are ready to put everything behind for the sake of achieving their personal glories. To be like men who have no regard for their familial and domestic duties, ‘achiever’ women do not bring welfare for the feminist dilemma. Besides, the play is a harsh criticism for Thatcher’s regime in England because the play “responded to the return of the Conservative leadership and the rise of Margret Thatcher”¹¹ who did not achieve any kind of success for women or the feminist issues. Copying Thatcher on the stage, Churchill produced from her protagonist, Marlene, a negative copy of the English prime minister because the latter belongs to bourgeois feminism which “was not adequate to the task of improving the lives of a majority of women.”¹²

Accordingly, bourgeois feminism is one of the sources of women’s oppression in that “a society based on class divisions only few bourgeois can benefit and most proletarian women remain oppressed.”¹³ Thus, *Top Girls* is a manifestation that bourgeois feminism is not totally useful for the feminist issues in that it widens women’s problems, especially

The Reversible Image of Successful Women.....(68)

lower class women, as in the case with Joyce, Angie, and other women who look for promotion. Thus Marlene is Thatcher's reflection in the case of oppressing both men and women alike. Thatcher's regime is considered worse than most of the preceding male counterparts. Thatcher's political rule for Britain "showed little of the supposedly 'caring' side of women and instead revealed itself as more domineering and ruthless than most of the male prime ministers who had preceded here." 14

Women's oppression for other women is worse than male's subordination for women. This is true when we consider Marlene's subordination for other women in both her family and at work. This oppression comes mainly from the success some women achieve in their life. If oppression accompanies success, it will be disastrous for the feminist issue. This oppression is Churchill's purpose to assimilate between Marlene and Thatcher as "Thatcher's attraction for Marlene is the achievement of success in a male-dominated world, though Marlene subsequently becomes supporter of Thatcher's economic policies as well." 15 Thatcher is known to be 'The Iron Lady' because of her unavoidable imprint on the economic and political strategies in the British policy and her "bent on replacing Labour's socialist vision with an aggressive commitment to free trade, private enterprise and individual home ownership." 16 Even Margret Thatcher is the first woman prime minister in England, she is often labeled as a man because, during her regime, she did not manifest any feminist side; rather, her regime was stronger than men prime ministers. To discuss Marlene in the Thatcherite perspective, "Churchill warned of a backlash inherent in the pursuit of success achieved on exclusively male terms. Marlene's – and – Thatcher's – success can be mainly registered as individual cases that did not contribute sufficiently to the alteration of the average woman's life." 17

Marlene represents that kind of women who is ready to step on everything and everyone to reach her own goals. She neglected herself as well as her relatives. To be a successful career woman, "Marlene needs to oppress other women to remain on top." 18 Marlene's success cannot be achieved by any ordinary woman. It needs an ambition, willingness and a deliberate mind to pass over every obstacle. For that reason, Marlene's success is considered exceptional because Marlene herself "represents an individualist style of 'feminism' (called, at the time, 'bourgeois feminism'), eager to assert her right to compete as ruthless as

her fellow male capitalist.” 19 Her success is the ideal for radical feminism which calls for women to seize men’s position to be the leaders in society. For the radical feminism, Marlene’s competition with Mr. Kidd to win the position of the head manager of the Top Girls Company is considered women’s competition for gaining their rights in the patriarchal society. Marlene’s success can also be seen as “a struggle against the male dominated society. Struggling with male domination makes Marlene an ideal character for radical feminism.” 20 But Marlene’s material success “did not build solidarity or foster change for the majority.” 21 For that reason Marlene can be a dream-woman for many ambitious women for she utilised every opportunity to achieve her dreams. Some critics see Marlene as Churchill’s call for women to be independent in their ways of living. This could agree with Thatcher’s announcement for her future policy; once she announced: “I came to office with one deliberate intent. To change Britain from a dependent to a self-reliant society, from a give-it-to-me to do-it-yourself nation, to a get-up-and-go instead of a sit-back-and-wait-for-it Britain.” 22

Marlene’s dinner party is just like a womanly meeting. The meeting is just a small party to celebrate Marlene’s promotion in her job. “The fact that Marlene invites figures from the past emphasizes not merely her lack of personal relationships but also her uniqueness as a successful woman.” 23 The success Marlene achieves seems to leave her alone with no friends and no relatives. Her abandonment of her sister and her biological daughter, who are the righteous people to celebrate her success, makes her living in a dream-like surreal party where there are some women who have no existence in the real world:

Her guests in Act One reveal her loneliness as the guests are ‘surreal’ characters – not real people. In fact, Marlene does not have any friends in her real life to celebrate with her promotion. She is alienated from real women. So, she has to celebrate her promotion with fancy guests, not with the real people as her promotion is not a great thing for real people.
24

Within the chitchatting of these women, the first scene from the first act of play “describes the lives of six female characters coming from different centuries. Each of them has their own story to tell, as they have all been victimized by the patriarchal system in the century when they lived and have resisted the system with different strategies.” 25 From their conversations, these women seem unhappy with the lives they lived.

The Reversible Image of Successful Women.....(70)

They tried to resist the patriarchal systems in their times in different ways. Most of them did not achieve what they hoped to do. Their failure of achieving their goals “raises the question of the effectiveness of the feminist movement.”²⁶ Besides, the interruption each other makes during the conversation reveals that each one of them is proud with her own achievement. These women neglect the social decorum in their times in order to be, in their own way of thinking, successful. So their successes are not common achievement that women must follow but they are individual successes:

The dinner party demonstrates neither the common attributes of these top girls nor their common achievements, nor even their common interest in each other. Though they converse politely enough, the women interrupt each other with regularity and seem more interested in their own stories than in those of others. This self-concern is, of course, born of achievement, but in a context in which success required a readiness to ignore social disapproval. For a dramatist interested in the “possibilities for chance,” these characters portray female achievement as a welcome but not necessarily ennobling experience.²⁷

Marlene’s success in business and her neglect for other women, including her family, can be seen as a sort of patriarchy and adopting of male creed in success through which men leave everything behind in order to gain success. It is clear that Marlene is not ready to put any woman, even from her relatives, in a position that may compete with her in the future. As Marlene reaches the top position, there should be some people in the bottom as “her ‘success’ is empowered to decide which other women get to the top or are forced to stay at the bottom of the career ladder”.²⁸ By this behaviour, Marlene does not represent a normal woman, as Mrs. Kidd described her, because she “has broken the stereotypical feminine role and attained success in business. As an upper class bourgeois woman who is on the top of class hierarchy, Marlene dominates some other lower class women. In other words, she exhibits patriarchal forces over them.”²⁹ Her patriarchy can also be seen through her personal life for she prevented herself from her natural rights like marriage and having children. If Marlene follows her natural desires, she could not become a successful career woman because she is a mother and ordinary mothers rarely gain success in business life. Seeing Marlene from this point of view reveals the superficiality of the notion ‘liberated

woman' "which appeared during 'Thatcherite regime'" 30 as that kind of women should abandon their natural rights, like motherhood and marriage, in order to gain success. Leaving the sense of motherhood is the first step that these women do to consider themselves successful. Although motherhood is not the main subject in *Top Girls*, it "is rather represented as a pervasive component of women's identities and women's worlds." 31 This abandoning of the natural rights like motherhood and domestic responsibilities is what makes professional career women as strange for the mainstream of women. Marlene represents the 'liberated' woman who is 'pushy' while her working-class and stay-at-home sister represents a normal woman that male taste prefers.

It is important to note that Angie is not a passive girl when seeing her planning for her future. Contrasting to the notion of being "a clumsy teenager who cannot cope with her situation", 32 Angie is different from other girls in her generation who wish others to fulfill their dreams; Angie, with her limited possibilities, has the ambition to strive hard to obtain success Marlene reaches. Just like Marlene, she is ready to escape her class and to look for improvisation. Visiting Marlene in the employment agency in London where Marlene works, Angie thinks that this visit is her first step in her long way in success road. She imitates the top girls', who have been present at Marlene's party, steps when "she has set out on a journey to a distant place in pursuit of change." 33 From her way of thinking, it is possible to see Angie as a top girl in the future for her innate desire to revolt on her way of living. But her exceptional cry at the end of the play reflects her innate terror from a future expected to be empty from any hope for an ambitious girl like her. Her nightmare scream manifests a "terrifying vision of a future of limited prospects for a girl without brains, looks and money, ill-equipped to compete in a thrusting Thatcherite world." 34

According to Marlene, just like Isabella Bird, her father represents the passive male power which she tries to defeat. For that reason, she "resists the male power and control in the family, her father's, and the society's power and control over her class position, by running away from all that binds her to the will of others." 35 She tries to build her own independent life away from men's control and to elevate her position as a successful woman. Giving up her family duties behind, Marlene decided to leave home at the age of thirteen to explore the life of adventure and independent work. She thinks that she no more needs men, but her

pregnancies and pills prove that whatever a woman reaches, she needs men to fulfill her biological desire. Marlene could defeat her innate female desire of motherhood by giving her new born child to her childless married sister and to leave everything behind her to achieve her dream as a successful independent woman. Her pregnancy, on the other hand, is considered a 'leap backward' because it "threatens the realization of her future plans and puts her on the brink of repeating her mother's story. Moreover, the baby is certainly a burden as it will tie her down to domesticity and she cannot afford to have baby if she wants to pursue her ambition as a successful career woman." 36

Thus *Top Girls* manifests the results of successful career women on both themselves and their families. Women who indulge in both economic and professional improvement will give poor attention to their domestic life. It is normal for a woman who spends most of her time travelling to ignore her family; or even herself. Such women have no time to fulfill the domestic duties for they are most of the time busy so that "[t]he result for many successful career woman can be guilt and pressure" 37 as in the case with Marlene who has no time to be pregnant or to visit her relatives. Mrs. Kidd, a normal woman whose life is directed towards her family and her husband, thinks that Marlene is not a normal woman when she attempts to convince her to leave her position for Mr. Kidd; she tell Marlene:

MRS. KIDD. It's not easy, a man of Howard's age. You don't care. I thought he was going too far but he's right. You're one of these ballbreakers, / that's what you

MARLENE. I'm sorry but I do have some work to do.

MRS. KIDD. are. You'll end up miserable and lonely. You're not natural. (Act Two, Scene 1, p. 70)

Espousing men's creed in career competition, Marlene degrades both her daughter and her sister. This gap between the upper-class and the working-class is clearly manifested when Marlene brought gifts to her sister and her daughter in order to affect them. By this act of offering gifts for both her sister and daughter after six years of absence, Marlene just "evokes the role of the absent father, who hands out presents to compensate for his lack of responsibility." 38 This absence is due to Marlene's busy life in economic world where she strives hard to establish her existence in that patriarchal world. Elaine Aston sees that it is difficult for a woman to combine between her career and domestic life for each one of them requires special duties; she adds:

Top Girls itself points towards an answer: unless women, in the interest of economic and professional advancement are prepared to make sacrifices, particularly of the domestic and maternal kind, and espouse masculinist values then they do not 'get on' (or, in the case of theatre, get 'put on'). The politics of a selfish versus selfless creed is staged in Top Girls in the relationship between two sisters, Marlene and Joyce. As Marlene enjoys her high-flying career, her working-class sister Joyce has a less 'successful' (in economic terms) life caring for Marlene's daughter, Angie (a low achiever and unlikely to become a 'top girl'). The difficulty of combining work and family life is posed as an unresolved problem in Top Girls, while the dangers of espousing Marlene's masculinist capitalist values, oppressive to other women (and men), are signalled in the final line of the play, delivered by Angie: 'Frightening'. 39

Angie's cry at the end of the play represents the actual bleak future that children suffer under the unreasonable rush of women into the professional careers letting their children and domestic duties behind. It is wrongly believed that a successful woman should abandon her natural rights, like marriage and children, for the sake of career success. Marlene reflects the passive copy of the professional career woman who left her baby behind and spent her life on pills and abortions. The pills and abortions are Marlene's method of defeating her natural desires and they are the "positive decision" 40 for women to complete their lives normally. Following this notion, "Marlene believes that in order to be on top marriage and children should not be mentioned as in her own case she leaves these two elements to be on top." 41 This neglect for childbirth is represented in Angie's final cry which illustrates her feeling of loss in a world that mother has no sense of their own children. The play also manifests the ignorance successful women pay towards both their families and their class. Most of successful women neglect the selfless creed in order to achieve their success. The play creates a dogma which Elaine Aston names as 'new feminism' of successful women who heatedly compete for the success regardless the economic and social class:

However, as Top Girls shows, to accept as cathartic the possibility of 'female success' based on egotism, cruelty, 'death-dealing', would mean somehow taking pleasure in

Angie's 'Frightening' moment. What this highlights is the 'gap' between Churchill's socialist-feminist and the 'new' feminism, gaining ground in the 1990s, that espouses 'female success' and continues to ignore the economic and class factors that militate against the idea that all women are able to 'compete' on an equal basis. Two key issues that emerge from the socialist-feminist of *Top Girls* set against the material and cultural backdrop of the early 1990s are the difficulty of combining work and motherhood, and the social reality for young, disadvantaged girls, like Angie. 42

One of the important points these celebrated women in Marlene's party share is that all of them have gained success in life in a way or another. Marlene reaches the highest position in her company. Joan became a Pope, a position that most Christian religious men do not even dream to reach. Isabella Bird becomes a famous traveller who gains both entertainment and knowledge. Griselda gained her children back and got her husband's love and estimation for the rest of her life. But the success these women won is not without a tax. Every one of these women has to pay for her success because success in life is not free any more. their success is accompanied with pain as they pay for their success:

All these six female characters [...] share several similarities. First of all, all of the characters live in a patriarchal society and all of them, consciously or unconsciously, have the awareness of their rights and they fully realize that they do not deserve to be treated badly. As a result of this awareness, all of them demonstrate resistance to win and survive the patriarchal system by using different strategies. All of them gain success in a sense that they can achieve what they want – Marlene gets a successful career, Joan becomes a pope, Griselda wins the respect from her society, both Nijo and Isabella have their freedom and Gret has her revenge. Yet, all of them have to pay a price for their success. Marlene has to pay with abortions and giving away her daughter so that she can pursue her career. Joan has to pay with her life. Nijo and Griselda have to sacrifice their children for their social status. Isabella pays with her constant feeling of guilt and Dull Gret loses all her children. 43

Reviewing both gains and losses, one becomes in an amaze when tracing these women's ends. The play reveals that women's success does

The Reversible Image of Successful Women.....(75)

not come without loss. As the conversation between the women reveals their own stories of success and fame, they fail “to follow or to initiate conventions of success” 44 because “the characters at the party are located in that strange Churchillian zone, suspended between stereotypes that they failed to follow and prototypes they failed to initiate.” 45 Thus the play can be seen as “a study of what must be sacrificed for a woman to be a success in a man’s world. It provides a sharp reminder that the advances of one woman do not necessarily facilitate the advances of others.” 46 According to this perspective, however, it is totally wrong to consider that these women are completely successful because each one of them has paid severely for her success. Even they gather in a happy meeting, they do not forget their miseries and the depression led them even to forget the sweet of their success as Marlene bitterly asks: “Oh God, why are we all so miserable?” 47

Marlene’s question reveals the bitterness these women suffered from and the success they gained does not compensate the unpleasantness they had. This question also arises an inquiry about the ‘effectiveness’ of women’s struggle to get their rights. If women, after all, do not feel satisfied with their success, their efforts would have gone with air. Marlene shows the fact that all these women have suffered from men’s control over all the fields of life. Even women in the modern and the post-modern ages gained some of their rights, “stories of similar abuse: domestic and sexual violence is still alive and happening.” 48

In this play, Churchill criticises the notion of “‘Superwoman’ ethos by demonstrating that the success of ‘top girl’ Marlene is achieved at the expense of oppressing her working-class sister Joyce, who has care of Marlene’s daughter, Angie.” 49 Following this notion, however, some critics see that “[t]he idea of the exceptional woman, the figure who, despite her gender, manages to succeed in a male world is patronizing and unhelpful.” 50 Thus Caryl Churchill lashes out women’s adoption of male’s way of achieving success. There should be another way for gaining women’s rights without subordination or discrimination for any sex:

However, one interprets the play, the experience of these six women exemplifies how male domination in the patriarchal system has occurred since centuries ago and is supported by the most sacred institutions of the church and flourishes in the marriage institution. Individual fights of these women will never come to any achievement, because

the system is too well rooted to beat. Women should rethink and reshape their way of struggling against the patriarchal system. Eliminating the well-established patriarchal system needs more than imitating men's roles and forgetting women's own nature and identity. 51

According to this reading, however, the play "challenges the inequities of capitalism" 52 by showing the disadvantages of women's adopting male's creed in competition. The play also criticises the notion of 'bourgeois feminism' where "a successful woman does not necessarily benefit people of her own sex." 53 Following Marlene's success in her career life and failure in domestic life, the play can be seen as a warning against both bourgeois and radical feminism in the case that Marlene is seen as a negative image of Thatcher's system in both Britain and Europe in general.

According to Sian Adiseshiah, however, the play criticises the feminist movements' neglect for 'class politics' for it shows that most of the feminist movements long for women's success without paying attention for the aftermath of that success. This criticism of the successful heartless woman which is intended for the British Prime Minister, Margret Thatcher, and theatrically staged by Marlene, the protagonist of the play, is Churchill's message for her audience of the danger of optimising so much on the success women gains and a call for the feminists to reevaluate their notion about successful woman:

It (the play) is more self-critical. In part it critiques the neglect of class politics within the feminist movement. In this way it speaks directly to feminists and socialists about the importance of pursuing anti-capitalist and feminist goals in tandem. It is not, however, an introspective play; it equally addresses a wider audience both in its astute representation and critique of Thatcherite Britain and the depiction of the strained relationship between two sisters, their choices or lack of them, and their relationship with their niece/daughter. 54

ملخص البحث:

تتناول هذه الدراسة المسرحية المشهورة لكارييل تشرشل، سيدات القمة (1982). إن إهتمام هذه الدراسة سيركز على بطلة هذه المسرحية، مارلين، وضيوفها الخياليين الذين دعتهم الى حفلة العشاء خاصتها. يناقش هذا البحث

نجاح مارلين وطريقة عيشها وكذلك معاملتها لبقية النساء من حولها وكيف يمكن مقارنتها برئيسة الوزراء البريطانية، مارغريت ثاتشر. يناقش هذا البحث أيضا قصص نجاح ضيوف مارلين والطريقة اللاتي يعتبرن أنفسهن ناجحات. تعرض هذه الدراسة قصص نجاح تلك النسوة وكيف أنهن عانين من أجل الوصول إلى النجاح. ومن خلال قياس النجاح والشهرة اللاتي وصل إليهما تلك النسوة فإن هذه الدراسة توضح كيف أن النجاح الذي وصلن إليه تلك النسوة يمكن أن يعتبر فشلا للقضية النسوية لأن نجاحهن لا يمكن أن يعتبر علامة مضيئة للنجاح لبقية النساء ولا يمكن لبقية النساء أن يقلدن خطواتهن بالضبط.

Notes:

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