



**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**Innovative Dramatic Technique of Caryl Churchill in her plays *The Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, *Top Girls* and *Cloud Nine* and *Vinegar Tom***

**Hem Prakash<sup>1</sup> and Dharmendra Kumar<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Department of English, D.S. College, Aligarh

<sup>2</sup>Department of English, S.K. College, Etah

Email: [hemprakash2307@gmail.com](mailto:hemprakash2307@gmail.com)

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**ABSTRACT**

*Caryl Churchill created new kind of drama after taking reins of dramatic activity at the Royal Court Theatre. She affected drama by effecting feminine point of view in the dramatic activity and by framing drama of women's choices. She does not care for the traditional patterns and norms of drama. She makes her own drama in which women's participation dominates. She develops her own artistic designs in the dramatic activity which is infested with innovations of her own. She designs speeches exclusively suited the female kind with her autonomy in her thoughts and actions. She goes to the extent of devising an exclusive feminine society with a female voice of economic independence. She developed situations in which females took the leading role and sometimes all characters were played by females. Sometime, she develops the technique of time shift in order to show the contrast between the past and the present- the same characters behaving in the seventeenth century and then in the nineteenth century. The innovations making impact on the audience are worth to draw attention of a researcher for a better assessment of Caryl Churchill's dramatic activity.*

**Keywords:** *Caryl Churchill, The Light Shining, Buckinghamshire*

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**ASSUMING AUTONOMY**

Caryl Churchill is a big name in the British drama of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. She achieved distinction as an exponent of the Feminist Theatre in England after displaying one after another thundering performances at the Royal Court Theatre in 1970's. She is known for the use of non-naturalistic techniques and feminist themes. Her early works developed Brecht's modern dramatic and theatrical techniques. From *A Mouthful of Birds* onwards, she began to experiment with forms of dance theatre. She also incorporated a few techniques developed from the performance tradition initiated by Artrand with his "Theatre of Cruelty." This move away from a clear fable dramaturgy towards increasingly fragmented and surrealistic narratives characterizes her work as innovative and post-modernist. Let us mark the words of Helen Keyssar thus:

*Churchill marks and distinguishes her feminism, both in the theatrical approach and in its historical perspectives. To emphasize the distinct angle of her vision Churchill urged the characters should not be played by the same actors each time they appeared.*

Caryl Churchill's attempts in the feminist drama have brought good results for the upliftment of the Feminist Theatre in England. This lady dramatist has revolutionized the theatrical scene of England and it was for her novel things in the field drama that she dominated the Royal Court Theatre. Both in the matters of theme and style she stands as an innovator Feminism in England and America developed during 1960's and 1970's with novel considerations of the feminine ways of living. Complete autonomy for women was conceived not only in theories but in the dramatic presentations as well. Equal participation of women in the constitution of sociological structures was also devised. But all such slogans have been given a new direction and entirely novel presentation in the art of Caryl Churchill.

### SPECIAL DEVICE FOR FEMALE REPRESENTATION

Caryl Churchill does not want to enlist sympathy for women. She only wants proper share of her identity in the entire sociological structure. Actually, the main difference between the feminism of Caryl Churchill and other feminist thoughts lies on the point that Caryl Churchill has viewed the life of women as a distinction of greater delights in feminine virtues, which have generally been exploited by the males in their own favour. Other feminists demand sympathy for women and show their distinction in espousing feminine causes. Caryl Churchill has kept in her mind that the male propaganda has conceived a few favours to womankind by treating an object of delight. She conceived of a different plan. She goes to the extent of devising an exclusive feminine society as in her *Top Girls*. It is, of course, a kind of imaginative realization of a particular situation in which women are kept entirely free from their economic dependence on man, so that the inherent ways of oppressions of the male dominated society may be kept aloof.

Caryl Churchill challenges the norms of the society based on patriarchal systems. She thinks in terms of constituting a different society in which women may attain to their autonomy. She does not want that the female society, as devised by her imagination, should suffer under the dominion of what the male propaganda in the society has dictated. In her opinion female beings assume as great picture of themselves as any other constituent part in the society. The idea conceived by Caryl Churchill is unique. In her opinion woman is as much the object of nature as man. Therefore, she has her rights to display, execute and design her natural gifts in her own fashion. Several kinds of impositions on woman in different ages have furnished her natural image and she has generally been treated a supplement to male designs. In order to bring out the complete personality of woman as woman Caryl Churchill has worked on sexual designs, male female unions and even female isolated living from the feminine point-of-view. A different kind of life has been conceived and planned in her dramatic activity with the notion in mind that women may have complete exposure of their true self.

### FEMALE DOMINANCE

In her famous play, *Cloud Nine* Caryl Churchill plans the presentation of contrast between the two kinds of living in sexual fulfillment – one dominated by men and the other dominated by women. From the Victorian society to the emergence of new society where inhibitions about sex have vanished and where woman have started playing leading role there is a marked contrast viewed and projected by Caryl Churchill. We may mark the following words of Josna Naumann:

*Caryl Churchill has become well-known for her use of dramatic structure often overshadowing the context of her works. She is a playwright of ideas with her primary concern being individual's struggle to emerge from the ensnarement of culture, class, economic system and imperatives of the past. Not surprisingly for a contemporary female writer, she primarily employs female characters to deal with such themes. In "Cloud Nine" a parallel is suggested between Western Colonial Oppression and Western Sexual Oppression. This oppression is seen first in the family structure then in the power of the past to influence the present."*

Caryl Churchill employs her innovative mind in producing the picture of woman's innerself by planning a few imaginative situations arising out her gender consciousness. She realizes that theatrical activity has generally remained in the hands of the male beings. Therefore, objectification of woman's subjective self has generally remained partial as the male ego has never allowed the emergence of woman's personality in a way that may jeopardize man's position in the society in any manner. All directions of the stage were in the hands of the male directors of the theatrical companies. Even as a writer with feminist point-of-view she wanted to do something and to bring changes in the presentation of woman's cast. It was for the first time that the entire theatrical activity came into the hands of a woman when Caryl Churchill came on the stage and contributed her designs of the stage presentation at the Royal Court Theatre.

Caryl Churchill dominated the theatrical network and created new scenes of women's participation on the stage. She developed several situations of dramatic presentation in which women took the leading roles. She went on experimenting the women roles to such an extent that when she came to the composition of *Top Girls* all characters were introduced from the women folk. An entirely new

pattern of life with the dominance of women's attitude was conceived. The dramatic activity, which aims at projecting the image of life and time through initiation of action, was still waiting for an able and clever woman leader- a thing which could be visualized in full bloom when Caryl Churchill took the reins of drama in her hands. Let us mark the words of Lib Taylor thus:

*What was a crisis for the male became a significant set back from the female bid for self-determination, returning her to a pre-war position from which she had just begun to escape. The economic independence won during the war, when women were in demand in the labour market, was reserved so that by 1947 only 18% of the married women were in employment.*

With the emergence of Caryl Churchill on the scene, woman's assertive voice was heard and male ego was dismantled. She projected the images of life in which woman had free play of her desires and designs of life. What was subdued in and around a woman came to light and several such designs of woman's life as had never appeared in print were executed in theatrical exercises.

### QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS

A new thing in the dramatic technique of Caryl Churchill is that she raises questions about the problems surrounding women's lives and does not answer them for a definite conclusion from her own side. She leaves the matter to audience to find out solutions. She deals with some of the most difficult questions of the contemporary life. *The Ants* among her radio plays, *Owners* among her television plays and *Cloud Nine*, *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, *Vinegar Tom* and *Top Girls* among her full length stage plays present novel situations in imagination casts and have direct bearing on the contemporary questions. She approaches even the most difficult questions with psychic reality in playful and comic manner. She does not write on the principles of pre-decided orals. She takes a feminist standpoint and questions the society about what they practice and what they have practised historically in the prevalent systems. The words of Amelia Howe Kritzer are worth quoting here thus:

*Churchill's plays are, above all theatrical. Their theatricality energizes the process of open-ended questioning that empowers audience to ask further questions and seek satisfactory answers in the world outside the theatre. Churchill's continual imaginative challenge to the conventions of the theatre she inherited distinguishes her work as does her overt thematically based questioning of societal conventions.*

High seriousness of Caryl Churchill about the feminist world and the feminist theatre is further highlighted in the following words of Elaine Aston:

*The kind of questions that Churchill asks through her theatre reflect her feminist and socialist viewpoints, but allied to her interrogative, political mode of writing is her experimental approach to dramatic and theatrical form. Churchill's theatre is not just a question of politics, but a politics of style.*

### LINGUISTIC IDIOM

Caryl Churchill's use of distinctive linguistic idiom for the feminist expression is also an innovation on her part. She is very much conscious about the use language in dramatic presentation. Actually, she knew that the of language that had been given to the mouth of the feminine characters was essentially related to the propaganda of the male world which dominated the society in the age long traditions of maiden bashfulness, submissiveness, coyness, gentle expression with sweet smile under a very small exposure of lips as the prime virtues of the feminine world. All these things were universally accepted and all speeches of the feminine world were guided by these norms assigned as marks of beauty in female beings. But, all these things were designed to please male ego and male imagination. Caryl Churchill as an innovator in the use of language breaks all such boundaries and keeps her women in leading speeches. In her *Vinegar Tom*, Alice is a young lady of her fancy, feelings and desires. She caught a man in her fancy and went for what her natural feelings dictated to her. Her act becomes a question of serious nature in the society of seventeenth century. She is nicknamed as a whore in the traditional linguistic idiom. She is being forced to accept that she is a witch. But Alice shows her attitude in her assertives. That is why, she reacts to

the statements of Susana who is trying to put into her mind that devil has gone inside her and she is a witch. Let us mark the conversation:

- Susana : Don't always talk of men.  
 Alice : He knew what he was doing.  
 Susana : You'll know what he was doing in a few months.  
 Alice : No, it never happens. The cunning woman put a charm inside me.  
 Susana : Take more than a charm to do me good.  
 Alice : Not again? Does he know?  
 Susana : He wants it. I know the night it was. He said, "Let's hope a fine child comes of it."  
 Alice : And what did you say?  
 Susana : Devil take it.  
 Alice : Blood every month, and no way out of that but to be sick and swell up, and no way out of that but pain. No way out of all that till we're old and that's worse. I can't bear to see my mother if she changes her clothes. If I was a man I'd go to London and Scotland and never come back and take a girl under a bush and on my way.

The nature of language used in this conversation has inhibited expression of a female being. Alice is talking freely about those things which have occurred to her. The argument about "blood every month" and its stay into swelling up and then pain has the innermost feeling of a female being. Alice knows her ways and takes her own decisions. She ignores all that Susan wants to put into her mind.

In *Cloud Nine* and *Top Girls* also the feminine speeches have typical feminine flavour. In *Cloud Nine*, Betty of the Second Act has learnt her perfect role as a feminine being as the mother of her children who have now grown up. She admits sexual freedom to her children and promises to provide more space for privacy than it was admissible to them earlier. Whatever problems of sex occurred in the First Act are resolved in the Second Act. Another definition of human relations is chalked out with more and more female participation in it. In this manner, *Cloud Nine* makes a fresh definition of gender consciousness and sexual attitudes in the fast developing changes in the patterns of personal relationships. In *Top Girls* Caryl Churchill exposes the feminine world with exclusively planned action revolving around female beings. In a posh restaurant Marlene celebrates her promotion as the Managing Director of the Top Girls Employment Agency. There is a dinner party and all the guests are female beings. Among the guests there are a Victorian Era Scottish Traveller, a Japanese Courtesan turned Buddhist Nun, Pope Joan and a few aspirants, top girls. Women's conversation at the party has feminine voice by crossing cultures, generations and politics. In their conversation, they believe in their choices, sacrifices and their joys in living with one another. All of them are happy to live their lives as feminine beings. All of them have given up significant relationship which they came across in the male-female cross section of the society as mother, wife, lover, nurturer, partner etc. The action moves forward with the reality of working class women. There is an imaginative reconstruction of a female society with exclusive choices.

### TECHNIQUE OF TIME SHIFT

Technique of time shift and characters in doubling also fall into the share of Caryl Churchill's innovations. In *Vinegar Tom* and *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* she shifts the scene to 17<sup>th</sup> century conditions in England. By projecting a flash of that time, Caryl Churchill puts audience to question whether the developments that took place historically were ever justified to women. Even the laws in astounding terms for the constitution of a welfare society with constant awareness to provide equality to women were never fair to womankind. The feelings Margaret Brotherton has shown in the play *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* narrate the unhappy story of the female world in all ages. In *Cloud Nine* another innovation is discernible as the First Act is laid in the Victorian Age and the Second Act takes place about a hundred years later, but the characters grow only twenty five years in age. The contrasting attitudes of people about their concepts and feelings for

the life of sex are projected. The drama becomes highly effective in the last flash when Betty embraces her own image of the First Act:

*Clive: You are not tht sort of woman. Betty, I can't believe you are, I can't feel the same about you as I did. And Africa is to be communist, I suppose. I used to be proud to be British. There was a high ideal. I came out in the Varandah and looked at the stars. (Clive goes. Betty from Act I comes. Betty and Betty embrace).*

With the help of this innovative device Caryl declares the better side of Betty as a female being. She has noted autonomy, confidence and awareness of her own self and in this manner she bids farewell to her earlier weaknesses.

Thus, Caryl Churchill has done plenty of work for the upliftment of the feminist theatre. Her innovations in her dramatic technique assert the female voice. Blooms of the female world are duly recognized and several questions about what has happened to women have been raised. Really, she has achieved high distinction in the theatrical network of England and America and has raised issues on which the modern generation has been set to thinking.

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