



## EXPLORING THE FEMININE : SHIFTING GENDER ROLES IN CARYL CHURCHILL'S CLOUD NINE.

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### ABSTRACT

Gender roles have been defined in extremely rigid terms by strict patriarchal norms. Masculine and Feminine traits have been demarcated and certain prescribed behavioral patterns are ascribed to them. Caryl Churchill's women characters in *Cloud Nine* attempt to question these gender specific roles. These women have been conditioned to behave in certain ways through years of conditioning. Yet, they strive to both cross and break the barriers pulling them down, in their struggle to carve out new identities for themselves. The journey in this direction is wrought with self-doubt, uncertainty and sometimes guilt. But, society had changed after the world wars and women could no longer be contained and confined. The researcher attempts to study the journey of the main female protagonists in *Cloud Nine*, in order to chronicle their self-development. Are these women able to be genuinely free or are they still unsure about themselves? The researcher also attempts to study the impact of these shifting gender roles on the male protagonists. Do they resist these changes or do they welcome the changing gender stereotypes.

**KEYWORDS:** Gender roles, Patriarchy, Feminine, Masculine, Conditioning and Stereotypes.

### EXPLORING THE FEMININE : SHIFTING GENDER ROLES IN CARYL CHURCHILL'S *CLOUD NINE*

Like all wars, the second world war also changed society in extraordinary ways. Gender roles underwent drastic alterations. Since men were engaged in military service, in the call of duty, women were thrust into roles previously held exclusively by men. This change in gender roles led to a breakdown of traditional barriers which had held women down for centuries. Women were seen in factories, driving trucks and other heavy machinery, as farm labour, and even repairing their own cars at home. The typical image of a British woman was turned on its head in the face of necessity. Of Course, the men too were forced to acquire different gender roles. Away from their homes, for prolonged periods, they learnt how to cook, clean, sew, mend and generally look after their basic needs. These roles had been previously undertaken by mothers, wives, sisters, and aunts. But, when the men returned and the euphoria of them being alive had died down, there arose new types of conflicts. This expectation of things returning to normal, the way it was before the war, led to tension between the genders. Women were no longer content sitting at home. They wanted to participate in every walk of life, alongside their male counterparts.

Post second world war British drama reflected this strain caused due to the shifting gender roles. Playwrights such as John Osborne, Harold Pinter, Mary O' Malley and Caryl Churchill were portraying the varied hues of gender politics and issues of sexuality. For the first time intimate personal relationships were discussed on the British stage. Osborne's *Look back in Anger* heralded this exploration of the man woman relationship in passionate and compelling ways. One of the most famous post war British woman playwrights, Caryl Churchill, is a legend in her own right. She has the distinction of having three successful plays being staged simultaneously in 1983. These were *Fen*, *Top Girls* and *Cloud Nine*. Churchill shows an array of female characters in her dramas. Some are passive, subjugated and sacrificing. While others are assertive and dominating, refusing to be type caste in previously decided roles. But all of her dramas are about women, struggling to come out into their own.

Churchill's *Cloud Nine* is a scathing indictment on gender stereotypes. The play explores the crisis of identity in a patriarchal family. The drama is divided into two acts and the themes of gender

bias and identity crisis run throughout. But, Churchill juxtaposes the traditional family setting of the first act with a more contemporary one in the second. The characters are the same in the second act, but, interestingly, society has changed and gender roles are not as biased and sacrosanct. Even some of the characters have evolved, especially the women.

In the first act, Clive is shown to be the domineering white Administrator of both, his family as well as the native Africans. Clive treats his wife as his possession and in Act 1, Scene 1 he introduces us to his family and says "my wife is all I dreamt a wife should be and everything she is, she owes to me"(251). His wife Betty is the epitome of what Gene Genet calls "interiorized subjugation". Conditioned in the traditional gender specific role, thought appropriate for women at that time, her whole life revolves around her husband. Like a child seeking the parents approval, at every step, Betty craves for Clive's attention and approval. In *The Vindication of the Rights of a Woman*, the first feminist, Mary Wollstonecraft mentions how women have been nurtured over the ages to believe that "the proper duty of the female was to make herself pleasing to men" (Wollstonecraft,37). Not receiving the love she craves for, Betty inadvertently falls into the arms of the charming Harry Bagley, Clive's friend. When Clive discovers this intimacy, he blames Betty. Although he is himself involved with Mrs Saunders. Rules were different for men and women and while himself being unfaithful, Clive demanded complete loyalty from his wife. Extra marital affairs were regarded as a sin for women, not men, although they were equally guilty. Betty internalizes this guilt and feels herself solely responsible for the misdemeanor.

The imposition of traditional roles is not limited to the wife, the children too are subject to them. Victoria the female child is not important for the father, it is the nine year old Edward who is the apple of his dad's eye. Conditioning begins at an early age and Victoria is encouraged to play with dolls even though she doesn't want to. This is important to ensure that Victoria would naturally take on the role of domesticity and motherhood in the future. When Edward tries to defy the patriarchal norms by playing with Victoria's doll, all hell breaks loose. Both Clive and Betty forbid Edward from repeating such an act and Betty even makes him promise to never tell anyone. She implores " You must never let the boys at school know you like dolls. Never. Never. No one will talk to you,

you won't be in the cricket team, you won't grow up to be a man like papa"(275). Betty's mother Maud represents the generation of women who never questioned the superior status of men as they were brought up to believe that men were indeed superior. Throughout the play, Maud tells Betty that "the men will do it in the proper way" (273) or "Clive will know what to do. Your father always knew what to do."(274)

In the second Act , Churchill catapults the characters into a more contemporary set up where gender roles are not as rigid. Like a soap opera, a period of twenty five years has elapsed and the characters are shown to have grown in age. One of the female characters introduced in the second act is Lin, a divorcee, who lives independently with her daughter. Churchill contrasts the independent Lin with the submissive female characters in the first Act. Society was changing in post war Britain and incidents of separation and divorce were on the rise. Women were gaining equality in the workplace and were unwilling to compromise for anyone. Churchill portrays the changing status of women through the character of Victoria, who was brought up as a submissive girl child in the first Act and turns into a woman who is deeply concerned and vocal about women's liberation in the second act. Her husband Martin is shown to be the new age man who is supportive of his wife. But, Churchill doesn't give us easy answers. Although Victoria is brilliant, intelligent and independent, she is unable to completely break free. She desires to be on her own and wishes to take up a job in a place far away, yet she is unsure and wonders if she can really make it on her own. Betty too decides to leave her husband Clive and discover her true self. Like Victoria, she yearns for space and desires to be free. But years of dependence on Clive has eroded her confidence. Jean Genet had remarked that "the colonial or feminine mentality of interiorized oppression, which must conquer itself before it can be free"(Millett,350). She does not possess the self-assurance of a modern liberated woman, but when she begins to earn, she is filled with hope.

Could this be a result of the years of conditioning thrust on her? Churchill's women characters are appealing because they are portrayed with their share of dilemmas. They are shown to be realistic not simply caricatures. Both Betty and Victoria crave freedom, yet are unable to simply walk away. Simone de Beauvoir famously said that one is not born but becomes a woman. Centuries of oppression have made woman what they are. Man placed himself in the superior position of being the self or subject and categorized the woman as the other or the object. Beauvoir highlights the fact that at each stage of the woman's growth, right from infancy, specific roles and behavior are thrust upon her, in order to condition her. Patriarchy categorized the roles of men and women in extremely rigid terms, terming any digressions as abnormalities. Men and woman were associated with specific traits. Man was tough, aggressive, competitive and independent. The woman, on the other hand, was considered to be weak, submissive, passive and dependent. From infancy, these gender roles were reinforced and imbibing correct gender specific behavior was regarded as an imperative part in the development of the individual.

Feminism challenged these gender specific demarcations. A more flexible view of the gender divide was advocated. Caryl Churchill's female protagonists question these gender specific roles. They try and carve an independent niche for themselves. But some, like Victoria and Betty are faced with challenges when trying to reinvent themselves. These challenges are both external and internal. Years of conditioning hinders this yearning to break free. The chains that have tied these women down for centuries are not easy to break. Yet, these women rise above the challenge and do finally manage to find contentment. One of the central themes of *Cloud Nine* is also the question of power. This is apparent not only in the man woman relationship, but also in the subject of colonization. Churchill draws parallels between the treatment of both Betty and Joshua, the black servant, to underline their similar position, that of the oppressed. Both being forms of colonization, one by males

over females and the other by whites over blacks. By combining this hegemony of both women and blacks, Churchill encompasses the issues of class and colour along with gender, making *Cloud Nine* an extremely potent statement of gender discrimination and the hegemony of patriarchy.

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