

MINISCULE OBEISANCE TO CARYL CHURCHILL'S IDEAL OF FEMINISM AND UNWARRANTED RACE RACE: WESTERN AND INDIAN PERSPECTIVES IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES

Samea Haleem

(Research Scholar)

Jamia Millia Islamia

New Delhi-110025

Abstract: *The two decades 1960s and 1970s witnessed the emergence of British feminist movement with the holding of the first British Women's Liberation Conference' in 1969 in Oxford. The movement became a political force with world-renowned writers and artists from across the continent and USA joining forces to identify the wrongs being committed against the embattled fair sex, and to voice women's claim for enfranchisement, liberty, and emancipation from oppression by the male-dominated society. Some who did succeed in their ambitions had to make ignominious sacrifice of their feminine traits. Indeed, women were being accused of witchcraft and promiscuity as well. The decade 1980s marked the end of the stilted progress of the movement with the rise of Margaret Thatcher as the prime minister of Britain. According to Betsko and Koenig (1987), "In fact things have got much worse under Thatcher". Advocates of Tory party (Ranciere, 2009, pp. 37-39) were jubilant at the "triumph of capitalism and the deregulation of the market", because capitalism together with patriarchy constituted the male ownership of capital, the woman being the loser. There was "widespread agreement that Thatcherism has seriously damaged women's interests in Britain in the economic and social fields" (Jessop, 2015: 48). Through her socialist-feminist narrative Churchill deep involvement in feminist issues is reflected in her debut play 'Cloud Nine' and later in other plays, where Churchill exposes the degradation of women and the connivance of institutions like the Church and medicine and society in targeting women. At the time Churchill was writing, Millet (1980: 25) theorized, "If one takes patriarchal government to be an institution --- principles of patriarchy appear to be two fold - male shall dominate female, elder male shall dominate younger: through this system a most ingenious form of interior colonization has been achieved."*

How the Churchillian narrative of feminism is viewed in the current Indian and western environment, and how it has been thwarted by politicians and leaders is discussed with the help of true examples.

Key words: *feminism; patriarchy; oppression; playwright; witchcraft; emancipation; and Churchillian narrative.*

Introduction

The period starting 1960s was the culmination of the demands of the British feminists with the first conference called the "British Women's Liberation Conference" being held on British soil in Oxford in 1969, which pressed for enfranchisement of women in the political, economic and social arena. The scale of the conference was so encouraging that the event was hailed a success story and Churchill along with many playwrights on both sides of the Atlantic (Western Europe and USA) actively joined the movement.

In early 1970s, British feminist movement took roots with women's group focused on the location of oppression and on evaluating the household chores, child-bearing and child-caring. Indeed, the above tasks were assumed as basic to women, and the patriarchal society that prevailed since ages had classified women 'evil' and 'promiscuous' thus depriving them of all political, economic and social rights and privileges. Women were also accused and persecuted as 'witches' by the misogynists. Thus with the feminist movement gaining strength the whole scene was radically changed and male domination through patriarchy was being challenged all round.

Hitherto, women's movement was unaffected by radicalism, but by early 1970s the feminist movement took a great leap forward to uphold the socialist philosophy on women's rights and liberty. Theatres throughout the United Kingdom (UK) began to incorporate socialist rhetoric in the feminist base issues. Women's organizations began to mushroom and playwrights had a field day. It was at this time that Churchill's first play *Vinegar Tom* 1976 based on socialist-feminist theme entered the scene. Incidentally it was the first play based on collectivism philosophy as opposed to individualism.

From a marginal woman writer in 1960s and 1970s, Churchill became famous in late 1970s and a world-class playwright after her debut play *Cloud Nine* gained international exposure in 1979. It is difficult to ascertain to what extent any plays or dramas will impact political or social environment or bring about any change in the society, yet Churchill's plays strove to influence societal issues by participating in leading projects. In the event, with Thatcher's accession as Tory Prime Minister, women's rights took a beating. Indeed, the policies adopted by Tories for women were so much regressive that there was "widespread agreement that Thatcherism has seriously damaged women's interests in Britain in the economic and social fields" (Jessop, 2015: 48). To quote Betsko and Koenig (1987) "In fact things have got much worse under Thatcher". Churchill claimed that Thatcher's social failure towards women included "women's needs were subordinated to the ideological goal of improving work incentives for low-paid male workers" (Lister, 1990: 12). In this way, Thatcher's government through bad socio-economic policies crushed women's upliftment irrevocably.

Along with the social failure of Thatcherism vis-à-vis women, its economic policies played havoc with the women's rights generally. In response to the recessionary trends the Thatcher government tightened the noose on public spending and adopted budgetary control. The British women received less money for the same job and position; were less educated; had no job security; and enjoyed a less than male social security in society. Thatcherism brought them only grief deprived them of support and subsidies and made them poor and powerless.

Giving an interview to Judith Thurman in May 1982 Churchill asserted that “[I know] quite well what kind of society I would like: decentralized, non-authoritarian, communist, nonsexist – a society in which people can be in touch with their feelings, and in control of their lives. But it always sounds both ridiculous and unattainable when you put it into words”.

Churchill was writing during what is known as the second wave of Feminism and inevitably her deep involvement in women’s issues is reflected in her plays *Vinegar Tom*, *Fen* and *Top Girls*. Churchill exposes the oppression of women and the connivance of institutions like the Church and medicine and society in targeting women. She exposes how this oppression is internalized through the metanarratives of ideology and culture. Churchill critiques essentialism and social construction of feminine to bring out the illogic of suppression on the basis of the construction of gender. In the tradition of feminism Churchill interrogates essentialism as a cultural construct and also investigates the representation of these essentials. She delineates how power finds an entry in the dynamics of gender politics and place itself quietly in relationships. These strategies of questioning although immediately invoked by feminist ideals, can be traced to various influences of the post-structuralist era. Foucault, Althusser, Hannah Arendt, Fanon all influenced her.

Churchill’s deep concern with marginalized voices and her constant attempts to find a way to communicate their position forms the crux of her oeuvre. What follows is a repertoire of plays not about individuals but a group of individuals. Tied with Churchill’s exploration of identity are Churchill’s own roles as her underlying concern is to undermine authority and question accepted beliefs.

The focus on the female identity and the female sense of the self will be found in Churchill’s plays that have been claimed by feminists as their own like *Cloud Nine*, *Top Girls*, *Fen* and *Vinegar Tom*. In building up the idea one is aware that extrinsic influences which may /may not have been consciously imbibed by her are nevertheless at work, e.g. the rapidly changing world of the 21st century with its technology and its effects on subjectivity of the individual. In dealing with these Churchill is no doubt influenced by the postmodern idea of a decentralized self and therefore her characters are “fluid, emergent, decentralized, multiplicitous, flexible and ever in process.”¹

Several critical approaches have been drawn upon that deal with essentialism, sexual politics construction and representation of gendered identities and above all the ideas relating to feminism which interrogates and undermines patriarchal social constructs.

Gender: Essentialism vs. Social Construction (Sexual Politics)

Sexual politics is defined as the principles governing relationships between the sexes; also, such relationships seen in terms of power” (Dictionary.com). At the time Churchill was writing, Millet (1980:25) citation theorized “If one takes patriarchal government to be an institution, the principles of patriarchy appear to be two fold - male shall dominate female, elder male shall dominate younger; through this system a most ingenious form of interior colonization has been achieved.”

Churchill’s work seeks to reveal binary and essentialist representations which still exist and continue in a large measure to control and define culture and the notions of legitimacy that change with a person’s changing circumstances. In short, gender essentialism limits the perception of the person or a whole category of people to a single identity, ignoring the diversity and differences that may exist within that group, and attributing specific capacities, attitudes, demeanour, capabilities and also, place of that group within a certain context; it further defines their area of influence and also their relation to other groups constructed on this very basis with the denial of some other attributes. This *reification is called essentialism*. The problem however is when this construct of essentialism is used to privilege a group over another; provides the entry point of power to place itself in the male/female sexual politics. It is accepted that a certain amount of essentialism is necessary to define the world around us but when it facilitates discrimination and endows more power to the groups (males over females) based on these essentialist and binary divisions then it becomes dangerous. Churchill got over her problem by camouflaging the non-essentialist elements in the garb of seemingly ‘essentialistic’ docile bodies. This façade is built up to the point that the ‘suspension of disbelief’ has to come to an end. An example was Churchill’s play *Top Girls*. It was written during a time when Margaret Thatcher was in power and the limits and connotations of feminism were being redefined and women were beginning to get accustomed to their newfound sense of independence and agency. “Caryl Churchill wrote *Top Girls* to question the extent to which second wave feminists were buying into Thatcher ideology to the detriment of a variety of real women” (Aston and Reinelt, 1997: 14). The play highlights the enormous gap between the middle/lower class of societal women and the highly successful high society women. In the play *Top Girls* the playwright Churchill dwells upon the ‘essential’ feminine features like age and physical appeal which attract men, viz. Louise, who is of age forty-six, realizes that her age is “a handicap” (pp. 105); in *Tom Vinegar* Joan Noakes exhibits the same feeling of being unnoticed by men because she no more appeals to them who feel that she is too old. The early female emancipators were of the view that if men and women had equal participation in all matters then this would give rise to total emancipation of the female. They were wrong in this assumption since society always ascribed to domination by males over females; whites over non-whites; and rich and powerful over poor. It follows in *Top Girls* Churchill shows that forms of power exercised by poor working class women are not looked upon as of any significance by the society. Elaine Aston (2009: 22) echoes the same opinion by stating that the debate on politics of feminism has a domestic element whereby women are consigned to performing kitchen tasks, and therefore cannot rise above the ordinary. In *Top Girls*, Churchill wonders at what price success came to the central character Marlene, who, as the play concludes, sums up the effect of different narratives with regret that women cannot rise above kitchen tasks.

During the nineteen hundred seventies decade feminist movement emerged and caught fire but was dominated by the “tyranny of structurelessness” since there was a lack of leadership and no formal structure or agenda. The eighties prioritized preoccupation of success, opportunism and individual decision-making and independent careers. Gender is one parameter that had taken a long time to be considered by society. The initial breakthrough came through Judith Butler’s (1990) seminal work on gender performativity, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (2011) in course of time performance of gender has taken center stage and has emerged as an important construct. Brecht provided avenues like alienation, gestus, defamiliarization” that led to the identification of gender as a parameter. The play *Vinegar Tom* was written and staged in 1976. It brings out the efforts of societies towards curbing woman and their problems. Along with the other play by Churchill, ‘*Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*’, both the plays share in the words of Gussow (1992: 14) “a sense of history trampling the spirit”. In support, Churchill says “under the garb of witchcraft and evil and hysteria and the devil” the society employs measures to curb the agency of womankind. It is about poverty, humiliation and prejudice and how women accused of witchcraft saw themselves. About how women not obeying the proscribed limits of female behaviour, are described as deviant and thrown out of the society by the religious leaders of Christianity.

Churchill and her feminist views: Western and Indian perspectives

Caryl Churchill and other intellectual feminist writers and artists have predicted that attaining equal rights and status for all men and women in developed and developing world is not a pipe-dream but a reality which will transform the society in a long-drawn-out future. It was thought that the western society had come of age with regard to women’s rights and privileges; job security and women’s access to all kinds

of jobs including those which required ‘masculine gender’ only, e.g. pilots, police, traffic police, fireman, cargo and merchant navy, army, business, CEOs, politicians, ministers, etc. in today’s world women have entered all spheres of life with confidence and aplomb, and have given an excellent account of themselves. The women in the west have risen above themselves to capture the goals of liberty and emancipation. Yet it is a fact that the ‘liberty’ they have hankered for since ages has been limited. If one looks at the film industry in Hollywood, established top actresses took so long to come out and say *#Me Too*, meaning they too had been taken advantage of by different people in the industry including directors, producers, editors, etc. either forcibly or voluntarily to enable the female characters to get a foothold in the film, theatre, TV industry or journalism and fashion industry. Even the President of USA has not been spared; some allegations have been leveled against him by several women of molestation and misconduct. Even earlier Presidents were caught on camera or committed indecent acts sub-rosa. The victims had some axe to grind or were forced by circumstances to sacrifice their identity.

Statistics abound of discrimination in UK against women whose pay and benefits are not at par with their male counterparts. New legislation in UK parliament seeks to redress this problem but opposition by male members cannot be ruled out. Sanctimonious events like marriages, Chamberlain (2018) claims that it is not only discriminatory but anachronistic since government, not God, made marriages. Therefore, on divorce or after break-up of live-in partnership it is the women who are the more vulnerable member and loser with no state support. On the fact that women are sensitive to male domination even in the present society is best described by what men should not be doing: men should avoid touching women in the workplace; no pats on the cheek, back or shoulder rubs (remember German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s expression when US President George W Bush tried it). Also men should stay away from the “you look great” line as women still feel insulted. US President Barack Obama felt deeply embarrassed when he called Kamala Harris “the best-looking attorney general in the US”. There are innumerable narratives of aggression and oppression of womenfolk still being practiced in the western world, yet, women have dented the ‘all-white’ and ‘all-male’ bastions. Many women writers and novelists of commercial fiction are now bringing in diversity and radical changes in the industry. On April 19, 2018, one of the first women fighter pilots in the US Navy, Captain Tammie Jo Shults, was hailed as an American hero for “her nerves of steel” for calmly landing the stricken passenger jet in Philadelphia and preventing a far worse tragedy of Southwest Airlines flight with 149 passengers on board from New York to Dallas. Keyword is ‘professionalism’ of Shults and her crew. While America and much of the world was celebrating the sangfroid of Captain Shults, a few miles north Nikki Haley was displaying a different kind of poise and composure. Flying into the headwind of age-old sexism and patriarchy that still characterizes societies across the world, President Donald Trump’s UN ambassador smacked down rank condescension from a Trump proxy bluntly telling him “I don’t get confused” after he had attributed to “momentary confusion” a policy position she had taken. Such was the import and intensity of her retort that the proxy had to apologize. US Senate, the most exclusive men’s club in the world, made “history” by allowing a woman Senator Tammy Duckworth to bring her ten days old daughter to the floor of the chamber since Senators were required to vote in person. These stirring sagas are only episodic events and not likely to bring cataclysmic changes in the status of women as envisioned by Churchill. They are, nevertheless, initial steps in the right direction of female empowerment and level playing field in the west. They are just a few dents in the glass ceiling. When Hillary Clinton won the popular vote but lost the electoral vote in the 2016 presidential election, a few hours later she told an aide who brought confirmation of the debacle, “I knew it. I knew this would happen to me ----. They were never going to let me be president”. The “they” Hillary Clinton referred to are institutional and societal biases. They run deep, they run wide, and they are wired into human behaviour, expressed through the misogyny of mindless men. “Across much of the world, the male of the species is unprepared for the changing mores and norms that have galvanized women into demanding a fair shake of an entrenched system” (Rajghatta, 2018a). The odds are still stacked against women yet gender parity is not far off, at least in the west. Do you even remember that airplane armrests had ashtrays once?

For Cassandras, it might appear that the growing incidents of crimes against women present a dismal picture. With reports of sexual harassment, exploitation, depredation, and bestiality, even against children, are the stuff of everyday headlines in India and in some parts across the world. But even the reporting of such incidents – mostly unreported in the past – is an indication of changing times. The *#MeToo* movement and women’s marches are just public manifestations of the demand for a level field, but subtler changes are taking place in the workplace and at home, where more and more men are stepping up for everything from domestic chores, to childcare. A few years from now changes would bring in near enough or equal care for each other. Meanwhile, women are stepping into what have long been male domains; flying planes, driving cabs, running corporations and businesses. They will demand parity and they will get parity (Rajghatta, 2018b). Let’s hope it happens in Churchill’s lifetime to fulfill her most ardent dream of man and woman as equal partners.

The women in the western world may attract changes to their status in the next few years, but for the women of the sub-continent including India it is not likely to happen in the next few decades, maybe centuries. Why? The world is describing India as a country of rapists; Haryana and UP and the West-East-North Indian states as provinces harboring rapists with Delhi given the moniker ‘a rapist city’. Women are not considered safe in Delhi, indeed, in the country. Not a day passes when TV channels and newspaper do not cry hoarse over rape offences (several times it is a gang rape and followed by murder) committed by common ordinary men, labour, bus driver, truck drivers and accomplices, cab drivers, fake god-men, students, neighbours, and relatives, step-fathers and step-sons. Even children including small girls are not spared. Hours after the Bollywood film industry erupted in a controversy over prevalence of ‘casting couch’ in the film industry, prominent Indian VIPs remarked that it is a ‘bitter truth’ not only of Bollywood but also of all workplaces in India, and the Parliament of India. Implication being that women are not safe anywhere and to climb up they have to make sacrifices, and imperative to have a male ‘godfather’. A reporter put the following question to an aspiring actress about the misuse of Rape Laws in India and the prevalence of Rape Culture. The actress asserted,

“Rape culture is something that signifies male entitlement and toxic masculinity. The woman is shamed when the rape happens, when it should be the other way around. There is a lot of stigma attached to it. Nowadays, you can have some politician or lawyer sounding more like a rape apologist. Why should we be hiring rapists? Why should they get *lal batti gadi* (cars with red lights)? They have forgotten their concept of justice and fair play and respect for elders and women – they remember only communalism- left right centre” (Sundaram, 2018). Of course, VIPs and politicians indulge in this perversion with impunity. Victims are normally poor, schoolgirls or SC/ST girls; or kidnapped, or abducted girls, and plaint lady secretaries. Day-in day-out some powerful high caste MPs or their sons are caught with their pants down but no action is taken – even police refuse to file a complaint or register a FIR against the predators. On April 26, 2018 a god-man was convicted ten years in jail for raping his disciples and more skeletons are coming out of his cupboard in Gujarat and UP, but he will go scot-free after a year or two. Earlier also, there have been cases of rape and perversion by people posing as god-men. Teachers, professors, chief executives, managers and other high officials are guilty as well for sexual offences and harassment.

On April 22, 2018, the Tamil Nadu governor kicked up a storm when he patronizingly patted a journalist's cheek (breaching her personal space). He later apologized which the journalist accepted but did not buy his explanation. PepsiCo CEO Indra Nooyi recalls her experience "I hate being called sweetie, honey, sweetheart, babe and other cool endearments. We have got to be treated as executives or people rather than sweetie, honey, babe."

One state in India is still in the throes of a Victorian age and offers no respite to young girls or women. The state has orthodox living standards for its womenfolk except for its rich; and young girls are prevented from education and mixing with boys. Patriarchy is in total control where high castes rule the roost. Rape and harassment of low caste females is a prerogative of the high caste and no convictions are ever enforced. Women cannot rip into Indian patriarchy without suffering degradation, oppression and aggression.

Many instances against women go unreported in India or elsewhere because of shame and ignorance of the victim, and because of lack of willingness on the part of authority to take action, or because of the perverted mentality of the men-folk (patriarchy).

A BJP leader shared a Facebook post on Times of India New Delhi April 20th 2018 suggesting that no woman journalist has made it big without sleeping with someone powerful. The message was loud and resounding – many Indian men can't see women as full humans like themselves, only as a different species meant for reproduction, recreation, and caretaking. They sexualize women at work because they don't see the worth of their minds and hard work; in their eyes, a woman's success has to involve sleazy tradeoffs. It is not just female journalists who have to deal with this misogyny – men control the levers of power in most professions, and most women have had to contend with shaming, patronizing, off-colour jokes and disrespect for personal boundaries at some time or the other.

Conclusion

In her play '*Serious Money*' and '*Top Girls*' and other similar plays, Churchill has warned against acquisition of avarice – physical or monetary - under capitalism which corrupts the society and oppresses the feminine gender politically, economically and socially if they are allowed to go unabated. While Churchillian ideals are a source of inspiration to her audience in western society which after some years down the line is likely to turn the leaf and follow her lead; India and other developing countries lack the will and determination to overcome their centuries-old mindset unless punitive action is taken at all levels, prejudice and bias against women and minors is made unlawful, and natural justice is imparted impartially, things will remain same for millennium regardless of Churchill or other sane preachers.

References

1. Aston, E & Daimond, E. Introduction. *Cambridge Companion to Caryl Churchill* (pp. 1-17). E. Aston, E. Diamond (Eds.) Cambridge University Press. 2009. The Edinburg Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU UK.
2. Aston, E. & Reinelt, J. *Caryl Churchill*, London: The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Women Playwrights, 1997
3. Betsko, K and R. Koenig (Eds) "Interview with Contemporary Women Playwrights." New York: Beech True Books, 1987.
4. Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London: Routledge, 1990.
5. Chamberlain, Clare. "Government, Not God, Made Marriage." *Aeon*, 2018
6. Gussow, M. Review/Theater; Women who fight on when there is no hope: [Review] (21 Mar 1992: 1.14.) *New York Times* [New York, N.Y.]
7. Jessop, B. "Margaret Thatcher and Thatcherism: Dead but not buried." *British Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 1. 2015
8. Lister, R. *The Exclusive Society, Citizen and the Poor*, London: Child Poverty Action Group, Ltd, 1990.
9. Millet, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. New York: Ballentine Books. 1980. Second Printing 1969.
10. Rajghatta, Chidanand. "Know This, Men." *The Times of India*, New Delhi, April 23, 2018a, pp. 18
11. Rajghatta, Chidanand. Chidanand.Rajghatta@timesgroup.com; accessed on Wednesday, 23.04.2018b. pp. 10
12. Ranciere, J. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, London, New York Continuum, 2009
13. Sundaram, Laspriya. Lasyapriya.Sundaram@timesgroup.com; accessed on Saturday, 21.04.2018. pp. 10

¹ Turkle, Sherry. "*Life on the Screen*", New York, NY: Touchstone Books, 1995