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Negotiating Ambition and Identity: Women's Resilience in Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*

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Abstract:

One of the most significant feminist plays in modern British theatre is Caryl Churchill's Top Girls (1982), which is a critical examination of the ambition, identity and strength of women in patriarchal, capitalist societies. The play is set against the socio-political background of Thatcherite Britain and asks what freedom working through the individual can achieve for women, and what it can achieve for them but doesn't. This paper examines how Churchill depicts women's resilience in the different lives of Marlene, Joyce, Angie and the historical women gathered in the iconic opening dinner scene. By focusing on the multi-faceted character of resilience, rather than just a story of success, Churchill conveys the nature of the situation as a class-based division, a gender-related expectation, an emotional loss, and a conflict of ideology. The study can be applied to Top Girls with feminist notions of Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, bell hooks and Elaine Aston. Resilience is cultivated via constant discussions of identity, agency and social inclusion. The paper also reveals how Churchill challenges neoliberal ideals of empowerment for women by revealing the underlying emotional and ethical costs of ambition for women. The examination of the text and feminist thought identifies resilience as a negotiation between individual aspiration and collective responsibility and as something other than personal endurance in Top Girls. Consequently, Churchill's play continues to offer valuable insights into contemporary debates surrounding feminism, leadership, class inequality, and women's empowerment.

Keywords: Caryl Churchill, Top Girls, Women's Resilience, Feminism, Identity, Socialist Feminism, Patriarchy

1. Introduction:

In the second half of the twentieth century, the rise of 'second-wave feminism' brought about a revolution in the portrayal of women in literature and theatre. Feminist playwrights started to examine

the intricacies of womanhood, independence and resistance in male dominated societies instead of portraying women as victims or romantic heroines. Caryl Churchill among these dramatists stands out because of her radical approaches to dramatic technique and her continuing exploration of issues of gender, class, capitalism and political power. In all of her plays, she has been testing the prevailing ideologies about women's roles that are responsible for inequality (Aston 18).

Top Girls was published and first performed in 1982, when Britain's Margaret Thatcher's government was initiating neoliberal economic reform, a new sense of individualism and extensive discussion of women's roles in professional life. Churchill places her play in this socio-political context with the question of whether the triumph of women in the patriarchal systems means feminist progress. Instead of extolling professional accomplishment as an indisputable success, *Top Girls* uncovers the emotional, familial, and ethical costs often incurred by individual achievement (Goodman 112).

One of the most renowned scenes in modern drama is the first, in which Marlene hosts a dinner party with imaginary guests, women from various historical eras and literary traditions. The characters in these works—Pope Joan, Lady Nijo, Patient Griselda, Isabella Bird and Dull Gret—all tell stories of survival, suffering, sacrifice and perseverance. Their stories set the tone for the rest of the book in making the point that women are resilient and that women's experiences are not limited to any particular historic moment. Churchill thus establishes a transhistorical conversation that demonstrates how patriarchy manifests in various ways in different cultures and eras yet leaves its mark on women. But resilience holds a much more nuanced place in the play than traditional definitions might imply. Rather than just being defined as the ability to overcome the difficulties of life, contemporary feminist scholarship is growing in recognition of resilience as a complex, life-long process of women's interaction with oppressive social systems, reconstruction of identity, and exercise of agency in the face of social inequities (hooks 82). Churchill also doesn't romanticize about resilience. Rather, she shows how women's strength is sometimes forged in a context of exploitation, emotional isolation, and class difference. Resilience thus becomes a survival response as well as an important critique of the structures that render resilience essential.

Marlene seems to be the ultimate "modern woman" in the middle. She has made it to a prestigious position in an employment agency, where women are usually the minority, and thus symbolizes the independence and economic mobility of her class. However, Churchill's portrait of Marlene slowly deconstructs itself as he uncovers Marlene's fragmented familial bonds, emotional isolation and ideology of competitive individualism. Through the compromises she makes, she finds herself separated from other women, primarily working class sister Joyce and unfulfilled daughter Angie. As such, Churchill asks if ambition in the pursuit of the capitalist patriarchy truly leads to liberation or to the recreation of the existing hierarchy (Butler 142).

Just as important, however, are the juxtaposed pictures of Joyce and Angie, who reveal the

class markers of female resilience. Bethany Joyce's domestic labour, financial difficulties and emotional obligations run counter to the 'empowerment' narrative of professional success. On the other hand, the vulnerability of Angie is a result of the long-term psychological effects of neglect, class inequality, and limited opportunities. Together, these characters illustrate that understanding of resilience needs to be informed by wider social, economic and cultural contexts.

While there have been many feminist, socialist, Marxist and postmodernist perspectives on *Top Girls*, little work has been done that has examined resilience as the conceptual framework that links ambition, identity, class and emotional endurance. Much of the current criticism is on either Churchill's attack on Thatcherism, or on gender politics, without taking into account how "resilience" itself is a space for ideological negotiation. To do so, it attempts to explore the intersectionality of personal survival, identity and political resistance in the context of resilience in this paper.

The study draws on the feminist theories put forth by Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, bell hooks and Elaine Aston, and suggests that Churchill's interpretation of resilience is a multidimensional process rather than a heroic act. Women's identities are shaped in a dynamic process of negotiation with the expectations of the patriarchy and the values of capitalism and class divisions. Finally, *Top Girls* offers an invitation to think of empowerment not just as a measure of success in work but as a measure of the bonds of relationship, solidarity and social justice.

2. Literature Review:

Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* has been the focus of ongoing scholarly research since its first performance in 1982, due to its intricate examination of issues of feminism, class, capitalism, and female identity. The play has been analyzed in various theoretical frameworks such as socialist feminism, postmodern feminism, Marxist criticism, psychoanalytic theory and gender studies. However, these works have contributed greatly to the knowledge of Churchill's dramatic qualities and his ideology but, in comparison, have seen little attention paid to resilience as a concept that bridges the notions of ambition, identity, class, and emotional survival.

The early criticism concentrated on Churchill's attack on the institutions of the patriarchy and on the socio-political situation of Thatcherite Britain. Throughout, Aston defies the dominant images of women by revealing how patriarchy works, not merely through men, but via social institutions that influence women's aspirations and identities (Aston 74). Churchill does not depict women's empowerment as a simple matter of progress, but rather as a complex and complicated matter of ideological negotiation, emotional sacrifice and class struggle. Likewise, Goodman notes that *Top Girls* challenges liberal feminist notions of individual success because the absence of structural oppression cannot be achieved by the pursuit of professional success (Goodman 118).

Feminism and capitalist relations have come to the fore as an important field of research. Butler's theory of gender performativity is an important framework for understanding Marlene's

successful career as a woman. Butler states that gender identities are not static or natural, but rather are continually produced through repeated performances in the social body (179). This performative construction is evident in Marlene's manner of managing, which is confident, and wherein professional success is often the domain of women who behave in a way that is typically masculine and authoritative. Churchill thus asks important questions about the relationship between ambition and freedom, and whether it is evidence of freedom or the conforming to expectations of the patriarchy.

There have been other scholars interested in studying Churchill and Thatcherism and neoliberal ideology. Mahmood and Almaarof believe that *Top Girls* is a socialist feminist attack on Margaret Thatcher's political principles, revealing the paradox between private achievement and social duty. They believe that Churchill's juxtaposition of Marlene's career trajectory with that of Joyce's economic well-being is an attempt to underscore the persistence of class barriers to women's opportunities even in the face of the apparent progress toward gender equality. The Studies of leadership, motherhood and female ambition in the play have also been carried out in recent years. Ahmed and Mohamad explain how Marlene's professional successes subvert the traditional gender roles, but, at the same time, also necessitate the rejection of her maternal duties and emotional closeness. Their analysis indicates that Churchill is not against women leaders, rather he challenges the social system that makes it seem as though someone must be cold, emotionless, and detached from family to be successful. So the conflict between a job and motherhood becomes an important ideological issue in the play.

In like manner, modern feminist criticism has come to understand that *Top Girls* is probing the price of ambition. According to Salsabillah, Adristi, and Rittiau Churchill makes ambition both a strength and a weakness. Marlene is successful despite being in a corporate structure that is largely male dominated, but her success relies on "accepting" competitive values that perpetuate and reinforce rather than challenge the patriarchal hierarchy. The play therefore raises the question of whether or not women's role in power is always going to alter what happens to other women.

The socialist aspects of Churchill's feminism have also been brought recently to the forefront of research. Al-Khazraji believes that the play is questioning the individualism of Thatcherism as it is showing the way that capitalism divides women against one another instead of enabling them to resist together. The strained relationship between Marlene and Joyce illustrates how even among their shared history of gender discrimination, women continue to be divided by economic inequality. Churchill thus argues for social change as well as individual movement to achieve feminist progress.

Most critics read the historical women as a dramatic tool for showing the continuity of patriarchy throughout time and culture. The various stories told by each of these women reflect varying ways of suffering, sacrifice, endurance and resistance, indicating that the resilience of women has been influenced over time by the social expectations that they have traditionally faced around gender, marriage roles, motherhood, religion and political authority. Instead of presenting these women as

heroines, Churchill reveals the toll which patriarchy takes on these women when they survive.

In spite of this literature of criticism, there is a huge lacuna in the literature. Resilience is looked at as a secondary effect of oppression, while most studies consider *Top Girls* with the concept of Thatcherism, socialist feminism, gender performance, leadership or class politics. There has been no detailed examination of the inter-twinement of ambition, identity formation, emotional endurance and feminist resilience. Often, while praising Marlene's success, existing scholarship sheds comparatively little light on how Joyce, Angie, and the historical women all challenge ideas of resilience in the context of care, sacrifice, survival, and moral resistance.

This study resolves this issue by considering the concept of resilience as the main conceptual framework with which ambition and identity are negotiated in the play *Top Girls*. Drawing on the feminist work of Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, bell hooks and Elaine Aston, it suggests that Churchill's conception of resilience is multi-faceted – consisting of emotional, ideological, social and identity aspects. This research combines these perspectives, enriching the current feminist literary criticism and furthering ongoing discussions of resilience beyond the traditional analyses of personal achievement.

3. Theoretical Framework:

The feminist theory is used as the theoretical lens to analyse the portrayal of women's resilience in Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*. Feminist theory is not simply a focus on the ability of an individual to withstand adversity but also a way of understanding resilience as a dynamic process in which women confront and challenge patriarchal power, reconstruct their identity, and negotiate social inequalities. Theories of Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, bell hooks, and Elaine Aston are used to examine the relationship between the themes of ambition, identity, and resilience in Churchill's play.

The *Second Sex* is a seminal work by Simone de Beauvoir that offers a significant insight into women's status as second-class citizens in a male-dominated society. Beauvoir claims that woman has been historically created as the "Other," whose identity is not established from the perspective of self-sufficiency, but in terms of the masculine (Beauvoir 26). Such a theory is especially pertinent to *Top Girls*, where women's characters are continually trying to forge their own identity as they challenge social norms around marriage, motherhood and career success. While Marlene is working towards economic independence and rejecting traditional femininity, her success also shows the psychological and emotional price of breaking free from traditional gender roles. Beauvoir's theory of this personal freedom and social responsibility is therefore used to clarify Marlene's character.

Furthermore, the study of gender identity in the play is also legitimised by Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity. Butler claims that gender is not a fixed state but a "social performance" that is continuously performed through cultural and institutional norms (Butler 33). Marlene is an embodiment of the qualities associated with male leadership, such as competitiveness, emotional

control and control over other people in *Top Girls*. Her corporate identity is a marker of her personal aspiration towards prestige, and is indicative of the institutional frameworks that promote traditionally masculine behaviour. Churchill shows how women can be successful by sticking to a male-centric definition of success instead than redefining success. The idea of resilience in this study is further supported by feminist philosophy of bell hooks, who states that liberation is found in collective empowerment and not in individual achievement. Throughout, Hooks contends that the goal of feminism is to abolish systems of domination that oppress women across social, economic and cultural settings (hooks 18). Resilience takes on a larger meaning from this point of view than it does simply as the capacity to “survive adversity”; it is also the capacity to challenge oppressive ideas and establish more equitable social relationships. Hooks' thesis that personal success is not emancipatory unless it is linked to social justice is echoed in Churchill's criticism of Marlene's individualism. Yet while distinct is Joyce's commitment to caring and family commitments despite financial adversity, a model of resilience based on responsibility, compassion and communal support.

Aston states that the plays are intentionally challenging to conventional theatrical practices in an attempt to uncover the ideology of gender and power (Aston 81). Churchill does not present women characters as set identities; rather, women characters are complex people who are subject to several modes of oppression at once. The disjointed nature of *Top Girls*, especially the symbolic first night's dinner sequence, highlights the different ways of resilience's lived experience for women over time, with a shared framework of control – patriarchalism. Aston's analysis shows that Churchill's theatre inspires viewers to feeling the experiences of women, but also prompts the viewer to challenge the political and social systems that maintain inequality.

These four theoretical perspectives are sufficient to define resilience as a multi-dimensional phenomenon of identity formation, gender performance, emotional resistance and political resistance. This does not valorise ambition as the epitome of female empowerment, but rather sees resilience as an ongoing process of negotiation between individual ambition and structural constraints. Churchill's characters will each be defined by different types of resilience determined by class position, familial relationships, economic opportunities, and ideology. *Top Girls* therefore settles disagreement over the term 'empowerment' by showing that empowerment is possible only through a process of both personal empowerment and social change, a process that enables women to be free from the conditions of their oppression.

This integrated feminist approach is used in the present study to look at Churchill's portrayal of women's resilience as they are experienced by Marlene, Joyce, Angie, and as historical women in the opening act. The paper aims to show how existential feminist approach, gender performativity, intersectional feminist approach and feminist theatre criticism combine to create a sense of resilience in *Top Girls* that is a personal strategy for survival and also a political act of negotiating identity within

the systems of patriarchy and capitalism.

4. Discussion and Analysis:

4.1 Marlene: Ambition and the Construction of Identity:

Marlene's character represents the modern career-oriented woman who is breaking the barriers of traditional feminine and female roles and has become a success in a male dominated environment. Her promotion is a testament to her resolve, skills, and perseverance in the face of institutional challenges. But Churchill complicates this picture by making clear that Marlene's drive to succeed comes with emotional isolation, broken family bonds, and a rejection of the traditional role of mother. Success is not the full liberation here as much as it involves women adopting the values of the patriarchal society, such as competitiveness, authority and individualism. However, Butler's understanding of gender performativity helps to understand who Marlene is, as her identity is formed through her repeated performance of behaviours that are culturally linked to masculine leadership (Butler 179). Likewise, Beauvoir's idea of women's attempts to overcome social constraints she has imposed on herself, helps to explain Marlene's efforts to assert herself outside of conventional domestic roles (Beauvoir 722). Resilience is thus not a matter of success but of negotiation, in Churchill's terms, between "personal ambition" and "emotional fulfilment" and whether empowerment in patriarchal regimes can ever be truly emancipatory (58–63).

4.2 Joyce and Angie: Alternative Models of Women's Resilience:

Unlike Marlene, Joyce and Angie are manifestations of resilience that are based on caring, sacrifice, and emotional stamina – not in professional success. Even though Joyce is struggling financially, working in the home, and raising Angie herself, Joyce exhibits great strength through her dedication to family in spite of the few opportunities available to her. Her tenacity contradicts neoliberal ideals of achievement and instead highlights cooperation and nurturing. Angie, on the other hand, represents the psychological effects of neglect and class differences. It's her insecurity and lack of certainty about the future that reveals the disparity in opportunities afforded to women at different social levels. In these characters Churchill contends that the concept of resilience can't just be equated with career progression: it is a need to also recognize the invisible emotional labour that women perform. Collective responsibility is necessary for feminist empowerment, not competition (hooks 81). But Joyce's endurance is also an equally important, if less celebrated, notion of resilience, revealing the carve-out of career-centred feminism (Aston 84).

4.3 Churchill's Critique of Individual Success:

The final fight between Marlene and Joyce is a summary of Churchill's main feminist thesis. This ideological clash makes a clear display of the two understandings of empowerment: individual ambition versus social responsibility. Churchill points out the neoliberal conception that individual achievements are the same as societal improvement for women. But *Top Girls* shows how the drive to

become a great leader without caring for others and without class consciousness can generate the very inequalities that feminism wants to overturn. In the end, the play redefines resilience as being able to negotiate identity and the ethical responsibility towards others. Through this Churchill makes the reader reflect on empowerment as a collective rather than a purely individual phenomenon, revealing the emotional, social, and ideological cost to success. Resilience in *Top Girls* is not about overcoming patriarchy, but about the ongoing effort to sustain identity, dignity and humanity within unjust societal structures.

5. Conclusion:

In Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*, women's resilience is an intricate and multifaceted phenomenon, influenced by ambition, identity, class and patriarchal power. By comparing Marlene, Joyce, Angie and the historical women in the opening scene, Churchill shows that resilience is not limited to the ability to succeed in a career or to be an independent business woman. It is in effect the outcome of a constant negotiation between human objectives, emotional attachments and social conditions. On the one hand, Marlene is a symbol of determination and success in the workplace, but her strained relationships and emotional distance highlight the hidden problems that come with seeking empowerment in a patriarchal capitalist system. On the other hand, Joyce's devotion to family and Angie's fragility reveal other forms of resilience that are tied to caring, giving up and persevering.

This work has followed feminist theory of Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, bell hooks and Elaine Aston in asserting that Churchill is questioning the concept of "success" as is associated with neoliberalism by highlighting the responsibility of the community and the social justice. The play finally raises the question that the extension of the individual is not necessarily a feminist advance. Instead it calls for empowerment in a more encompassing sense that embraces arrangements of equality, empathy and solidarity as fundamental to empowering women. As such, *Top Girls* is an important feminist document that still holds much to teach us today about gender, identity and strength, and challenges us to think differently about the nature of individual aspirations and social liberation.

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