
QUEST FOR FEMINISTIC IDENTITY IN CARYL CHURCHILL'S CLOUD NINE

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Abstract: The Paper tries to analyse the feministic identity through two factors, one colonial oppression and the other feminine oppression the first leading to the other. The play consists of two Acts, Act I set in Colonial Africa of the Victorian era and Act II in a London Park in 1979. Though there is a century difference between the two Acts, the characters turn only twenty five years older. Act I begins with Clive the father of his family as well as a master to the African natives and he controls everything around him. Everyone obeys his orders and Joshua an African servant obeys him rather than being with the natives. The women also obey Clive in all aspects. Caryl Churchill deliberately changes gender roles. Joshua is played by a white man and Betty is played by a man to emphasise that she is a man's creation. Clive is the father like figure to the natives and his family. Everything is under his control. The rigid social structure that Clive creates breaks as Joshua points a gun towards Clive signaling the end of the colonial and feminine oppression. Set in London, in the immediate present, Act II the characters become real. Betty is played by a man. The characters have sex with each other, some characters are lesbian and almost all characters advocate organism. Women feel that they can live alone without men. Clive is totally absent in the second act. Betty played by a woman becomes real and rediscovers herself. All women come out of the shells created by the patriarchal society and identify their womanhood. The paper tries to portray how the characters try to find their real self and how the characters struggle to achieve feminine identity through complex reversal of gender roles. Caryl Churchill wants the society to accept gay people, lesbianism and women who do not fit into societies so called norms.

Introduction:

A brief note about the Author: Caryl Churchill, a notable British woman dramatist of the late twentieth century, emerged as a leading playwright in the 1980s. Her plays largely focus on social criticism with radically strong views on feminism and gender issues. In her plays Churchill often raises philosophical questions pertaining to contemporary life, most of which are resolutely unanswered. Caryl Churchill, as a playwright, challenges conventional perceptions and thought patterns, particularly those that relate to woman. In the words of Amelia Howe Kritzer: "Churchill's plays enlist a wider range of theatre's potential for multiple, diffuse, and paradoxical meanings to confront the audience with deconstructions of artificial unities". Gender politics often find its place in the works of Caryl Churchill. Her plays explore the values set by patriarchal society, and examine gender roles and power relationships in the society; and thereby brings forth such issues which tend to deconstruct traditional ideas of sex and gender. In *Cloud Nine*, a play consisting only of two acts, Caryl Churchill discards the idea of gender essentialism and of stereotypical representation of the same. Side by side in the play, Churchill establishes a parallel between colonial domination and sexual oppression. She does this by deliberately subverting gender and racial stereotypes, and using cross-gender and cross-racial casting.

Cloud Nine – a brief outline: The two acts show a vast difference in the setting and scenario which clearly brings out the striking difference in the century, characters and their roles establishing that women need to establish themselves and identify

their roles which is very essential for their existence in the male chauvinistic world. Simon de Bevoir in her book *The Second Sex* asserts that "one is not born a woman: but rather becomes one". The roles and behaviour based on biological category of gender and social construction have been forced on women. This is emphasized in the assertion of feministic independence which characters strive in *Cloud Nine*. In Act I, the setting is Colonial Africa of the Victorian Era. Clive, his wife Betty, son Edward, daughter Victoria, mother-in-law Maud, governess Ellen and servant Joshua welcome the audience to his African home with a song paying tribute to England. Clive is the father like figure to the natives as well as his family. Joshua is an African servant but is played by a white man and is obedient to Clive though he belongs to the natives. Betty is woman but she is played by a man as Betty asserts that she is a man's creation and Clive wants her to be like that. Everything that happens in the Act I is governed by Clive. When Betty becomes attracted to Harry Bagley, it is a crime which Clive takes seriously and warns her on his behalf. But when Clive flirts with Mrs. Saunders it is not at all a mistake and everyone should ignore it. When Betty and Ellen are attracted towards each other, then Ellen is forced to marry Harry by Clive. Men are liberal and they can do what they wish to do. The Victorian society creates such patriarchal rigid norms that women need to fit in the social norms created by them. Clive is the symbol of the male chauvinistic patriarchal father who dominates the African natives

as well as his family. Edward, his son should not play with a doll as it is feminine to play with dolls. When Joshua misbehaves with Betty and Betty complains about it to Clive, Clive reprimands Joshua just to soften Betty but he does not seriously mean it. Act I parodies the rigid rules and regulations of the Victorian society and tries to loosen it at the end. The end of the Act signals breaking all the shackles created by the male dominated society as Joshua points out a gun to shoot Clive.

Act II is in the modern century and though this Act takes place after a century but the characters are only twenty five years older. Clive is totally absent in Act II which is set in 1979 and the scene is the London Park. This signifies that Clive's regime has come to an end. The characters are becoming real and there are no Clive-types running around telling women and black people what to do anymore. Instead a world of women and gay people are seen living a free, independent life. Betty is played by a woman and she is real. There seems to be absence of male domination. The women would like to live alone without men. Betty considers leaving Clive. At first she is hesitant but discovers the joy of having independent life. Betty rediscovers herself and the play concludes with Betty of Act I embracing with Betty of Act II. This scene celebrates Betty's freedom from shackles of patriarchal autocracy.

Quest for Feministic Identity-an analysis: By juxtaposing opposites, Churchill strives to assert feminism and women identity. Sidelining male superiority and giving importance to female emancipation is an important factor which Churchill tries to emphasise through this play. The first act is male dominated and firmly structured. The second act world of women and gays unbridles all structures. Clive the father like to natives as well as the family proclaims,

CLIVE: I am a father to the natives here,
And father to my family so dear.
(Cloud Nine 1)

The submissiveness of women in the play becomes evident when Betty, the wife of Clive is played by a man and claims that she is a man's creation.

BETTY: I live for Clive. The whole aim of my life
Is to be what he looks for in a wife

I am a man's creation as you see
And what man wants is what I want to be
(Cloud Nine 1)

When Betty expresses her liking towards Harry, Harry reminds woman's role in the patriarchal society saying that she has to fulfill her roles of being a good wife, mother and daughter. The women strive to establish their identity in the first act but are not able to because of Clive's well knit male empire. Maud also forbids Betty to be close to Harry saying that Mrs. Saunders as a widow has a lonely and desolate life. Ellen is forced to marry Harry against her wishes. Women who do not conform to the societal norms are treated very different and forced to submit to the wishes of the male society. The gesture of Joshua pointing a gun towards Clive marks the end of the patriarchal reign and signals feminine identity and triumph.

The second act shows people having fun in a London park describes change in time, place and attitude. The modern twentieth century asserts the end of the British colonial rule and also emphasizes woman empowerment. Women speak about leaving their husband and being a lesbian boldly. "In the first scene, Lin tells Vic that she is a lesbian and straightforwardly initiates a relationship with her" (Kritzer 123). The characters in the second act proclaim that they are independent but the ghosts of the first act return to claim the patriarchy and make it difficult for the characters to enjoy their freedom. "In spite of leaving her husband, Betty at first seems unable to overcome her patterns of dependency" (Kritzer 125). Betty becomes a receptionist in a doctor's clinic and enjoys her life independently. The second act ends with Betty (male) of the first act embracing with Betty (female) of the second act signifying feminine independence and freedom.

Conclusion: With contrasting two acts, Caryl Churchill emphasizes how women find it to break from societal norms and become independent triumphantly. The patriarchal society for ages has restricted women to express themselves and creates fear so that they do not go out of control. Though in the second act all women characters are enjoying freedom, the ghosts of Maud and Clive restrict them. Initially women are having low esteem about themselves and have lot of fears. In spite of all these Betty identifies herself at the end. Therefore to some extent feminine identity is established.

References:

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