

**POWER AND OPPRESSION: A STUDY OF MATERIALISM AND
GENDER IN SELECTED DRAMA OF CARYL CHURCHILL**

by

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SUMMARY

Caryl Churchill, the most widely performed female dramatist in contemporary British theatre, is a playwright preoccupied with the dissection of the traditional relations of power. She challenges social and dramatic conventions through her innovative exploration of the male gaze, the objectification of women, the performativity of gender, and women as objects of exchange within a masculine economy. In so doing, Churchill locates her concerns in the area of 'materialism and gender'.

Churchill explicates a socialist-feminist position by pointing directly at the failure of liberal feminism. The lack of a sense of community among women, highlighted by Churchill's portrayal of women such as Marlene in 'Top Girls', forms a critical aspect of Churchill's work. Her drama reiterates how meaningful change is impossible while women continue to oppress one another, and while economic structures perpetuate patriarchy. Altered consciousness, aligned to socio-political re-structuring, is necessary for both the oppressors and the oppressed, in a society where too much emphasis has been placed on individualism.

The outspoken hope for a transgression of the conventional processes of identification and other omnipresent, oppressive socio-political phenomena, is a strong aspect of Churchill's work. Her plays reveal how signs create reality rather than reflect it, and she uses Brechtian-based distancing methods to induce a critical examination of gendered relations. Time-shifting, overlapping dialogue, doubling and cross-casting are used by Churchill to manipulate the sign-systems of the dominant order. Cross-gender casting, Churchill's most widely reviewed dramatic device, is employed to destabilise fixed sexual identities determined by dominant heterosexual ideology. She calls into question the traditional sign 'Woman' - which is constructed by and for the male gaze - and addresses the marginality of the female experience in a non-linear framework.

Although dealing with serious issues, Churchill's plays are often executed in a style that is at once amusing and thought-provoking to exclude the possibility of didacticism. With her skilful use of language and innovative techniques as her highly effective instruments, Churchill accomplishes her broader purpose with originality. In its originality and complexity, her drama is in itself a 'new possibility' for different forms.

Key terms:

Socialist feminism; Feminist theatre; Patriarchy; Gender ideologies; Women's oppression; Cross-dressing; Cross-casting; Brechtian alienation techniques; Intra-sexual oppression; Overlapping dialogue; Male gaze.

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