Reinforcing the Status Quo: The Complexities of Female Success in Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*

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Abstract—In Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*, the portrayal of successful women offers a nuanced account of workplace and domestic dynamics, highlighting the ways in which women in positions of power navigate and perpetuate mainstream male values. This essay delves into the attitudes and behaviors of these top girls, revealing how their achievements inadvertently reinforce traditional gender norms and patriarchal structures. Through an examination of character interactions and thematic elements, this essay uncover the complexities of female empowerment within a society shaped by systemic inequality. By dissecting the tension between personal ambition and collective struggle, this essay sheds light on the challenges faced by women in challenging and reshaping dominant narratives of success.

Keywords—successful women, *Top Girls*, patriarchal Patterns, patriarchal values

I. INTRODUCTION

Caryl Churchill, renowned for her unwavering focus on social reality and consistent experimentation with theatrical techniques, has achieved the remarkable distinction of being the sole female playwright in the illustrious annals of British drama to be honored with the esteemed title of "the Master of drama" [1]. Her oeuvre, rich and diverse, predominantly explores the intricate complexities of family dynamics, offering a profound insight into the nuances of contemporary British society. Among her notable works, *Top Girls* stands out as a particularly poignant commentary on the raging debate surrounding the role and status of women in the 1980s, a topic that was hotly contested and widely discussed at that time.

In Churchill's play *Top Girls*, the image of a successful woman, represented by Marlene, presents a complex interplay between gender and societal expectations.

Set in the Thatcher era, successful women in Top Girls women's employment agencies, represented by Marlene, conquer or surpass men to achieve an equal social status, earning great admiration from some other women, including Marlene's daughter Angie. However, In a society that prizes masculine values and reinforces traditional gender roles, the nature of women's success raises sobering questions. That is, can their success be seen as a breakthrough in the societal identity of women under male dominance?

This article will study the image of successful women in *Top Girls* and argues that their achievements, while compelling, are ultimately meant to reinforce rather than challenge social norms about gender.

Firstly, through a detailed analysis of key themes and character dynamics, this article will explore how top girls survive in the workplace, the sacrifices they make in pursuit of success, and the broader implications of their individual success in the context of ongoing gender oppression and put forward the idea that although they are women themselves, they still to choose to embrace the values of competition and survival prevalent in male-dominated workplaces instead of recreating a more comfortable working environment for their female colleagues.

Secondly, drawing on historical context and literary analysis, this essay will show how Churchill's plays reveal the complexities of female empowerment in a world shaped by patriarchal norms and systemic inequalities and proposes that by abandoning attributes associated with "mother", "wife", and "daughter", the success of the top girls reinforces the idea that men are the protagonists in the workplace.

Thirdly, by dissecting the experiences of characters like Marlene and their interactions with their male and female peers, this essay will reveal the underlying tensions between individual ambition and collective struggle, between individual achievement and institutional change, and finally argues that their success is individual and does not alter the societal oppression and neglect of women.

In general, through a critical examination of the success of top girls, this essay will question the concept of female success within a patriarchal framework and consider the implications of feminist discourse and activism in the society at that time.

II. THE TOP GIRLS' ADOPTION OF MAINSTREAM MALE VALUES IN WORKPLACE

The attitudes of the successful women towards their subordinates provides a nuanced exploration of workplace dynamics, revealing a phenomenon where women in positions of power not only embrace but also perpetuate mainstream male values. Marlene's assertive statement to Jeanine, "You will be at the top with new girls coming in underneath you" (32), encapsulates the hierarchical structure prevalent in the workplace. Despite Win and Nell being longtime co-workers and friends, Marlene's promotion alters their relationship into one marked by distance and hierarchy, as Win laments, "Not long now and you'll be upstairs watching us all" (50). This shift underscores the rigid workplace hierarchy and hints at successful women replicating patriarchal patterns, with their ascent symbolizing the oppression of other women in the work place.

Moreover, *Top Girls* vividly illustrates the gender stereotypes in the Top Girls women's employment agencies. For example, as a woman who wanted to achieve more in her career, Jeanine's ambition in the field of advertising was not motivated and encouraged by Marlene; on the contrary, Marlene tried to discourage her from this idea and let her engage in "knitwear" that fit the traditional image of women

(32). This indirectly indicates that although Marlene has achieved breakthrough career success as a woman, she still maintains gender stereotypes, believing that there are certain things women are more "suitable" to do and some are "inappropriate" to do. Similarly, when Shona expresses interest in a computer-related field, Nell dismisses the idea, reinforcing gender biases by remarking, "That's a top field, and you'll be up against some very slick fellas there, there's some very pretty boys in computers..." (61), which reveals that, even among women in positions of power, there exists an ingrained bias favoring men in high-tech jobs. Despite Shona's determination, expressed with "That's why I want to do it" (62), Nell stubbornly denies her a computer-related job. This highlights the paradox that instead of using their power to challenge and change the gender-oppressive environments, successful women are unwittingly perpetuating patriarchal values, accepting the suppression of power, and upholding traditional gender norms and prejudices that women typically face. Consequently, the success of these top girls unintentionally symbolizes the pathetic fact that patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes have penetrated deeply not only among men, but also among the population of women as a whole.

III. The Sacrifice of Top Girls' Female-Specific Attributes

Top Girls delves into the complexities and sacrifices women are often forced to make in their quest for career success, particularly the loss of their inherent qualities. It does so with a satirical edge, highlighting the societal pressures that shape women's choices and identities. The play poignantly showcases how successful women deliberately adopt male traits in order to gain an edge in their professional lives, unintentionally reinforcing the stereotype that men hold the reins in the workplace. The opening scene of Marlene's top girls women's party serves as a vivid illustration of the historical pattern women have faced. It's a pattern that has persisted throughout the ages, where women are confronted with the daunting task of relinquishing their unique characteristics in order to navigate the often-challenging landscape of their careers. This trade-off is not without its costs, as it often involves compromising one's identity and authenticity. Joan's story, in particular, stands out as a poignant example of this dynamic. Her ascension to the papal throne is the culmination of her decision to forsake her feminine identity and present herself publicly as a man. This transformation allows her to achieve remarkable success, but it also sets in motion a chain of events that ultimately leads to her downfall. When she is unable to conceal her true gender during childbirth, her carefully constructed facade collapses, revealing the fragile nature of her position and the underlying fragility of women in positions of power. On the other hand, Isabella takes a different path. She devotes herself entirely to the field of biology, choosing a life of unmarried solitude and childlessness. While her dedication to her work brings her academic acclaim and respect, it also leaves her with a personal life that is devoid of the traditional markers of happiness and fulfillment. Isabella's story serves as a reminder that the pursuit of professional success often comes with its own set of compromises and sacrifices.

Through these intricate narratives, *Top Girls* challenges viewers to reevaluate the societal norms that shape women's choices and the role of gender in defining success. It encourages a deeper understanding of the complexities women face in their pursuit of both personal and professional fulfillment."

With Margaret Thatcher becoming the first female Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, the status of women seems to have improved greatly, but in order to achieve career success, Marlene still faces the same problems -- although she does give birth to a daughter, she abandoned her coldly afterwards, leaving her completely in the care of her sister, and always presented herself to the public as unmarried, childless, and non family-centered. In a conversation with Joyce, Marlene mentions not having visited her daughter in six years (81). When Marlene inquires about her mother, Joyce responds, "Did she recognize you?" (78), indicating it has been quite a while since Marlene's last visit. When Joyce explains her regular visits to her own mother, Marlene finds it incredible, and therefore emphasizes, "I mean lately" (73). This reveals that not only has Marlene failed to fulfill her responsibility as a daughter to visit her mother, but she also doubts that others would do so. Additionally, during an interview with Jeanine, Marlene advises Jeanine repeatedly that "you won't want to mention marriage here" (32) if she is doing a job interview. This underscores Marlene's firm belief that the traditional family life that women are expected to enjoy becomes a hindrance to their career paths. Marital bliss, family happiness, and career success for women are portrayed as incompatible. Therefore, it is fair to conclude that, for women like Marlene, success in career always has come at the cost of sacrifices and trade-offs -- giving up traits inherent to being a woman by forsaking her sisterhood, daughterhood, and motherhood.

While Marlene conveys a negative stance on marriage and exhibits a seemingly tenuous connection with her family, it becomes evident that she is not entirely indifferent to familial bonds or devoid of a desire for intimate connections among family members. This sentiment is reflected in her heartfelt statements to her sister Joyce, as she confesses, "I came because I thought you wanted it", and later she even expresses directly, "I love you" (82) to her sister. However, despite these glimpses of familial affection, Marlene makes the challenging choice to prioritize personal advancement over her family under the influence of liberal feminism.

Liberal feminism traces its roots to the Enlightenment era, notably embodied in Mary Wollstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" [2], in which Wollstonecraft advocated for the liberation of women from lives centered around husbands and families, endorsing the idea of women participating in public life and urging them to "wrangle in the senate to keep their faculties from rusting" like men [3]. Therefore, Thatcher, who successfully achieved the pinnacle of the political career becomes the idol of various liberal feminists, including Marlene, who also strives enthusiastically for women's career success. Marlene's desire for success reached a fever pitch, with her sister Joyce sarcastically stating, "I suppose you'd have liked Hitler if he was a woman" (84). Under this circumstance, she firmly chooses to abandon her family to achieve her dream of becoming a "Iron Lady" like Thatcher.

However, when women seek to integrate into the

male-dominated social work environment, a great dilemma arises. Women's unique experiences, including having and raising children, are seen as harmful, unemployable, and may even lead to the end of their careers and personal lives. Namely, they can only be "more successful" by becoming "more like men". Therefore, in order to succeed, the female elites in *Top Girls* have to yield to traditional patriarchal norms and give up their characteristics and experiences as women. Consequently, their actions of abandoning their womanhood not only fail to signify societal progress towards the true liberation of women from gender constraints but also suggest that women can only achieve success if they are willing to relinquish their unique feminine qualities and adopt masculine behaviors, reinforcing the pervasive influence of traditional gender norms within the narrative of female success.

Therefore, it can be inferred that through the portrait of Marlene, Churchill may have intended at insinuating the former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and her neoliberal state policies. Of Thatcher, Churchill once directly remarked "She may be a woman but she isn't a sister, she may be a sister but she isn't a comrade" [4]. In fact, Churchill was acutely aware of the problems that the policies of the Thatcher years had caused for British women, and realized that things have gotten worse for women under her administration, therefore she portrayed them in his plays.

IV. TOP GIRLS' REPLICATION OF THE OPPRESSIVE SOCIETAL STRUCTURE

Unlike liberal feminism, another kind of feminism prevailed in Britain during the Thatcher administration—socialist feminism believe that class, rather than just gender, is the cause of women's oppression. From their perspectives, for British women, the political framework is primarily the social class structure [5]. A lack of a clear and accurate understanding of the relationship between "gender conflict" and "class conflict" can hinder the fruitful results of the women's liberation movement. Sue Ellen Case pointed out that Churchill's plays suggest feminism is incompatible with any ideology that does not take women's oppression into account, directly labeling the playwright as a "socialist feminist" [6]. In an interview with Laurie Stone [7], Churchill questioned Marlene's criteria for success. That is, as a spokesperson for bourgeois feminism, Marlene sees the main challenge for women as simply gaining equal status with men. The goal of women's liberation should not only include the "top girls", but also include the women at the bottom of the society, such as Gretel and Angie who implement role duplication in the play, otherwise, it is not liberation in the real sense.

In *Top Girls*, Churchill's in-depth exploration of successful women reveals a disheartening reality: successful women often fail to share diverse possibilities with their relatively disadvantaged peers. Instead, they unintentionally replicate the social structure of the oppressive class, perpetuating the continuation of gender differences. According to Churchill, this link of progress and liberation can not be seen as true as the goal of feminism at all. At a banquet for successful women, the waitress, as the only "ordinary woman" at present, is almost completely ignored by the guests led by Marlene. No formal conversation has been formed between them. She just listen to the order of these top girls and remains in spite of the lively chatter around her. This reflects the huge gap between these female elites and the lower working class women, who have no voice to express themselves at all. It is a hint that conversations and understandings are not exist between these two groups of women.

Not only do these top girls have no empathy for low-class women they are not acquainted with, they also have no empathy their closest female relatives. Marlene, the central figure in the story and a symbol of successful women, consistently displays a condescending and incomprehensible attitude toward her working-class mother and sister. While her mother has a "rotten life" (85) due to a failed marriage, and her sister Joyce must work four jobs simultaneously to support the family, Marlene is totally unaware of their plight and ascribes all the cause of their poverty to their own problem by stating "I don't believe in class. Anyone can do anything if they've got what it takes." (86) She refuses any chances to help them coldly, and declares her attitude toward the working class as, "If they're stupid or lazy or frightened, I'm not going to help them get a job, why should I?" (86)

As one of the successful people in the female group, Marlene not only abandons helping working-class women in need but also holds a disdainful attitude toward them, which leads to Joyce accusing her, "You're ashamed of me if I came to your office" (85). Marlene completely severs ties with her mother and sister, even taking an opposing stance. As Joyce puts it, "And you're one of them!" Marlene counters with, "And you're us, wonderful us, and Angie's us, and Mum and Dad's us" (86) Joyce positions herself from a class perspective as "us", while Marlene unintentionally distances herself from her working-class background, becoming "them", an exploiter. Marlene's acceptance of the male value system prevents her from understanding the complex reasons leading to the low status of her relatives[8], and makes her turn a blind eye to the systemic obstacles that contribute to the struggles of women like her mother and sister.

By refusing to acknowledge structural inequality and attributing responsibility to individual so-called deficiencies, Marlene even contributes to the cycle of oppression against working-class women. In seeking personal success, Marlene resorts to unscrupulous means, using the interests of other women as steps to advance herself. She sees leaving her daughter as a natural personal choice by saying, "People do leave home, it is normal" (78). But in fact, she made her daughter lose her maternal love at an early age, and also disregarding Joyce's excessive efforts and sacrifices that compensated for her irresponsibility, which directly led to her sister's overworking and losing the opportunity to have her own child (81). Marlene has become an oppressor, building her happiness on the suffering of other women. Thus, the success achieved through this means, even reaching the top, will not bring true happiness or genuine recognition from the broader working-class women in society.

Marlene's self-serving attitude of only caring for personal development and never considering others is exactly the practice of Thatcherism's "individualized consumption era requires the government to cultivate values with individualism as the core" [9]. Until the end of the play, the relationship between Marlene and Joyce shows no positive

improvement, symbolizing that the issue of oppression between different classes of women has remained unresolved. Therefore, in *Top Girls*, successful women fail to bridge the vast differences with their comparatively unfortunate peers. Their embrace of the male value system further demonstrates the internalization of oppressive norms, hindering the possibility of genuine solidarity among women.

To note with, In *Top Girls*, rather than telling the whole story in a chronological order, Churchill reversed the order of the second and third acts and deliberately placed the quarrel between the two sisters Marlene and Joyce at the end of the play, and abruptly ended it with Angie's comment of "frightening", leaving the reader with a lot of imagination.

Phyllis [10] believes that the key to Churchill's dramatic approach lies in her clever use of the "gap" and her constant refusal to provide a fixed ending. Churchill herself declared that instead of offering a model of what people should be like, she had deliberately "left gaps" in the play, and hope there was a place for those gaps in the play [7]. Therefore, it is reasonable to infer that Churchill intentionally shuffled the chronological order of the whole story so that the two sisters, Marlene and Joyce, who represented the high woman, quarreled with each other.

Up till the end, Churchill did not provide an ideal model for the audience to follow, nor did she provide the same measure of value for people to judge on these two characters. Instead, she plainly laid out the juxtaposed display of a variety of distinct and opposed clear consciousness and voice, making the whole play comes to an abrupt end in the quarrels of the predecessors, Marlene and Joyce, and the panic of the younger generation, Angie. This fully reflects the author's uncertainty about the path of women's true progress in social status and the complexity of the life that women are facing. It is in this dialectical and contradictory response that the reader and audience can think about the social causes that cause the complex contradictions of human nature.

V. CONCLUSION

Historically, women have faced systematic discrimination and marginalization in both the public and private spheres, a reality reflected in Churchill's exploration of gender dynamics. During the Thatcher era, with its conservative political landscape and the rise of liberal feminism, women's struggle for equality was fraught with challenges. As Britain's first female prime minister, Thatcher herself was a contradictory figure whose rise to power symbolized the advancement of women, but whose policies often perpetuated traditional gender roles and reinforced patriarchal structures.

Against this backdrop, top girls such as Marlene and her cohorts navigate a male-dominated world by adopting the patriarchal values and behaviors that sustain this dominance. Instead of challenging the status quo, they force themselves to blend in, embracing the same competitive and individualistic tendencies as their male counterparts. In doing so, they inadvertently contribute to the perpetuation of patriarchal norms in the workplace, reinforcing the notion that success is inherently masculine. In addition, they sacrifice feminine attributes such as motherhood, wives and daughters in the pursuit of career success, which reinforces the idea that men are the main protagonists in the professional arena. By prioritizing personal advancement over family relationships and traditional gender roles, these successful women reinforce the notion that women must emulate male traits in order to thrive in a male-dominated environment. Despite their individual achievements, the success of these women remains isolated and does little to address broader societal oppression and the neglect of women. Rather than catalyzing systemic change, their victories have become exceptions in a system that perpetuates gender inequality.

Overall, through *Top Girls*' in-depth portrayal of successful women, the adoption of a male-dominated culture in their pursuit of career success and the impact of this culture on the societal status of women has been revealed. It is to be concluded that while top girls may break through individual barriers, their collective impact isn't enough to challenge deep-seated norms that limit female agency and perpetuate gender inequality.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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