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The Reflection of Modern Women in Caryl Churchill 'Top Girls' and Anita Nair's 'Ladies Coupe'

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Abstract

Caryl Churchill and Anita Nair, both female authors, have highlighted the issues of modern women in "Top Girls"¹ and "Ladies Coupe"² respectively. Regardless of their geographical, cultural, religious, social, economical, and political differences, most of the women share one thing in common and that is "affliction." Almost all the personas of both the stories identify and share their agonies, somehow, in a similar way despite the fact that they lived in different periods of history. It is possible that a woman can survive alone without registering in the conventional institution of marriage, even though some aspects of her life remain unfulfilled, empty and unyielding because it is against the law of nature. In "Advice on the Choice of a Mistress" Benjamin Franklin said, "A single man—resembles the odd Half of a Pair of Scissors"³ so it is not just the need of a woman but the man's as well to have a partner to share life with. Nevertheless, majority of modern women are willing to accept the companionship of men, but they are not intrigued by the marriage institutions. Therefore, the similarities and dissimilarities in both the narratives will be explored with a special reference to modern women's standpoint.

Keywords: Caryl Churchill, Anita Nair, Women

The Reflection of Modern Women

In "Top Girls" Marlene's decision to pursue her career, to leave her family behind and to ignore the duty of bringing up her illegitimate daughter "Angie" reflects the hollowness and concavity in her life though professionally she proves herself as a very successful and efficient woman. To accomplish such a self-rooted independent achievement, Marlene immolates her emotional, social and moral obligations that cause her fear and loneliness as a result. On the other

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hand, in "Ladies Coupe" Akhila gives away her youth to provide total support to her family after the death of her father and never receives any appreciation and acknowledgement. Ultimately, these multiple factors encourage her to take drastic measures against the social and the religious norms. Therefore, her rebellious solitary journey to make an intrinsic proposition of her life results in an illuminating dawn after listening to the stories of five other ladies whom she meets in the Ladies Coupe.

Concisely, it can be cognized that the blissful survival of a human being can't be subjected to individual's aspiration and vice versa, but only the mélange of individual and cultural preferences can form a symmetrical balance in a life.

The opening of the play *Top Girls* is very peculiar as five fictional characters from the history come to celebrate Marlene's promotion as a managing director of an employment agency. The presence of the historical personas in the contemporary setting creates a fairy tale like atmosphere. Alluring affect of Act-I, Scene-I magnetizes the audience's focus. The suffering of those fictional characters enables the audience to identify themselves with their agonies which prepare them to analyze the cause and effect relationships of the later scenes of the play during the multiple episodes of interviews. These personas tell their lives' stories in an amorphous manner causing inexplicability since nobody pays attention to anybody's story in particular. But, it does establishes a point when Marlene says, 'Oh God, why are we all so miserable?'⁴ This statement qualifies the fact that women always suffer no matter what century or country they belong to. This is the principal theme in Churchill's play. Consequently, she tries to prove it through characters from the past as well as from the present time because same characters play the roles of the past characters first then they act as the modern characters. Thus, indirectly indicating that women always suffer whenever they try to live independent life or to defy the set norms of the society. Undoubtedly, this technique introduces a new genre in the literary tradition, hence, the trait of magical realism is skillfully plaited in the first scene of Act-I as Gunter Grass has also employed this genre in his novel 'The Tin Drum' in which the protagonist Oscar's mischievous actions, primarily, provoke the readers to look for the causes of German nation's suffering after the World War-II. Likewise, the presence of the past mythical characters can also be interpreted on the same lines that the dramatist wants the readers and the audiences to investigate the reasons of modern women's afflictions. This new genre can also be symbolized as the Greek chorus used for affirmation of the intrinsic argument 'of

women's suffering' in the play. In either of the interpretations, it highlights the agonies of the women throughout the history.

The next important scene in *Top Girls* is the last one which takes place a year earlier than the prior scenes in a sequel. In this very scene Churchill dramatizes the American individual capitalism through Marlene and English social capitalism by Joyce, Marlene's sister. Both sisters seem to have a tight economical status because Joyce supports herself and Angie by cleaning houses, indicates her low financial status whereas Marlene earns a lot of money but spends it all to maintain her high living standards. As a result, she finds herself unable to give Angie's birthday and Christmas gifts due to the deficit of funds when she says, "Just a few little things. I have no money for birthdays..."⁵

Therefore, this indicates that whether women follow American individual capitalism or English social capitalism there is not comfortable financial status. It can be deduced that it is individual's preferences and management that can provide financially comfortable life not the system.

Marlene earns a lot of money and spends it all, the way she wants to spend it, so she is not better off than Joyce in this sense, yet Marlene has a satisfaction of making her own decisions and living her life fully. Both sisters appear true in their arguments, yet partial resentment for Angie and Marlene can be noticed in Joyce because of two reasons: firstly she calls Angie "a big lump and useless" as she to some extent was the cause of her miscarriage. Secondly, Marlene improved herself by alienating herself from the filial responsibilities to succeed in her ambition as a top career woman, in contrast to, Joyce who sacrifice for the sake of her family and receives no gratitude or appreciation. Despite these minor differences, they care a lot about each other and are very much alike. They both believe they are right and do what they have to do to survive in their different worlds. The play ends with Angie's frightened entry after dreaming a nightmare probably. The fright of Angie can be interpreted as a fear of her blurred future to become a top girl. Thus, getting a cheerful welcome from Marlene can be decoded as a wake up call for Angie who joins her aunt / mother in London in an earlier episode after a year of this meeting.

In contrast, *Ladies Coupe* opens up with the lines, 'the smell of a railway platform at night fills Akhila with a sense of escape' creates suspense in the minds of the readers. The Brahmin protagonist, Akhila, 45-year- old spinster and the breadwinner of her family in an income tax office, loathes at her multiple roles. She decides to go on a train journey, away from her family and responsibilities, in order, to become a different woman. Like *Top Girls* Akhila also meets five ladies but from the

contemporary world who share the real stories of their lives to find an answer to her question which also establishes the thesis of the novel. Akhila asks her co-travelers, "I just want you to tell me if you think a woman can manage alone."⁶

The women do not reply or suggest anything directly, but allow Akhila to make up her own mind by listening to their real stories.

Chapter nine is the turning point of the novel where we learn that the major force of altering Akhila's mind and life was not only Karpagam, her childhood friend who meets her accidentally in a super market after twenty five years but also Padma's, Akhila's younger sister whom she wedded and still supports her financially, disdain attitude prepares the grounds for Akhila's escape besides other multiple factors. Unlike Joyce, Padma is not only ungrateful but also exploits Akhila even after her marriage in every respect under the garb of favor and providing her security, as she is alone and not permitted to live alone. On the contrary, Joyce adopts Marlene's illicit child and doesn't display this patronage unless she feels the threat of losing Angie in a rational manner. Padma's perpetual degrading and tussling attitude contribute vitally in Akhila's realization of offended self-esteem. Consequently, Karpagam's supporting shoulder works as a catalyst to her decision of traveling. Then the last chapter of the novel offers the resolution in *Ladies Coupe* where the transformation of Akhila is celebrated. She accomplishes her quest with these thoughts, "She has no more doubts about what her life will be like if she lives alone—but at least she would have made the effort to find out. And perhaps that is all she needs to ask of life now. That she will be allowed to try and experience it..."⁷

The characters of Marlene and Akhila are similar in many ways. For instance, both of them are career women, they are the bread winner and self made, they consummate without marriage, they are efficient and rational in their profession, they defy the traditions, they are progressive, they are decisive and determined. The differences between them are few, for example, Marlene subsides her emotional and social sides to become a success. In opposition to that, Akhila shares her life in office with her colleague and friend Katherine whereas Marlene's colleagues do not know much about her when Nell says, "What's she got, brother, sister? She never talks about her family."⁸

Perhaps Marlene can't afford such a facility if she wants to remain a top girl in that enterprise, for sharing and revealing personal matters not only weaken the person but also influence one's business decisions. Hence, Marlene remains strictly professional. The second dissidence is Akhila's affectionate and responsible nature which contradicts Marlene's self centered and a realistic caliber. Having such a

high prestige, Marlene does not do anything for her biological daughter Angie or her sister. In fact, Angie tricks Marlene into visiting her and Joyce, after seven years because Angie looks up to Marlene and believes she is her real mother which she tells her friend Kit during a conversation. Marlene seems to be aware of her shortcomings because meeting the family means to face the emotional part which devitalizes her so to avoid such situations she restrains her visits. But, Akhila's strong sense of responsibility does not allow her to nourish her subjectivity though that cultivates anxiety in her gradually. The torment of exploitation keeps on decomposing Akhila psychologically, yet she does not give up until she is done away with her duties. Another difference between them is, Akhila does not take interest in politics, but Marlene propagates Thatcherism and despises working class as seen in her dealing with the characters of Joyce and the waitress who is part of the first scene, but never utters a word.

Angie, sixteen and an immature, is a very significant character. Joyce and Marlene do not think highly of her because she is a high school drop out, hence, can't get a decent job. In stead of encouraging and arranging something useful for her, they undermined her. Joyce thinks that Angie will have a hard time getting a job and her best bet in life is to get married, though she cannot imagine who would marry her. Joyce does admit at one point, "She's clever in her own way." Labeling her "thick" Marlene, Angie's biological mother, tells one of her coworkers, "She's not going to make it." She believes Angie's future career will be as a "Packer in Tesco" nothing as accomplished as working at the employment agency run by Marlene. But, Angie performs very well over the course of *Top Girls*, more than expected, considering how she is talked about. For instance, Angie manages to call Marlene for visiting. Another achievement of Angie's is going to London from Suffolk on the bus, and finding her way to Marlene's work place in act 2, scene 1. Joyce and Kit do not think Angie could do such a thing on her own. But Angie wants to escape her life with Joyce to become a success. To that end, she goes to her aunt/mother and hopes to stay with her but to ask her help, too. Her willingness to sleep on the floor of Marlene's home to have a different, better life, like her aunt/mother does establish a sense of keen awareness of reform in her. It also creates a situation where Marlene gets her child back, a key point brought up in the dinner party. Angie wants to be with Marlene, to be Marlene, and does what she can to make that happen. Angie wants to be a top girl even though she is asleep in the couch of the employment agency in a linear sense of the play; it can symbolize Angie's utter submission to her future life, work and ambition to become a top girl like Marlene. In case of

Akhila, there is no child, yet her optimist approach resolves her issues of identity-crisis and self-reliance. Having a no child may is left open-ended as she reconnects with Hari in the end so it leaves a hope for the future.

Another significant difference between both narratives is the fictional figures of Pope Joan, Dull Gret, Lady Nijo, Patient Griselda and Isabella Bird from history, literature and art in *Top Girls* and the realistic characters of Janaki Prabhakar, Sheela Vasudevan, Margaret Paulraj, Prabha Devi and Marikolanthu in *Ladies Coupe*. However, except the first scene, all the other characters in *Top Girls* are from the present time. Perhaps by doing this, Churchill wants to portray the similarities between the past characters and the modern figures. Another interpretation can be this that it reflects Marlene's isolation as per demand of the new economical system. As being a nonconformist, she has become a loner. Therefore, symbolically she is an insular and does not talk to the waitress the only real character since she despises the working class. This eccentric technique gives birth to a new genre in literature where as Nair's execution of developing the plot is quite identical to the oral tradition because all her characters tell their stories without any interruptions or inquiries which is very much like the traditional way of story telling usually (in villages) in the past. In this way a vein of magical realism can be sensed in both the narrations. Another difference is the absence of male characters in *Top Girls*, but Akhila does meet Vinod and spends some time with him in the end of her train journey. In this way, the potential role of men has been abolished to provide complete authority and independence to the modern women. Consequently, advocating the notion that a woman can live without conforming and submitting to the traditions by creating her own identity in the contemporary world. This may sound alarming to some people, yet evolutionary by empowering the modern women will create the equilibrium in the society. But, one strong point that can go against this is only the child's nourishment as it is seen in the case of Angie. The love of a child must not be replaced or ignored under any circumstances until the child is at least ten.

Furthermore, one of the commonest streaks is the anguish and torment which all women encounter just to stand up for their decisions or to survive. Most of the characters of Churchill are hardly content in the end of their stories except Patient Griselda who represents the patriarchal society. On the other hand, characters of Nair are prospectively satisfied within the patriarchal circle though they defy their traditions in their own way and succeed ultimately in their struggle victoriously. In fact, through their protagonists Churchill and Nair try to suggest the answer of modern woman's affliction by using a mirror technique through that the

protagonists, readers and audiences see the reflections of other women's lives identifying their agonies with them. As a result, it supports them to make their own logical decisions. Role reversal is one of the similar traits in the two stories since Marlene and Akhila are career women and breadwinners. Traditionally it used to be only men's responsibility in the past, but now Marlene and Akhila have replaced their domain; still they are not treated as equal as men are. In addition, they have to play their roles as women e.g. to give birth to a child (in case of Marlene), and to look after the house (in case of Akhila). In this way, women pressurize themselves in the name of liberty and independence, but if it gives them satisfaction, it has to be appreciated if not supported. Marlene does receive this complete support from her sister generously whereas Akhila's mother appreciates her contribution and sacrifice fearfully and dimly. This thankless and careless attitude of her family hurt Akhila and she tries to find her lost identity; she travels.

Another identical thread in the two stories is a 'gender' discrimination. In *Top Girls* Mrs. Kidd, wife of Howard who is Marlene's colleague calls her promotion and working "unnatural." Mrs. Kidd believes upset Howard should not have to work for a woman. Furthermore, Mrs. Kidd hopes that Marlene will give up the promotion because Howard has to support his family. Of course, Marlene declines that at once. In the same way, Akhila works with twenty four colleagues all day long, yet when she wants to go on an office trip, her mother asks her to take permission from her younger brother. Going out without a man's permission is considered inappropriate because as a woman she can't decide for her self, but to support the family financially she is allowed to work with men whole day long without being watched or secured by any close family members. Knowing this hypocritical trick, Akhila defies the tradition and goes with Hari.

Top Girls is set in the contemporary times. The action is confined to two places in England, London and Suffolk. The realistic action takes place in these two settings. One is the Top Girls employment agency, where Marlene works and the potential clients are interviewed, and Angie shows up, hoping to stay with Marlene. Marlene looks composed and in control in this surrounding. The second setting is Joyce's home and backyard, where Angie and Kit scheme and Marlene visits. At home Marlene becomes vulnerable and bursts into tears. The fantasy dinner party that opens *Top Girls* also takes place at a restaurant in London. Though the dinner is clearly a fantasy because all the guests are dead or fictional, the setting is very real. It can be seen as an isolated place where Marlene and a waitress are the real people who do not talk; though Marlene being a success does not have any true relationships

around her to enjoy with her the promotion. Thence, she celebrates alone and becomes boozy. It can also depicts the loneliness of a successful modern career woman who seems to have some flaws despite being a success in the men's challenging world. The employment agency reflects the status of a contemporary middle class English woman. On the contrary, in *Ladies Coupe* the major action is engineered at a railway station at first then in a ladies compartment where all the characters narrate their stories. Symbolically it can be perceived as a transitional period of Akhila's past and future life as if night will absorb all her sufferings. The proceeding performance takes place at Kanyakumari's beech resort 'Sea Breeze Hotel.' Sea and beach indicate the new Horizon, life, mystery, peace and solace for Akhila. Also, here she is acquainted with Vinod and reconnects herself with her lover Hari. Consequently, it can be observed that Marlene being a self-centered modern woman is alone, on the contrary, Akhila being altruistic and conventionalist also suffers because of her family, so she becomes lonely. Therefore, it can be inferred that being a conformist or nonconformist does not contribute to one's life and progress but individual's happiness depends on his/ her determination and courage to face challenges successfully.

Top Girls is not a linear play, but one in which time is used in an unusual fashion. The last scene of the play, act 2, scene 2, is the only part that takes place at a specific time in the story, about a year earlier than the other events. This flashback ties up some of the loose ends created by the story. The rest of the scenes, even the action within act 2, scene 1, do not have to take place in the order presented, though all are set in the present. The events are linked thematically, but not by a specific sequence of time. *Ladies Coupe* is a linear play though flash backs give it sometimes cyclic effect and it is also set in the present time. Impacts of time are irreversible though they instigate the further actions among the characters.

The tone of *Top Girls* is objective and ironical in some episodes, but by and large it is explanatory in the interviews' segments, in contrast, the tone of *Ladies Coupe* is narrative and satirical. The language of *Top Girls* is quite knotty, for the dramaturge has given notes in the 'caution' section to clarify ambiguities, yet it is plain, slang and comprehensible with minor complications. In *Ladies Coupe* the terminology sets the scene, with topography and transport registers dominant affect, is distinctively Indian despite the English words are employed. The title phrase ("coupé" is actually of French origin, thus incidentally pointing up the hybrid nature of English) refers to a gender-segregated convention, apparently now disappearing, of Indian rail travel. Amalgamation of

Nair's native language and English language gives a fresher vein of distinction and post-colonial product. It is relatively understandable novel except the use of some local expressions and traditions' elaboration.

The important images in *Ladies Coupe* are the train, water, sea, beach and eggs. (Except eggs, all the other images are explained above.) Ritually, eggs are forbidden to eat in Brahmin community, yet Akhila eats them. This sacrilegious act can be explained as Akhila's desire to fulfill her cravings to decide her own destiny. An egg also symbolizes birth or creation so it can be said that she yearns to perform that role, too. She wants to be wedded and to have her own off springs like the other women and that role is denied for her due to responsibilities she takes on her shoulders after her father's death. In *Top Girls* recurring image is the 'drinking' of the ladies as well as Marlene's father's. The state of drunkenness itself depicts the longing for peace and security in order to avoid anguish and affliction. In the first scene, all the characters become woozy in the end not because they were celebrating Marlene's promotion but also they were trying to relinquish their painful memories. They used alcohol as a tranquilizer to sooth the heat of their agonies temporarily to seek refuge. Drinking of alcohol and eating eggs depict the desire for peace and security from the afflictions they encountered in their lives whether it is in the past or in the present.

The main theme of both the stories is to pursue the challenging decision taken by women to liberate themselves from the traditional roles and to remain steadfast despite the unfulfillment of certain personal aspects of their lives, however, the satisfaction of deciding for themselves gets prioritized the most in their lives. Marlene's right decision brings success to her though her personal life remains hollow as she does not have any real friends apart from Angie who truly loves her. Therefore, it indicates that nurturing one's off-springs will never go unrewarded. Likewise, Akhila's calling Hari connects her to missed-emotional part of life after arriving to the final decision that after all she can live alone and mange well independently, respectively. In a nutshell, it can be deduced, 'Where there's a will, there's a way.'

Notes & References

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² Anita Nair, *Ladies Coupe*, (London and New York: Vintage, 2003)

³ "The Speech of Polly Baker", Accessed on July 27, 2010,
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⁵ Ibid, p. 66

⁶ Ibid, p. 23

⁷ Anita Nair, *Ladies Coupe*, op.cit.

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