

ფემინისტური დისტოპიის დეკონსტრუირება ქერილ ჩერჩილის პიესაში „საუკეთესო გოგონები“

Deconstructing Feminist Dystopia in Caryl Churchill's Play *Top Girls*

ნიკა ბაღდოშვილი

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აბსტრაქტი:

სტატიის მიზანია ამოვიცნოთ ფემინისტურ დისტოპიური თვისებები ქერილ ჩერჩილის პიესაში „საუკეთესო გოგონები“. სტატიაში განვიხილავთ თუ როგორ ახერხებს პიესის ავტორი შექმნას ფემინისტური დისტოპია ტექსტის ნარატივში. ჩემი მსჯელობა დაფუძნებულია ტექსტის ანალიზზე და ამ თემაზე გამოქვეყნებული ნაშრომებზე. სასცენო მიმართულებებით, დიალოგებითა და გმირების ურთიერთქმედებებზე დაყრდნობით ჩემი სტატია განიხილავს როგორ ახერხებს ჩერჩილი თეატრალური ხერხების საშუალებით შექმნას სივრცე, რომელშიც ქალებს შეთვისებული აქვთ პატრიარქატი. გარდა ამისა, სტატია ყურადღებას აქცევს პიესის სოციო-პოლიტიკურ კონტექსტს და განიხილავს თუ როგორი ზეგავლენა იქონია 1980-იან წლებში ბრიტანეთში გავრცელებულმა ტექტურებმა პიესაზე და ზოგადად ქალების მოლოდინზე. სტატია გვიჩვენებს ფემინისტური დისტოპიის განსხვავებულ ფორმას პიესაში, რომლის საკვანძო პრობლემა თავად ქალები გახლავთ. ერთის მხრივ პიესაში წარმოდგენილი პერსონაჟები, ჩანან როგორც თვითკმარი და დამოუკიდებელი ქალები, რომლებმაც „წარმატებას“ მიაღწიეს პატრიარქატის მიუხედავად, მაგრამ, სინამდვილეში, ისინი არიან ქალები, რომლებიც კი არ ებრძოდნენ პატრიარქატს, როგორც ამას ფემინიზმი მოითხოვს, არამედ ისწავლეს მისთან თანარსებობა და სათავისოდ გამოყენება. სტატის მნიშვნელობა ჩანს მის წინასწარ მეტყველურ ხასიათში გამოიხატება. ბრიტანეთში 1970 და 1975 წელს მიღებულმა კანონებმა ხელი შეუწყო ქალების დასაქმებას, რასაც 1980-იან წლებში ფემინისტური მოძრაობის მეორე ტალღა მოჰყვა, რამაც ფემინიზმის თემა კვლავ ყურადღების ქვეშ მოაქცია. ქერილ ჩერჩილმა ოსტატურად მოახერხა ფემინიზმში

დამალული პრობლემის აღმოჩენა და ეს პიესაც სწორედ ამ პრობლემის წარმოჩენას მიუძღვნა.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: ქალები, ფემინიზმი, დისტოპია, პატრიარქატი

Key words: women, feminism, dystopia, Patriarchy

Introduction

Dystopia, as a literary and philosophical concept, presents a vision of a society that may appear ideal or perfect on the surface but is fundamentally flawed and oppressive upon closer examination. *Top Girls* by Caryl Churchill takes this very idea and reverses it. Meaning that the driving force out of which the play was created is fundamentally utopian, but its realization in actual political and social settings makes it Dystopian. The opening scene of the drama takes place at the restaurant, where famous female figures gather to celebrate the promotion of Marlene, the main character. The concept bears a striking resemblance to Judy Chicago's famous "The dinner party" exhibition, which pays tribute to the achievements of the various women throughout the world. Originally, the purpose of such displays is to create "*an imaginary space in which the meaning and potential of woman has not yet been measured and cut down to size*" (Bammer, 1991, p. 26). However, Churchill's play uses this narrative to gain the opposite effect. By doing this fundamental, utopian idea of female potential easily becomes deconstructed and morphs into something more sinister.

Churchill's Feminist Dystopia

We have to mention that the play is not Feminist dystopia in a traditional sense. The Typical narrative of the Feminist dystopia is a fictional world in which the patriarchal inequalities of contemporary society are exaggerated to call for the change that our society needs to undergo. Even though the men mentioned in the play are painted in a negative light, they still aren't the "main villains" of the story. The narrative does not concentrate on the issues that lie in contemporary society or the brevity of those women who fought the system, but rather on the problems they created themselves., Churchill's women have created their own *dystopia* "*by internalizing patriarchy*" (Pfaelzer, Nov 1998, p. 287). In order to "succeed", characters acquire the qualities of the men, in other words, becoming something other than "woman". During one of the interviews Churchill talks about the inspiration for this idea (literary construction): "*I remember before I wrote Top Girls thinking about the woman barristers - and how they were in a minority and had to imitate men to succeed – and I was thinking of them as a different from me*" (Churchill, 1991, p. 22). Churchill saw this as a serious problem that was slowly taking over women, but the final nail in the coffin would be in 1979, when Margaret

Thatcher became the first female British Prime Minister. Thatcher's Leadership style as the "Iron Lady" became the defining feature of career-driven women. For Churchill, the former prime minister symbolized the problem of women abandoning their femininity and sisterhood as a way to gain success. They became more egoistic focusing only on themselves and getting rid of everything that stood in their way, therefore destroying any idea of comradery and sisterhood. As Churchill says "*She [Thatcher] may be a woman, but she isn't a sister, she may be a sister, but she isn't a comrade*" (Betsko & Koenig, 1987, p. 78). She went as far as to use her as a basis for the play's main character, Marlene. This is shown by the character's nickname "Maggie" as the audience of the 1980s would no doubt make the connection.

Structurally speaking the play itself is separated into 3 acts all of them moving backwards in time, (meaning chronologically Act 3 happens before Act 1). The settings of each act have important symbolical meaning. Act 1 happens at the restaurant, a place where men and women eat at the same table, representing the coexistence of the two. The second act takes place in the office traditionally male-dominated area and the final act happens in the kitchen traditionally female dominated place. But those locations, regardless of their "traditional ruler", are overtaken by women. In doing so, the playwright can show the characters exclusively in relation to other women. The strongest realization of that idea is the dinner scene.

The opening scene starts with two characters Marlene and the nameless waitress. Throughout the scene the waitress comes and goes never uttering a single word and dutifully fulfilling her job. As more guests arrive the disparity between the waitress and the other characters becomes even more apparent. In contrast to the famous figures of the past the nameless waitress becomes objectified taking on the role of the prop. Churchill underscores the inherent issues with feminism, which tends to exalt only the renowned and exceptional women, neglecting those who haven't attained such distinctions. This divide further highlights the fracture between them.

The rift doesn't only exist between famous and less accomplished as the guests' conversation slowly deteriorates. The women of the party are from different social, economic and cultural classes being members of the same gender is not enough to reach an understanding. The chaotic use of overlapping dialogues highlights women's detached and forced relationships. By doing this Churchill criticized the assumption of the "universal sisterhood". Being "successful women" doesn't immediately make them "sisters". Their own experiences and prejudice lead them to "intrasexual oppression", meaning they judge and criticize each other. For instance, Lady Nijo and Isabella Bird refer to one another's culture as "barbaric". Such blatant display of disrespect shows their unwillingness to accept a culture much different from their own. Among the legendary figures Lady Nijo stands out as the "outsider". Due to her oriental heritage her experiences seem much more "exotic" and "scandalous" often leading to misunderstanding:

"Marlene: Are you saying he raped you?"

Lady Nijo: --of course not, Marlene, I belonged to him, it was what I was brought up for from a baby. I soon found I was sad if he stayed away. “ (Churchill, 1991, p. 3)

Acts of the Emperor seem unreal to their “western ears” so they are quick to condemn it, while it remains natural to Lady Nijo. Churchill shows that if one is raised by certain customs and traditions, it is hard for one to find problems within it. Just like how they easily saw the flaws in Japanese society, the opposite can be true as well. The women are so influenced by their cultural heritage it is hard for them to discern the problem. At the end of the day, the characters use their subjective point of view to find flaws in other stories, never doubting their own reality, their own truth. Lady Nijo symbolizes women who try to please patriarchy and abide by their rules, but that never seems to get any result only after they go against the system can they find comfort:

“Lady Nijo: - when His Majesty came in Genki seized him and I beat him till he cried out and promised he would never order anyone to hit us again. Afterwards there was a terrible fuss. The nobles were horrified. "We wouldn't even dream of stepping on your Majesty's shadow." And I had hit him with a stick. Yes, I hit him with a stick.

[Lady Nijo is laughing and crying]” (Churchill, 1991, p. 27)

Patient Griselda and Lady Nijo share a lot of similarities. both experienced being owned by patriarchy and tried appease it, because of it there is mutual understanding between them:

“Griselda: I had promised.

Lady Nijo : No, I understand. Of course you had to, he was your life.” (Churchill, 1991, p. 23)

In the end, they were never appreciated. They were violated and had their femininity, in the form of their children, taken away. It shows that adhering to the patriarchy doesn't lead to happiness.

Isabella Bird is a woman “favored” by patriarchy. Her journeys and her freedom is enabled by her husband. Her tales usually included her adventures and exotic places, never really having any problems due to her husband's gentle nature: *“Isabella: I swore to obey dear John, of course, but it didn't seem to arise. “ (Churchill, 1991, p. 21)* Not only that, it seems that she feels guilty because of her actions. Isabella is aware that she isn't cut out to be a suburban housewife, still conscious of abandoning her sister to the point that she marries the person who

cared for her: *“I sabella: It was Doctor Bishop’s devotion to her in her last illness that made me decide to marry him.”* (Churchill, 1991, p. 11)

Pope Joan is in a similar situation. By disguising her inherent sex, she was able to utilize privileges provided by patriarchy. As Joan herself mentions she was noticed because she was a “clever boy” hinting that what makes her so clever is her womanhood. Marie Folkeson argues that Joan represents radical feminism which believes that women are superior to men and such *“display of radical feminism is one way of introducing the problems of forcing women to become masculine.”* (Folkeson, 2017, p. 25)

Joan spent most of her life in pursuit of knowledge and even achieved the title of the Pope as a result, but despite all her efforts it seems as if her own body rebelled against her. She was so entrapped in her own illusions that she became oblivious to the clear signs:

“Pope Joan: I didn’t know what was happening. I thought I was getting fatter, but then I was eating more and sitting about, the life of a Pope is quite luxurious. I don’t think I’d spoken to a woman since I was twelve” (Churchill, 1991, p. 16)

The pregnancy itself is very symbolic as it is core and defining feature of womanhood as soon as she proves her femininity, she loses all her control. Joan’s story is the realization of “Thatcherian women’s” fear. They walk on a tightrope as the single display of femininity, which as shown is inevitable, leads them to lose all power they have gained as men. This idea might remind the reader of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest’s* climactic scene where McMurphy exposes Nurse Ratched’s breast and her vulnerability, a poignant illustration of the power dynamics. This symbolic act strips her of the mechanical power she wields over the patients, symbolizing the liberation of those under her control. Similarly, in the broader context of societal norms, women often find themselves under pressure, expected to embody a certain image of femininity that simultaneously grants them power while constraining them within predefined roles and the display of femininity can paradoxically lead to the loss of the power they've gained.

As for Dull Gret, her character is taken from Pieter Brueghel’s famous painting of Dulle Griet also known as Mad Meg. The inspiration for this painting comes from the Flemish proverb “she could plunder in front of hell and return unscathed”. The usual interpretation of the painting takes two forms: first one is to make fun of aggressive and spiteful women based on the proverbs' means, but also depicting human’s greed and avarice. Churchill’s Gret is taken more in the context of feminism as she symbolizes the masculine females who have truly copied the manners of the man and aren’t afraid to loot and plunder. It is a negative trait of patriarchy to use force and violence to take what they desire.

As the dinner runs wild it becomes painfully obvious that Marlene pales in comparison to her guests. Numerous times throughout the dinner Marlene tries to join the conversation. She asks questions and even sometimes talks about herself, but each time she gets glossed over and unanswered:

“Isabella: My father taught me Latin although I was a girl. /

Marlene: They didn't have Latin at my school.

Isabella: really, I was more suited to manual work. Cooking, washing, mending, riding horses. / Better than reading books,

Lady Nijo: Oh, but I'm sure you're very clever.” (Churchill, 1991, p. 4)

Compared to the exotic lifestyles of those ladies, Marlene's life seems boring and mundane. She tries to unite everyone in her toast, but fails miserably:

“Marlene: We've all come a long way. To our courage and the way, we changed our lives and our extraordinary achievements. “ (Churchill, 1991, p. 13)

The irony of her toast becomes even more apparent in Act 2. Marlene genuinely thinks that she is helping other women through her success and even her job is directly connected to helping women. *Top Girls* is a high-end employment company that is supposed to help women find better jobs, but as we find out none of the workers of the company are interested in their client's future:

“Marlene: --He's very fair I think, good at his job, you won't have to nurse him along. Hundred and ten, so that's better than you're doing now.

Jeanine: I don't know.

Marlene: I've a fairly small concern here, father and two sons, you'd have more say potentially, secretarial and reception duties, only a hundred but the job's going to grow with the concern and then you'll be in at the top with new girls coming in underneath you.

Jeanine: What is it they do?

Marlene: Lampshades. / This would be my first choice for you.

Jeanine: Just lampshades?” (Churchill, 1991:32)

Even her coworkers, Nell and Win, share Marlene's mindset. Nell doesn't want to help her next client because he can't relocate due to personal reasons and Win has to deal with *“Half a dozen little girls and an arts graduate who can't type” (Churchill, 1991, p. 49)*. The company that is supposed to lead women in male-dominated space only seems to help patriarchy and enforce its unwritten rules. Women in the office aren't there to help, but rather to look down and criticize others as the only way to be a “high-flyer” is to have more “balls” than your opponent. Even Angie, Marlene's supposed niece, is not spared as she is denounced for being “thick” meaning even future generations are affected by their influence.

Marlene's façade becomes even more fragile in Final, revealing a glimpse of what she truly is. The final act takes place at Joyce's (Marlene's sister's) home a year before the events of Act

1. We find out that Angie is Marlene's biological daughter, who she abandoned years ago for the sake of her future. This secret makes clear that Marlene used her sister in the role of a wife. Just like men use their wives to take care of the household and children in order for them to focus on the career Marlene used Joyce to achieve success, but when Joyce confronts Marlene, she denies it and believes that Joyce wanted it too:

“Marlene: You were quick enough to take her.

Joyce: What does that mean?

Marlene: You were quick enough to take her.

Joyce: Or what? Have her put in a home? Have some stranger / take her would you rather? “(Churchill, 1991:79)

For egotistical and self-serving Marlene, it impossible to understand why some people do things they don't want or don't have to:

“Marlene: Then don't go and see her every week.

Joyce: Somebody has to.

Marlene: No, they don't. / Why do they? “(Churchill, 1991:79)

Marlene feels attacked thinking that her sister is jealous of her success, because she was “clever” from the very start. The adjective “clever“ pops up once again further connecting the Pope Joan and Marlene. Both of them put on the Mantle of men, the only difference being Marlene is conscious enough to control her femininity. In the end, their debate is not resolved and the sisters never reach an understanding. The play ends with “*a little girl's nightmare of the future*” (Brown, 1988, p. 117)

Conclusion

In the 1970s Britain experienced “the second wave of feminism”. This period is marked by heightened awareness of gender inequalities, due to the Equal pay Act of 1970 and the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975. The idea of women's potential started to take root in society but it seems the discerning and insightful eye of the playwright saw incoming dangers in the movement. *Top Girl* is the realization of the worst possible outcome. The play is a possible future, where women have taken and embodied the worst traits of patriarchy. Rather than finding true independence as the true ideal of feminist, they submit to it. The stories shared by characters clearly depict this. Their discussions all are connected to men: Walter, Emperor or Doctor Bishop are just the means to an end. Patriarchy in a different form. As a way of achieving their goals, they either had to control men or be controlled by them, never achieving true balance between the two. The female characters forcefully or willingly gave up their womanhood in order to survive and succeed, becoming more like “women barristers”,

becoming something different from “Churchill” (Typical woman). Churchill’s greatest fear and Dystopia is a world like this, where women rather than providing a fresh perspective join this senseless rat race and continue the patriarchal customs.

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ავტორის შესახებ:

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