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Identity and selfhood: construction and fragmentation of the female identity in caryl churchill's select plays

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Abstract
Gender identity has been and will continue to be a major part of the idea of 'selfhood' and 'identity". This concept however tends to be essentialist in nature and ignores other aspects of an individual's experiences and personality. In the modern and postmodern times this essentialist aspect of the 'self' is being challenged variously and in the realm of contemporary British drama by several women playwrights like April De Angelis, Sue Lenier, Sarah Kane and Caryl Churchill.
'Selfhood' can be defined as the state of having a distinct identity; an achieved personality / a fully developed self-individuality. This idea has been one of the major concerns of literature finding full expression during the Renaissance; and more so for women, which has been an especially long drawn and arduous task. Over the last century significantly much has been added to the concept of identity, yet much more remains to be done in the globalised burgeoning cyber environment.
One of the postmodern personalities Caryl Churchill (1938-) is regarded as a major playwright of contemporary Britain. Having written plays for the radio during the1960's, in the 1970's she turned to writing stage plays, in which she explored contemporary life in post-seventies Britain. She is best known for her plays like '*Cloud Nine*' (1979), '*Top Girls'* (1982), and '*Serious Money'* (1987) in which she explores human existence and experience in all its present day dilemmas of a multicultural global environment. Indeed, she has a profound understanding of the contemporary world through the medium of theatre and questions and interrogates every construct including gender constructs, and every accepted belief. Consequently her characters become vehicles for exposing the inconsistencies with character stereotyping. In her plays Churchill deplores capitalism and deep rooted patriarchal mindsets that connive to limit the female 'identity' and confine her within certain definitions of the 'self'.
This paper will find how Caryl Churchill, with her innovative incisive plays subverts gender constructs. It will be a close reading of the primary source material which forms the selected plays and understand how Caryl Churchill deals with the question of female identity in her plays. From her vast oeuvre I deal with two widely acclaimed and very successful plays – '*Top Girls*' and '*Cloud Nine*' as these are radically different in their representation of female subjectivity.

Keywords: self, identity, playwrights, gender, postmodern, patriarchy

Introduction
With the Post-Modern Era there was a recognition that the end of traditional structures and institutions was near, the end of what another theorist calls 'grand narratives'– the big, one-size-fits-all stories of modern thought (Lyotard, 1984). There is a loss of faith in the idea of 'progress' (Foucault, 1978), the idea that we are gradually heading along the one true pathway towards certain universal goals – such as the full picture of knowledge, or equality and justice. Instead, there is an emphasis on multiple pathways and plurality; on diversity and difference; and on the partiality of all knowledge that is, the idea that we can only have an incomplete picture and the idea that all knowledge is biased. Change is seen, not as a linear progression, but as a series of networks and flows, connections and reconnections that, because they are always forming and reforming, never have time to solidify.
Thus, where modern thought emphasizes direction, order, coherence, stability, simplicity, control, autonomy, and universality; postmodern thought emphasizes fragmentation, diversity, discontinuity, contingency, pragmatism, multiplicity, and connections. In modern thought people are separate, coherent individuals - or 'selves' - who think and act independently of all other individuals. While this idea seems obvious and natural to those of us acculturated and educated in the Western European system and traces its roots to the renaissance idea of the distinct 'self'; it is a construct. In postmodern thought, this construct is being called into question.
In the everyday world, the modern idea of individuality was replaced long ago. People have more than one way of being, and they have relationships and connections with one another. They are also made up of many, often conflicting, parts. As they move in and out of different contexts, cultures, and sets of ideas (and / or between the different parts of themselves), they think differently, and behave differently in relation to others. They know that there are different rules of conduct in different contexts, that they are constructed - and can construct themselves - differently in these different contexts, and that they perform better in some contexts than in others. The postmodern person is thus a hybrid. They have, not one core, permanent self, but many 'selves'. Their self - and their identity - are not fixed, but continually in process, as the boundaries between themselves and others, and between the different parts of themselves are negotiated.

Postmodernist political theatre

Postmodernism was not the invention of literary critics, but literature can certainly claim to be one of the most important laboratories of postmodernism (Steven Connor, 2004) [11]. Brian McHale's (1977) [4, 6] influential suggestion is that where modernist fiction is epistemological – that is, concerned with problems of knowledge and understanding (Knowledge Age), postmodernist fiction is ontological – that is, concerned with the creation (Imagination Age) and interrelation of worlds of being. Postmodernist work in the theatre has come to mean work that no longer conforms to assumed definitions of what should happen in a poem or a play.

The term "postmodern" is largely a phenomenon of the 1970s and 1980s. "Postmodernist" often refers to cultural works that possess stylistic features that align them with postmodernism as a structure of feeling, an episteme, rather than a chronologically defined moment. When thinking about aesthetic performances in relation to postmodernism, the basic critical question is usually: in what sense is a given performance or kind of performance postmodernist? Michel Benamou describes postmodern culture, where everything performs: technologies perform; art is no longer content to stay on the museum wall; literary critics see their writings as performances; political and social developments are performed in the public arena – the media, in particular, make political and social developments performative (Benamou *et al*, 1977) [4, 6].

In theatre, it is difficult to establish what postmodern theatre may have reacted against because a coherent description of modern theatre is hard to construct. Normally, 'modern theatre' refers to the realistic (as opposed to Romantic) plays and performance practices of late nineteenth-century European realist plays of Ibsen (2008) [17] and Chekhov (1912) [8], then in the realist drama that flourished in the United States and United Kingdom after World War II. To identify modern theatre with realism means postmodern theatre is anti-realist when actually it really constitutes an alternative strain of modern theatre. This confusion has made it very difficult to place certain figures like Bertolt Brecht (1964) [5] and Samuel Beckett (2009) [2, 3, 16, 22], playwrights who challenged realism equally radically to be considered modernists or postmodernists or transitional figures? The analysis of postmodernism in theatre is further complicated by the relationship between text and performance that characterizes the form.

One simple but important point is that pluralism and diversity are historically postmodern phenomena in the theatre. The vast majority of the playwrights produced on the modern, Anglo-American and European stages well into the 1960s were white males. As a result of the influence of theatrical movements directly informed by the 'identity politics' of social movements in the late 1960s and 1970s, postmodern women playwrights including Caryl Churchill and playwrights of color, are now much better represented both in the theatre and in the monologue performances that have become the most popular style of performance art. In the majority of cases, however the autobiographical monologue is an accessible and popular form through which performance art, once considered an experimental and avant-garde genre, has entered the cultural mainstream. Comparing the features of historically postmodern performance with performance that articulates postmodernism as a new structure of feeling, we run into contradictions. Some performance practices that are unquestionably postmodern, such as those of most performance-art monologists and much of the theatre that reflects postmodern pluralism, are not postmodernist because they rest on the epistemological assumptions characteristic of the modern, including the idea of the unitary self. Postmodernist theatre has challenged that assumption by presenting characters whose fragmentary identity is constructed from bits of cultural texts. Even in stand-up comedy, some performers have undermined the idea of a consistent, distinctive comic persona. A similar contradiction appears when we consider the radical theatres of the 1960s. These theatres deserve a place in an account of postmodern performance on account of the ways they destabilized the hierarchical apparatus of modern theatre through their frequent elimination of the playwright in favor of collectively devised performances. These theatres frequently eschewed traditional actorly representation in favor of performers who appeared in their own persons, as is often the case in performance art as well. This shift led to a practical and theoretical distinction between traditional acting and a new category of performance, which includes acting alongside other ways in which people present themselves to others. This non-traditional device has been extensively and widely used by playwrights like Brecht and Caryl Churchill in their plays, and in fact it is an important characteristic of postmodern era.

Identity and Selfhood

The idea of 'selfhood' can be defined as the state of having a distinct identity, an achieved personality, a fully developed self [1]. The realization of a distinct identity or the achievement of individuality has been one of the major concerns of literature, more so a distinct identity for women. Over the last century much has been accomplished yet much more remains to be done in the globalised burgeoning cyber world.

Identity, self and postmodernism

The state of having a distinct identity or individuality in a postmodern theatre or play has several distinct characteristics:

- Psychological space in plays and performance
- Ability to avoid solutions rather let the audience think for themselves or empathize
- Importantly for a playwright not to offer solutions since there is a risk destroying embryonic possibilities of future interpretations in changing social contexts
- Playwrights use gaps between binary opposites such as male/female, or power/powerlessness, or caring/patriarchy
- Subjects performing in plays are universally drawn from all categories

British playwright Caryl Churchill (1938-) is regarded as one of the world's major postmodernist playwright of contemporary Britain. Born in London and educated in Montreal and at Oxford University, she started writing plays for the radio during the 1960's; in the 1970's she turned to

[1] http: //www.thefreedictionary.com/selfhood.Web. 20. November.11.

writing stage plays, where she deployed her incisive and innovative talent to represent the contemporary world and life in post-seventies Britain through the medium of theatre. She is best known for her plays like '*Cloud Nine'* (1979) [19], '*Top Girls*' (1982), and '*Serious Money*' (1987) and recently the highly controversial '*Seven Jewish Children*' (2009) [2, 3, 16, 22], in which she explores human existence and experience in all its present day dilemmas of a multicultural global environment. From her vast oeuvre two widely acclaimed and very successful plays –'*Top Girls*' and '*Cloud Nine*' - have been selected for this research paper as these are radically different in their representation of female subjectivity and together present new possibilities of understanding the social construction of female identity.

Caryl Churchill was writing when the feminist movement was undergoing a new phase later known as the 'second wave feminism'. During the first wave the emphasis was on the equality of rights for women; in the second wave the focus shifted to women's health issues and the limiting of women's talents and sphere of influence in the domestic setup. Indeed, Caryl Churchill was experiencing this at a personal level too as the wife of a barrister and a mother of three young children. Her exceptional academic achievements notwithstanding, perforce Churchill remained home-bound and faced discontent and a general isolation from national and international events since she had to attend to maternal duties brought about by Thatcherite policies which were generally responsible for widening the gap between the working class women and bourgeois feminists.

Meanwhile elaborating on the theme of the second feminist wave, Churchill promoted self-transformation by taking her characters and spectators to a sacred space of empathy and inter-being. To explain Churchill's self-transformation, Hwang's play 'M. Butterfly' argues that Hwang deconstructs the notion of "the concept of self" used by postmodernists in defining self-identity. As his play suggests the phrase a "concept of self" involves a contradiction, for the essential self can be approached not conceptually, but only by emptying the conceptual content of consciousness. This self lies in the space between and beyond socially constructed identities.

Churchill's first theatre play '*Top Girls*' (1982) extends this theme by adding the binary opposites between the ethics of caring and patriarchal competition, thus revealing a distinction between 'discursive thought' and the 'self as no-thought'. David Henry Hwang (1988) [16] achieves a similar effect in his poststructuralist play.

Scene from '*Top Girls*'

Fig 1: Image from nymag.com/daily/entertainment/2008/05/)

The play '*Top Girls*' is set in the early Thatcher years and can easily be interpreted as socialist commentary on the free market, reduced state intervention and social service retreat of the government in the 80's. It is also a pointer to the *female identity* and *self* being depicted by Churchill. '*Top Girls*' dealt with unmitigated ambition of women that characterizes Marlene, the protagonist. The opening scene where Marlene is celebrating her promotion as the head of her company where she is joined by an array of historically significant women "top girls'' - Isabella Bird, the 19th century explorer, writer and a natural historian; Lady Nijo, a Japanese courtesan exploited as a courtesan and then chucked out of her own home turns a Buddhist monk; Dull Gret, a peasant woman from Brueghel's painting "Dulle Gret" or "Mad Meg" (1562-1564) who becomes a captured image through the gaze of the male painter; Pope Joan, a woman who disguised herself as a man, became pregnant, her gender was betrayed and she was burned at the stake; and Patient Griselda, the dutiful wife from Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales". Clearly, despite the wonderful successes of all of these women, their lives have been unfathomably shaped by the patriarchal system they manoeuvre within. Each woman has remarkable courage and spirit and each ends up being a pawn in the hands of the patriarchal system they happen to be born in. Every woman from this group has the skill to shape her destiny but her gender places her in a social order where she is in the subordinate position and her desires and ambition have validity only when they fit in the context of a male-centered mindset. As a result each of them has failed to achieve what each wanted. Coming from different ages the characters have more than a thousand year time space between them yet the suffering they are subjected to is as unjust as the other. Marlene can be said to be their present day avatar, who has managed to "unsex" [2] her 'self' to reach the top. The remarkable difference between Marlene and the other women is the absence of an active male figure in her life. Marlene had an abusive father but there is presence of no other male in her scheme of things. Love, patience, endurance, maternal affection, filial duty; all attributes of the '*essential female identity*' have been circumvented in Marlene's character, paving the way for a resolve and single-minded devotion towards her career, which is typically male. Several characters in the play act in sharp contrast to her personality – first, her own sister Joyce; second Angie, who is later revealed to be her daughter whom she abandoned as a child; and Ms Kidd, the wife of a man who is bypassed for promotion because of Marlene. The only character who resembles her in some ways is Kitty, Angie's young friend. The resentment and angst of the care-giver Joyce, the attitude of Ms Kidd on Marlene's promotion and Angie's scarred psyche are all reminders of the traps that lay in store for women who do not tread the path Marlene chose. They all provoke the question of what it means to be successful as a 'woman', and through their stories they reveal how sexuality has constrained or empowered them in their lives. Nevertheless, it is apparent that all of these women have been creative in finding some form of success in "a man's world", meaning that all of their exploits or adventures have been defined or controlled in a social

[2] *Macbeth Act 1, scene 5, 38–43.*

structure of patriarchy.

Churchill, as is her wont, desists from offering solutions, she rather poses questions to her audience. Does achieving individuality entail negating the woman inside? Does the fulfilling of one's duties as mother, wife, and care-giver lead one to fall in the habit of sacrificing for the other's sake? For a woman does the pursuit of monetary gains and personal ambition and success validate the forsaking of one's duties? Is denying essentialist feminine attributes tantamount to losing one's identity as a woman? Churchill's characters are flexible and display postmodern features in this play '*Top Girls*' as well as in the next widely acclaimed play ('*Cloud Nine*').

The question of '*gender identity*' or rather '*multiple identities of gender*' (a characteristic of postmodernism) is dealt with in Caryl Churchill's other play '*Cloud Nine*' (1979) [19]. The characters first introduction sets the scene for the blissful wholeness of identities that they seem to be enjoying. However as the plays unravels the 'bliss' is more of a drug induced [3] perception of reality than reality. The main characters at the very outset profess undivided loyalty to Queen, country, husband and master. The proclamations are mere eyewash and each character has a fragmented psychological and sexual identity. To foreground this aspect Churchill uses devices such as *gender* and *racial cross* - testing the limits of artistic make-believe. It is like making characters wear (don) their subjectivity, revealing the dichotomy between the inner selves and the identities they are made to wear (don) socially. In '*Cloud Nine*' this is the *gender role* Churchill is trying to fit as the socially acceptable good English wife. For example; below is scene (i), pp. 17-21, Act I of '*Cloud Nine*':

CLIVE: My wife is all I dreamt a wife should be,
And everything she is she owes to me.

BETTY: I live for Clive, the whole aim of my life
Is to be what he looks for in a wife,
And what men want is what I want to be.

Such loving thoughts! But the fact that she is anything of this sort is shown in the very next instance with the arrival of Harry Bagley. So does Clive also reveal his true intentions with the arrival of Ms Saunders? This is the first Act in which the characters are in the jungles of Africa during the Victorian era, 1879. In the next Act which is in England of 1979 (for the characters the leap is only 25 years) characters come into their own and in a more liberal and tolerant time reveal their true selves. The idea of '*selfhood*' for the characters in this play involves primarily their *gender identity*. Using Brechtian ideal of de-familiarization Churchill casts male actors for female roles and vice versa, thus the audience is constantly aware that the characters cannot be fitted either into constructed or essentialist notions of identity. The author wants to keep her spectator aware of the possibility of identities that are constantly in a flux. Janelle Reinelt sums up, "*Cloud Nine* is inclusive of identities to the point of making even the difficult contradictions and questions experienced by the characters seem valuable and acceptable [4].

Churchill deliberately extends the limits of her characterization of specific gender identities to try to identify and understand the subjectivity beneath the layers of socially invested definitions. The rupture in the timeline is also a bridge that connects simultaneous, sometimes conflicting identities of the characters. Betty goes from being a devoted wife to being a free spirit able to shed the vestiges of Victorian hypocrisy. Vicky who had been a rag doll in the first Act is a more *realised self* in the next era. '*Cloud Nine*' is thus a play depicting fragmented ambiguous *gender identities* across race and era. Both plays are Churchill's way of exploring the limits and necessity to seriously think about female identity and selfhood beyond essentialism and social construction.

Conclusion

The plays raise important questions that are still relevant today, even as we progress through the fourth wave of feminism. Churchill feels that we have reached a point where the "superwoman" is epitomized. This is a woman who can hold down a career, a family and a man all the while making regular gym visits to maintain her physique and still have time to make it home for dinner at 6. The expectation for woman to be able to "do it all" is both empowering and daunting. Often women are forced to choose between having a family and having a career. Churchill realizes this may sound ridiculous in a day and age where there are so many options and opportunities for women, but the fact of the matter is that having a family takes time and sacrifice. In Churchill's opinion, the only way for women of today to achieve true equality is to fight for a revolution of our economic system that recognizes the unique capabilities and contributions of women's work. The topic of contemporary feminists of the fourth wave is often an exploration of the category of "woman" and how factors of race, class, gender and religion can collide.

"I feel that these interweaving questions are missing from Churchill's play. It feels as though Churchill is questioning the category of woman as if it is universal. She fails to realize that being a white 'woman' from a middle class background is certainly a different category than a poor black 'woman' from the slums. Where do race, class and gender come into play when considering success and womanhood? Why are the voices of white women privileged in the plays? And how could the play change if different ethnicities were cast to play the roles of the different women? I think this could be a very effective tool for a remount of the show. Anyway, throughout Churchill's plays there is definite streak of un-sentimentality as if she is trying not to fall in the feminine habit of sentimentalism" (Mann, 1987). To counter the criticism Churchill has this to say, "Unlike most films and books, theatre can utilize political connotations with bodies to both craft characters and deconstruct social categories of identity; **e**xploring the social construction of identity, particularly of sex and gender roles. As playwrights, we can ask ourselves:

[3] Cloud 9 is also a designer drug sold in the United States as a bath salt and is also known as "the ultimate high".

[4] Reinelt, Janelle. "On feminist and sexual politics" *The Cambridge Companion to Caryl Churchill.* Elaine Aston, Elin Diamond eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

What person/object would best embody our characters' inner lives?"

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