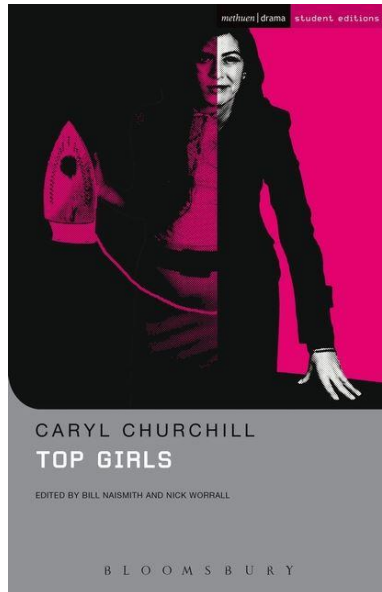


New Image of Woman in Caryl Churchill's Play *Top Girls*

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Abstract

The Image of 'New Woman' emerged during the Victorian age which catered to the deep consciousness of individuality as a woman and responsiveness towards womanly problems. Repression of woman can be traced in history from olden days at various levels such as the family, society, politics and the economy. The term 'New Woman' coined by Sarah Grand brought the reversal of the stereotype of woman defined by a set of characteristics. Literature from the 20th century pictured woman as an educated, career oriented and independent being. The play *Top Girls* by Caryl Churchill depicts the success of the woman, Marlene in a hostile working environment of an employment firm. The endurance, individualism and toughness in Marlene can be claimed to be a reflection of the Thatcherism. Margret Thatcher was the Prime Minister of England when the play was produced. Thatcher with her capitalistic values and reform turned to be the 'Superwoman' idol imbibed by many women during her regime. The play incorporated five historical women characters from literature and painting who had been suppressed by male patriarchy from various cultures and time zones. This paper traces Churchill's image of 'New Woman' in Marlene and drawing the distinction from the past and the

present. The descriptive features pertaining to 'New Woman' can be found to be a reality in the play and in the realistic form of Thatcher.

Key Words: New Woman, Thatcherism, Liberated Women, Economic stability, Individualism

'Woman, you are a thousand stories long

With the depth of the ocean and an entire constellation woven into your soul'.

-Nikita Gil

Literature in its written art form depicts artistic and aesthetic features. From ancient period to the contemporary scenario, literary works of each age stand in distinction with its depiction of human behaviour, way of living, political upheaval, economic crises and other social concerns. Among these expositions, the most revered form of literature is in literary works where the element of truth is found. The literary works of 1950's across the globe in major colonized areas showed their stand for reconstruction and the need for attainment of freedom. Postcolonial genre vividly brought out the native peoples' glorious heritage, culture and their indomitable spirit to retaliate against the subjugation they faced. Resistance and reconstruction were the key focus of writers of deconstruction and subaltern studies.

The feminine literary retaliators initially portrayed the negligence of women's rights, the atrocities they faced under patriarchal society and their submerged freedom. Later in the 19th century, the concept of 'New Woman' evolved. The miserable aspects and negativity were kept aside and literary works showed the active achievement of women in all major fields. This genre of literature featured the immunity the women should possess to come out of the clutches of patriarchy. Passivity was kept aside and active voices of women emerged with strength was heard continuously from the Victorian age to the present period.

The term 'New Woman' was coined by Sarah Grand, writer and public speaker. Her article *The New Aspect of the Woman Question* published in the 'North American Review' in March 1894 discussed the new framed term 'New Woman'. The subaltern stereotype of woman was left behind and this phraseology pictured woman as intelligent, educated, emancipated from patriarchy, and self-reliant. Literary works of the late 19th century redefined gender roles and the theme of overcoming masculine supremacy emerged. Literature developed under this platform attacked the perception of woman as 'Angel in the house'. The influence was carried on in the 20th century fiction which emerged as a rebellion for women's education, women's suffrage, sex and women's autonomy. Renegotiation of women's role was another aspect pondered under the New Women Literature.

Technological developments, educational policies and the scientific inventions further initiated the process of liberalization of women in fiction and in reality. The rights and reservations for women were revised; marriage and divorce laws, right to property, custody rights, educational and employment opportunities for women emerged. Henrik Ibsen's *Doll's House* served as a pioneer in depicting the image of new woman in literary works. By the time of Caryl Churchill, the author in discussion, the concept of new woman and the descriptive features became a reality.

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The 1980's were rapid years of advancement for women in all areas of life; public and private, professional and domestic. The idea of 'Superwomen' emerged where the women deal masterfully to make even a man wonder what it means to be a woman. Margret Thatcher became the idol for many women during this period. Thatcher was the Prime Minister of England for almost 15 years and her period was known for her effective administration. Her policy stressing individual skills in women and fierceness of self was greatly admired by the feminine world. Career and economic development flourished among women during this period. Women had their success framed in the capitalist ladder. Women executives, women vice presidents and other higher grade were held by women. Materialistic aspiration among the women fuelled them to reach power and success. Thatcher was the motivating force and her footsteps were followed even by the protagonist in discussion, Marlene.

Caryl Churchill, the British playwright is known for her plays which advocate political and social problems faced by women who are in the marginalized position. Works like *Vinegar Tom*, *Owners*, *Cloud nine* and *Fen* question the ideological male dominant systems. Churchill had been a representative for the feminine victimization through her writing. The play *Top girls* won the prestigious Obie Award and were one of the most celebrated works of Churchill. The play was performed in 1982 with an entire female cast and gained instant popularity. During this time Margret Thatcher was idolized as an 'Iron Woman' for having ruled England with her capitalistic values. The idea of writing this play originated in Churchill's mind after her visit to the United States where she witnessed women holding higher executive powers. Thatcherism and the United State visit combined in her to put across the play *Top Girls*.

Top girls expose the success story of women overcoming the exploitation under the patriarchal system. The first act opens with the success party hosted by Marlene for her promotion as Managing Director of the company. The party celebration was arranged for five famous women from literature and painting who belonged to various time periods. The sufferings, sacrifices and exploitations these historical characters faced under the male dominance are narrated by them during the course of the conversations. The aim of the celebratory opening scene by Caryl Churchill was to emphasize the extraordinary deeds achieved by women across different periods. The escalation of women from their suppressive state can be reflected in the position held by Marlene in her employment firm. In the words of Marlene, "We've all come a long way. To our courage and the way we changed our lives and our extraordinary achievements" (p.25).

The play progresses to highlight the contemporary woman, Marlene and her condition in an employment agency. Her courage to withstand in the firm, amongst a competitive surrounding can be traced. The final act gives out the imbalance Marlene had in her personal family life, where she failed to bring up her biological daughter. Yet the survival aspects of Marlene highlight the plot and her ability to reach the top. All the six characters break the traditional system of womanly traits and exhibit imbibed qualities of masculinity in their struggle to establish their success.

The historical characters across different times in history had experienced suppressions under the male value systems. The retaliations done as protest by these women can never be neglected. The features of 'New Woman' can be traced even in these historical characters across various time zones, who never remained as silenced or as commodities. Isabella Bird, an ordinary woman travelled to various parts of the world without being confined to her home. Pope Joan disguised as a man for her thirst for education did make a mark as a woman in history of Christianity. Lady Nijo, a Japanese courtesan of an Emperor, had the freedom to travel on foot through Japan. The fictional character Patient Griselda through her patience gave birth to children/ and finally Dull Gret from the Brueghel painting led a battalion of women charging through hell and fighting the devils.

In the contemporary age, education and employment are basic necessities a woman should acquire. Simone de Beauvoir in her renowned work *The Second Sex* includes the chapter *The Independent Women* where she favors the career oriented women. To quote " It is through gainful employment that woman has traversed most of the distance that separated her from the male; and nothing else can guarantee her liberty in practice". *Top Girls* vividly brings out the lifestyle of such an employed and educated woman, Marlene.

Marlene had accomplished a greater position compared to her male counterparts, which describe the new evolution of a confident 'New Woman'. The mistreatment Marlene's mother faced in the hands of her drunkard father served as a fuel for her independence. From the working-class strata, Marlene enters the elite position, a state where all her primary needs are met. To pursue her ambition as a career woman she had to take the hard decision to forgo of her baby. The spirit of Marlene geared up to do any undertaking possible to reach her own goals indicate how the career of women progressed. Ambition, willingness and a deliberate mind can be visualized from the character description of Marlene, the ground qualities which are essential for any achievement.

Marlene made use of all possible opportunities to achieve her dreams. Through the character of Marlene, Caryl Churchill makes a call for all women to stay independent in their ways of living. Margaret Thatcher's governance was a living example for many women; her announcement for her future policy once was described by her as quoted from the Guardian report: "I came to office with one deliberate intent. To change Britain from a dependent to a self-reliant society, from a give-it-to-me to do-it-yourself nation, to a get up-and-go instead of a sit-back-and-wait-for-it Britain."

Marlene had to overcome all the accusations her own female world throws on her. For instance, Mrs.Kidd, wife of Howard the male counterpart of Marlene accuses her to have taken the position of her husband. Mrs. Kidd goes to the extent to tell Marlene to withdraw from her promotion and accusations like "you'll end up...miserable and lonely. You're not natural" (p.113) are directed at Marlene. The endurance, individuality and toughness in Marlene can be claimed to be a reflection of the Thatcherism. The character of Marlene reversed the notion of oppression faced by women. The problems on women reaching a higher grade when compare to

men will be tougher to handle yet the fictional character Marlene and the iconic Margret Thatcher achieved glory in their fields.

To celebrate her promotion Marlene had to invite the fictional characters which indicate her lack of real women friends. The character of Mrs. Kidd depicts how she remains influenced under the patriarchal dominance. Churchill brings out women who still in the contemporary society believe in male supremacy system in various cultures across the globe. Marlene associated her with women who struggled odds to achieve their passion rather than to be around passive women.

Virginia Woolf's *A Room of one's own* portrays the importance for Women education, their freedom to marriage, motherhood and financial independence. The work revolves around the theme 'Women and Fiction', which was a speech delivered by Woolf in a women's college. "A Woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" is the compressed statement Woolf presented in the speech. She wanted every female writer to possess money and a personal room. This gives freedom psychologically for a writer to concentrate on her work and will lead her to create an aesthetic writing career. This aspect applies not only to the writing field but to the entire canon of womanhood. Financial stability and efficiency to meet the basic requirements of living are to be solely attained by woman without any dependency. *Top Girls* brings out this perspective features of how a 'New Woman' makes her life effective.

The strain in sisterhood between Marlene and Joyce can never be ruled out. Marlene showed lack of concern for her own sister who found daily means difficult to cope up. The individualism made Marlene to lead a self-centered life. The same criticism and negativity can be found during the rule of Margret Thatcher. The governance under her flourished but women centered development was not present to a great extent. The lack of concern to the issues towards her own feminine community is one of the major criticisms bestowed on Thatcher. Thatcher, being classified as 'New Woman' in a subverted feminine ideological framework found it unnecessary for special reservation for female institutions. Because advancement in the field of women was growing and the requirement to further voice for the freedom of women was rooted.

During the regime of Margret Thatcher many women abandoned their natural rights, like motherhood and marriage, in order to gain success. Marlene to raise her baby found it a hindrance for her professional success and lifestyle. To be a liberated woman in the society, the abandonment of natural rights like motherhood and domestic responsibility was required to tackle all the pressure from various forms. Joyce remained passive and financial down as her family responsibilities like raising up Angie pulled her away from the professional life. A normal working environment like men was not possible by women, as many hindrances were directed at them by both the male supremacy and female repressive believers.

Caryl Churchill questions the plight of women who had to fight harder than the opposite sex to obtain a place in the working environment. Churchill further catered to the misinterpreted ideology that working women had to forgo her domestic duties behind to top the

career ladder. Thus, the issue of balance between work and motherhood was addressed in the play.

Toril Moi in her work *Sexual Politics* brings out the term 'Feminine' which is concerned with the conditioning and socialization of women by underpinning them to a crucial set of distinctions. 'A set of culturally defined characteristics' is the term Moi gives for feminine in her intellectually constructed feminist work. Marlene subverted the ideology set to characterize women by living her life directed by her intuitions and passions. *Top girls* act as a catalyst for women to self-realize their potentials and capabilities and to choose their desired paths.

To conclude, the term 'New Woman' which evolved from the Victorian age had taken various forms and shades over the period of time. The New Women in the 20th century were daring, fashionable, educated and passionate to change everything though caught at times in the web of conflicts and tensions. While talking about the 21st century women, their broad fields of achievements in all dimensions are to be glorified. The impact of the concept of 'New Woman' can be traced even in developing countries like India, where the role of women stand magnificent than the men. Thus, the play, *Top Girls* with its very title emphasizes the soaring heights the feminine community had reached under the avatar of 'New Woman'.

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