



Exploring the Theme of Motherhood as portrayed in *Top Girls* and *Fen* by Caryl Churchill

Mahmoud Fakhry Osman Hassan

Ph.D. Candidate, Department of English language and Literature,
Faculty of Arts, Ain Shams University, Egypt.
Email; Mahmoudfakhry612@yahoo.com

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Abstract— This paper examines the theme of motherhood as portrayed in Caryl Churchill's plays: *Top Girls* (1982) and *Fen* (1983). By delving into the nuanced exploration of motherhood within these works, this paper aims to shed light on the complex and multifaceted nature of maternal experiences, while also analyzing the social, cultural, and political contexts that shape these representations. Through a close reading of the plays, this paper elucidates the diverse perspectives on motherhood presented by Churchill. Moreover, this paper situates Churchill's exploration of motherhood within the broader socio-political landscape of the time. It considers the feminist movements and debates surrounding reproductive rights and motherhood in the late 20th century, as well as the socio-economic realities that shaped women's experiences. By contextualizing the plays, this research paper provides a comprehensive understanding of how Churchill's works engage with the theme of motherhood as a lens to comment on the complexities of gender, power, and social expectations.



Keywords— Caryl Churchill, *Top Girls*, *Fen*, Motherhood

I. INTRODUCTION

Top Girls depicts the challenges faced by women in balancing their professional ambitions with their familial obligations. The protagonist, Marlene, embodies the dilemma of modern women torn between the desire for career success and the societal expectations of nurturing and motherhood. By examining Marlene's character and her relationships with other female characters in the play, this paper explores the tensions and contradictions surrounding the concept of motherhood in the context of a patriarchal society.

In *Fen*, Churchill delves into the lives of working-class women in a rural English community. The play examines the impact of poverty, limited opportunities, and societal constraints on these women's experiences of motherhood. Through an analysis of various characters, such as Val and Nell, this paper explores the ways in which motherhood becomes a site of struggle, resilience, and resistance for these women. It investigates how

Churchill highlights the intersecting issues of class, gender, and motherhood, offering a nuanced portrayal of the challenges faced by marginalized women.

II. ANALYSIS

This paper offers a detailed analysis of Caryl Churchill's plays: *Top Girls* (1982) and *Fen* (1993), in relation to the theme of motherhood. By examining the characters, their relationships, and the socio-cultural contexts, this paper provides valuable insights into the ways in which Churchill grapples with the intricacies of motherhood, shedding light on the challenges, contradictions, and possibilities inherent in women's experiences of maternity.

Caryl Churchill, a renowned British playwright born in London in 1938, is highly regarded in the theatrical world. Following World War II, her family moved to Montreal, Canada, in 1948. Churchill later returned to

England and pursued her studies in English at Oxford University. It was during this time that she wrote her debut play, titled *Downstairs*, in 1958. After marrying David Harter, a barrister, Churchill became a mother to three sons and settled in the suburban areas of London. In the 1960s, she began her professional writing career, primarily focusing on radio plays. In order to keep a balance between her family and career, Churchill wrote more than “forty-five plays for radio, stage, and television” (Diamond 285). Churchill's plays not only delved into the complexities of women's roles, but also offered critical commentary on British politics. This is particularly reflected in her works from the 1980s, such as *Top Girls* (1982), *Fen* (1983), and *Serious Money* (1987), where she expressed her socialist viewpoints. Through these plays, Churchill explored social issues and examined the intersection of gender and politics from her distinct perspective. According to Mary Luckhurst, Churchill became “the great icon of second wave feminism in the British theatre” (18).

Churchill raises questions about the roles of women. By portraying a diverse range of female characters and exploring their individual successes, Churchill criticizes the prevailing social and economic norms and their impact on women. These societal expectations have a profound effect on people's identities. According to Sian Adiseshiah, motherhood, which is often influenced by these societal norms, “can define the identity of not just women with children but all women (135). Churchill's exploration of these themes challenges traditional notions of gender and highlights the significant influence social standards can have on personal identity.

The issue of domestic work, which is an area that few women are able to escape, has been a topic of discussion and debate in Marxist-feminist circles. Heidi Hartman reinforces the argument that women receive low wages, and this economic reality pushes them to marry. Once married, they are expected to primarily take on domestic responsibilities, while “men benefit ... from both higher wages and the domestic division of labor”. Women's childcare and household duties in the private sphere further contribute to their disadvantaged position in the job market. The divisions of labor, both inside and outside the home, reinforce a hierarchy based on gender. Hartman believes: “The present outcome of the continuing interaction of two interlocking systems, capitalism and patriarchy”(141). The combination of women's roles in the workforce and in the family creates a strong economic and ideological system that perpetuates their subordination in both spheres, at home and in society.

The concept of motherhood as an ideological construct plays a significant role in understanding the characters of Marlene in *Top Girls* and Val in *Fen*. In *Feminist politics and human nature*, Alison M Jaggar states that both Marlene and Val attempt to break free from “the pervasive and suffocating ideology of the family,” which “sentimentalizes mother love as the highest, because the most self-sacrificing, form of love”(153). However, both characters struggle to navigate this challenge successfully, albeit to varying degrees. Val's failure is absolute, leading to her tragic death. Unable to live without her children or her partner, she ultimately takes her own life with Frank's assistance. Val finds it impossible to redefine her identity beyond the narrow confines of motherhood and marriage, feeling trapped in a limiting role that weighs her down, as she expresses, “it's like thick nothing. I can't get on. Makes my arms and legs heavy” (*Fen* 172). Val's desire to form relationships outside the traditional family unit threatens to undermine that unit, and she faces criticism and condemnation from her community for attempting to do so. The notion of private ownership of children, where parents, particularly mothers, bear exclusive responsibility for the care and upbringing of their children, serves as the specific context in which Angela's fraudulent motherhood is upheld, and Val's actions are viewed as deplorable. This context reinforces the perceived importance of traditional motherhood and the societal expectations placed upon mothers, making it difficult for Val to escape the confines of this role without facing severe judgment and rejection.

Women who work are affected by their gender, which plays a role in how they are perceived. Despite gaining more independence by participating in the job market, many women face double exploitation, both at work and at home. According to Zillah Eisenstein: “ideology adjusts to this by defining women as working mothers”(29). Society's emphasis on motherhood distorts women's identities as workers. This influences the types of jobs women typically take on, such as teachers, caregivers, cleaners, nurses, and office workers, which often reflect their roles as wives and mothers. Nancy Chodorow states that when women do work in manufacturing, “it is generally in the production of nondurable goods like clothing and food, not in ‘masculine’ machine industries like steel and automobiles”(91). This means that women are less likely to be seen as independent workers with their own interests, unlike men from working and middle-class backgrounds who are often motivated by pay, career prospects, and job conditions. Instead, women's work is often considered unessential economically, as it is assumed that they supplement male wages, or ideologically, because it is believed that work does not

contribute to their self-worth or dignity. Society has traditionally confined women's productivity and creativity to their ability to give birth, often at the expense of their involvement in other cultural and economic spheres.

Top Girls premiered at the Royal Court Theatre in London on August 28, 1982. The play consists of three acts, and all the characters are women. The acts are not presented in chronological order. Act One takes place on a Saturday night at a restaurant, where Marlene hosts a dinner party. Historical and fictional women gather to congratulate Marlene on her promotion at the Top Girls employment agency. Act Two is divided into three scenes, also presented out of chronological order. Scene One is set on the following Monday at the office, where Marlene interviews a job applicant named Jeanine. Scene Two takes place in Joyce's backyard, Marlene's older sister, on the previous day, Sunday afternoon. Joyce's daughter, Angie, and her friend Kit hide in a shelter they created. Scene Three returns to Monday morning, preceding the events of Scene One. This scene includes Angie's visit to Marlene at the employment agency. Act Three is set one year before Act Two. Marlene visits Joyce's home, and they engage in arguments concerning their parents, Angie (who is Marlene's biological child), and British politics. Throughout the play, Caryl Churchill weaves together these non-chronological scenes to explore themes of female achievement, family dynamics, and political ideologies.

The first act of *Top Girls* showcases paradoxes and contradictions in the way the dinner party guests engage with their own experiences of motherhood. Pope Joan challenges traditional notions of pregnancy and childbirth, dismissing labor pains as a stomach issue until she realizes that "the baby just slid out on to the road" (TG 71). The libertarian pleasure derived from demystifying the clichéd idea of childbirth, accompanied by jokes and laughter from the others, creates a moment of anarchic delight that resonates with both the actors and the audience. Yet, "the cardinals won't have known where to put themselves" (TG 71). Thus, the consequence of committing such a cardinal sin, as expressed by the statement "women, children, and lunatics can't be Pope" (TG 69) is a brutal punishment. Joan concludes her story: "they took me by the feet and dragged me out of town and stoned me to death" (TG 71). It becomes evident that Joan is executed because she challenges the male-dominated role of the Pope and subverts the authority of the father. However, her denaturalization of pregnancy and childbirth and her exposure of the fragility inherent in the sex/gender construct also make her subject to criticism. The silence that typically follows Joan's disturbing speech

in the theater reflects the lack of adequate responses to such misogynistic violence.

In this act, there is a shift from an uncompromising judgment of motherly behavior in public discourse to a more ethically nuanced portrayal of motherhood. The initial shock at Patient Griselda's acceptance of having her children taken away competes with the mitigating circumstances of her required obedience to her husband, even though it was a "chosen" obedience. Nijo, who can relate to this experience, understands Griselda's decision, acknowledging that her husband was her whole life. This contrasts with Marlene's dismissal of Walter as "bonkers" and Gret's labeling him as a "bastard," which, while critical of Griselda's obedience, clearly place the blame on Walter. Isabella's diplomatic response attempts to delve deeper into the matter by questioning the impact it had on Griselda's well-being, while still focusing on her welfare. "I can see you were doing what you thought was your duty. But didn't it make you ill?" (TG 77) It becomes evident that some of the women demonstrate significant complicity with sexist systems, such as Griselda consciously accepting her husband's authority and Nijo willingly participating in the Emperor's patriarchal order. However, the prevailing characteristic of the interactions between these women is the attempt to understand and connect with the emotional complexities of motherhood, rather than simply passing judgment on maternal behavior.

The "tough women," Win and Nell, also represent a rejection of motherhood and domestic life. Nell is against the idea of conforming to traditional gender roles, refusing "to play house, not even in Ascot" (TG 102). Nell's rejection of motherhood aligns with her masculine focus on the hard sell. She says: "I can sell anything, I've sold in three continents, and I'm jolly as they come but I'm not very nice" (TG 115). Win, on the other hand, finds it more challenging to embrace the individualistic mindset promoted by the employment agency. After returning from America, she experiences a period of psychological instability, saying: "I came home, went bonkers for a bit, thought I was five different people" (TG 119). Her attempt to live a life outside the confines of domesticity and motherhood does not go smoothly. Both women struggle to establish a sense of autonomy that goes against the expectations and narratives surrounding motherhood. The characterization of Win and Nell revolves around their endeavor to navigate the complexities of autonomy and independence outside the realm of motherhood, highlighting the challenges they face in breaking free from maternal discourses.

Fen portrays the countryside and working-class situations, which set the backdrop for Marlene's family and community in the play *Top Girls*. This setting is something Marlene manages to break free from. This play presents a glimpse of a culture that combines agriculture, femininity, and the working class. Through this, it highlights the limited opportunities available to these women in feminist and socialist politics to understand and confront their own oppression.

Fen presents a diverse range of motherhood representations, with multiple generations of mothers shaping the family dynamics for Val and her children. However, similar to *Top Girls*, the exploration of motherhood is not the central focus. Instead, it is portrayed as part of a female-specific network of social relationships that trap women in a cycle of poverty. This cycle combines contradictory emotions such as affection, love, happiness, pain, frustration, and misery. Val's predicament, which is the heart of the story, starkly challenges Marlene's belief in "choice" by demonstrating that Val fails to find fulfillment and happiness whether she remains within or steps outside the realm of motherhood. Val's desperate reaction to the lack of meaningful options available to her resonates with the unbearable nature of the ending of *Top Girls*.

The various portrayals of motherhood in *Fen* reveal the significant influence of societal discourses surrounding motherhood on women's identities. May, for instance, upholds the tradition of self-sacrifice in motherhood, expressing regret at leaving her daughter Val. She says: "I'd never have left you, Val" (*Fen* 160). Angela, on the other hand, exhibits abusive behavior towards her stepdaughter Becky, demonstrating a sadomasochistic mix of cruel rejection and intimate connection. Their initially antagonistic interaction eventually turns into shared laughter. Angela says to her, "Becky, why do you like me? I don't want you to like me" (*Fen* 184). Margaret, who turns to alcoholism after the death of her young daughter, finds redemption through a divine sign from God. The request for more jam by Mavis's son, which coincidentally matches the initials of Margaret's name (M) and Jesus (J), convinces Margaret that she has been religiously called. This poignant moment is reinforced by her friend Alice and the affirmation from the Baptist women's meeting, who acknowledge the legitimacy of the "sign." Shirley, a fifty-year-old grandmother with a sixteen-year-old granddaughter, shares her experience with Val while taking care of one of her baby grandchildren, highlighting the expectation placed on mothers to prioritize their children and sacrifice personal freedom. She says to Val, "you expect too much Val. Till Susan was fifteen I never went out" (*Fen* 169).

In both plays, women who do not have children are portrayed in various ways that emphasize the absence of motherhood. In *Top Girls*, Isabella exhibits a conventionally masculine desire for travel and adventure, and she is aware of how this affects her gendered identity. She takes great care to present herself as feminine and says: "I always travelled as a lady and I repudiated strongly any suggestion in the press that I was other than feminine" (*TG* 62). Her frequent mentions of her sister, Hennie, whom she refers to as her "own pet" (*TG* 65) hint at a displaced maternal connection that serves as a substitute for traditional motherhood. The interviewees in the employment agency, Jeanine and Louise, are also depicted in relation to motherhood and marriage. Marlene assumes that Jeanine will eventually have children, and this assumption influences her consideration of Jeanine's employment options. On the other hand, Louise "passes as a man at work" (*TG* 106) and implies that she is single and childless. She expresses her dedication to her job, stating that "I've lived for that company, I've given my life really you could say because I haven't had a great deal of social life, I've worked in the evenings" (*TG* 105-6). The power of motherhood to shape identity is highlighted, leading the audience to perceive Louise's work as a surrogate family for her.

In *Fen*, Angela embodies the characteristics typically associated with the archetypal wicked stepmother. The ideology of motherhood, which is influenced by the connection between biology, nature, and social behavior, marginalizes and undermines the stepmother's place within this identity. She is constantly reminded of her biological "fraudulence" as she attempts to fulfill the role of an authentic mother, all the while being judged on her ability to do so. The stepmother finds herself caught in a cycle between the reminder of her illegitimate status as a mother and the pressure to perform a motherly role towards her partner's child. The significance of fairytale characters, such as the wicked stepmother in *Cinderella*, resonates deeply in society. These characters are some of the first social roles imparted to children, and they contribute to the categorization of stepmothers as deviant women, making them vulnerable to attack. In fact, there is a faint echo of the historical witch hunts in Becky's response to Angela's abusive behavior. "I'll tell someone. You'll be put in prison, you'll be burnt" (*Fen* 154). This also brings to mind Mary Daly's discussion of the breaking of the mother/daughter bond, where daughters were encouraged to inform on their mothers during witch trials and witness their execution by hanging or burning.

The exchange between Angela and Becky highlights Angela's inability to meet the unrealistic expectations placed upon stepmothers:

BECKY: Can I sit down now, Angela?

ANGELA: No, because you asked. Drink it standing up. And you didn't

call me mum.

BECKY: You're not, that's why.

ANGELA: Wouldn't want to be the mother of a filthy little cow like you.

Pity you didn't die with her (*Fen* 153).

Despite Angela's responsibility for caring for Becky, she does not receive the same level of respect and recognition that biological mothers often do. The authority and power that biological mothers possess within the household are absent in Angela's role as a stepmother. This lack of authority leads to a profound sense of disempowerment for Angela, which unfortunately contributes to the mistreatment and abuse of the teenage girl.

In *Fen*, Nell stands out as a more positive and progressive character compared to her counterparts. She manages to maintain an autonomous identity outside the traditional realms of motherhood, which is a partial success. Unlike the ambitious and career-oriented women like Marlene, Nell, and Win, Nell aligns herself with the collective rather than individual pursuits. She exhibits genuine concern for her fellow workers and the broader community, in contrast to the emphasis on motherhood and family that May and Shirley prioritize. However, Nell faces challenges and suffers due to the isolation that arises from deviating from deeply ingrained expectations of women's behavior. Her femininity is even questioned by the children, Becky, Deb, and Shona, who speculate whether she is a man or a "morphrodite". The significance of Nell's choice not to participate in the expected roles of marriage and motherhood becomes starkly apparent as the girls turn against her, wielding a garden hoe and expressing their hostility, saying they want to kill her because she is horrible. This moment highlights the harsh consequences Nell faces for not conforming to societal expectations of marriage and motherhood. Despite her positive attributes and concern for others, she becomes a target of aggression, emphasizing the challenges and backlash that women who reject traditional gender roles can face.

Marlene, in contrast to Val, achieves success as a businesswoman. Yet, this success comes at a cost, as Marlene transfers her responsibilities as a mother to her sister and neglects both her sister and her own

daughter/niece. Her visit to them after six years reflects the behavior of an absent father who tries to compensate for his lack of involvement by giving presents. It is notable that Marlene suppresses this part of her life, likely to avoid the criticism and condemnation that Val experiences in *Fen*. When asked if she has a sister, Marlene responds with a somewhat dismissive tone, saying "yes, in fact" (*TG* 56). Additionally, Nell, inquiring about Marlene's family, mentions that Marlene never talks about them, further emphasizing the absence of familial bonds in Marlene's self-representation. She asks: "What's she got, brother, sister? She never talks about her family" (*TG* 120). Marlene's self-presentation deliberately excludes her familial connections, and this extends to a broader repression of the personal sphere. While the audience learns about Win's weekend with her married lover and Nell's romantic flings, Marlene's dinner party celebration is depicted as a fantasy, and it is implied that she spent the weekend alone. The erasure of motherhood from Marlene's identity seems to be accompanied by a more general avoidance of personal relationships and a focus on her professional success. This portrayal suggests that Marlene has prioritized her career and individual aspirations over familial ties and personal connections. By suppressing her role as a mother and distancing herself from the personal sphere, Marlene attempts to create a self-image that aligns more closely with the traditional expectations of success and ambition in a male-dominated professional world.

Val and Marlene challenge the ideologies of motherhood from different political perspectives. Val struggles to conform to the insistence on the exclusive nature of love and the expectation of self-sacrifice that is often associated with motherhood. She yearns for emotional connections that extend beyond the boundaries of the family unit and seeks a more inclusive and non-competitive form of love. However, her desire for affection and love outside of traditional family structures is portrayed as problematic within the context of the play.

VAL: Can't you give me a hug without Jesus?

ALICE: Of course not, we love better in Jesus.

VAL: I'd rather take valium (*Fen* 176).

In contrast to her own mother, Val attempts to break free from the cycle of self-sacrifice and martyrdom that characterizes their relationship. She expresses her hopes for her daughter, "Shona, when you grow up I hope you're happy" (*Fen* 185). She aims to instill a sense of individual fulfillment and personal well-being rather than perpetuating the self-negating expectations placed on women. Val's struggle to adapt and accept the prevailing norms and expectations of female behavior is evident in her inability to get used to how things are. This internal

conflict ultimately leads to her tragic decision to take her own life, highlighting the profound sense of tragedy that can arise from the oppressive and self-negating expectations placed on women and mothers in society. Both Val and Marlene's challenges to the ideologies of motherhood reflect the complex and often conflicting pressures women face in navigating their roles as mothers and individuals within societal norms. While Val seeks a more inclusive and emotionally fulfilling form of love, her inability to reconcile her desires with societal expectations leads to tragic consequences.

Marlene's decision to distance herself from her family is influenced by her adherence to Thatcherite values. She assures: "I believe in the individual" (TG 138). She aligns herself with individualism, proclaiming her belief in the power of the individual as an explanation for her political allegiances. She rejects the idea of conforming to the traditional working-class lifestyle saying:

I know a managing director who's got two children, she breast feeds in the

board room, she pays a hundred pounds a week on domestic help alone and

she can afford that because she's an extremely high-powered lady earning

a great deal of money(TG 134).

Marlene's aspirations for a different life lead her to invest in a right-wing discourse that promotes notions of personal adventure, monetarism, and the ideals of the "free world." Ironically, while rejecting motherhood, Marlene seeks fulfillment through the pursuit of a political ideology that aligns with conservative ideas regarding motherhood, gender roles, and the family. Furthermore, when faced with Joyce's accusation that Marlene's success would not have been possible if she had kept her daughter, Angie, Marlene's response underscores the inherent challenges and obstacles faced by working-class single mothers. It highlights the systemic barriers that make it extremely difficult for women in such circumstances to achieve personal and professional success. Marlene's departure from her family and rejection of motherhood exemplify the complexities and contradictions that arise when personal aspirations clash with societal expectations, class dynamics, and the limitations imposed by conservative ideologies. Her story sheds light on the nuanced and challenging choices that women, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, often face in their pursuit of personal fulfillment and success.

III. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, through the analysis of Caryl Churchill's plays: *Top Girls* and *Fen*, this paper has delved into the theme of motherhood, offering a nuanced exploration of its portrayal. By examining the diverse female characters and their relationships, as well as the social, cultural, and political contexts in which they exist, a comprehensive understanding of the complexities of motherhood has been attained. *Top Girls* challenges societal expectations and scrutinizes the impact of social and economic norms on women's identities. The play depicts the struggle of balancing professional ambitions with the responsibilities of motherhood, highlighting the tensions faced by women in a patriarchal society. In *Fen*, Churchill provides a glimpse into the lives of working-class women, shedding light on the intersectionality of motherhood, class, and gender. The play showcases the resilience and resistance of these women as they navigate poverty, limited opportunities, and societal constraints. It emphasizes the struggles faced by marginalized women and the ways in which motherhood becomes a site of both challenge and strength.

In essence, Churchill's plays, *Top Girls* and *Fen*, provide a thought-provoking exploration of the theme of motherhood. Through diverse characters, intricate relationships, and critical analyses of social contexts, Churchill challenges established norms and offers a multifaceted portrayal of motherhood. Her works invite reflection on the complexities, contradictions, and possibilities inherent in women's experiences of maternity, fostering a deeper understanding of the intricate interplay between gender, power, and social expectations.

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