

www.galaxyimrj.com

ISSN: 2278-9529

# GALAXY

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Vol. 3, Issue-IV July 2014



**Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite**

**Managing Editor: Madhuri Bite**

About Us: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/about-us/>

Archive: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/contact-us/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/faq/>

## Unconventional Use of Theatrical Devices in *Cloud Nine*

**Mohammad Ahmad**

Research Scholar

Department of English and M.E.L.

University of Lucknow, Lucknow.

Games of self-reference, increasingly common in modern art and literature, are a long-standing tradition in the theatre. But a twentieth century artist in modern era is one who challenges the established conventions and disapproves both the respectable morality and the principles and formulas of literary success. The traditional system of representation have used Aristotle as the starting point, but there are some avant-gardists who do not follow conventions or rules rather they make their own rules to follow.

Like such an artist, Caryl Churchill (born 3 September, 1938), an English female dramatist, escaped from tradition and authority and entered into herself and insighted upon life through her own being with her own eyes. Churchill, born in London, the daughter of Jan, a fashion model, and Robert Churchill, a political cartoonist, is known for her use of non-naturalistic devices and feminist themes, the abuses of power, and sexual politics. Churchill, the major contemporary feminist woman playwright, wanted to breakdown the traditional norms in every aspect of society and tried to deconstruct the traditional system of representation based on Aristotle's ideas in writing the plays. Her deployment of conspicuously theatrical pretense throughout *Cloud Nine* evokes a persistent double-vision that not only capitalizes on the essential quality of her medium, but also illuminates a multiplicity of issues inherent in her work. Churchill's first major theatrical endeavour was *Owners* (1972), a two-act play about obsession and power, which was staged in London the same year. Churchill's basic socialist and unconventional views are very clear in the play.

She served as resident dramatist at the Royal Court Theatre from 1974-1975, and later began collaboration with theatre companies such as Joint Stock Theatre Company and Monstrous Regiment (a feminist theatre union) which used an extended workshop period in their development of new plays. Churchill continued to use an improvisational workshop setting in the development of some of her plays. From *Owners* (1972) onwards, Churchill began to experiment with forms and Aristotelian model of dramatic structure. Churchill has written more than thirty plays. Some of them are – *Having a Wonderful Time* (1960), *Objections to Sex and Violence* (1975), *Vinegar Tom* (1976), *Traps* (1976), *Top Girls* (1982), *Serious Money* (1987), and a very recent play *Seven Jewish Children* (2009) – a play about Gaza. But her first play to receive wide notice was *Cloud Nine* (1979), a farce about sexual politics, set partly in a British colony in the Victorian era, which examines the relationships involved in colonization. The most striking feature of the play, that I am dealing with, is its innovative and unconventional use of theatrical techniques. That is why, the play became successful in all over the world and won an *Obie Award* in 1982 for the best play of the year.

### Theatrical Techniques in *Cloud Nine*

Churchill, an avant-gardist, is recognized as Britain's leading woman dramatist. She is best known for her experimentations with established theatrical forms and conventions. The unconventional approach to feminine writing in theatre and making innovative theatrical techniques set up Churchill within a place of both – the canon of contemporary women's theatre, and “the male-stream” of the modern British stage. Through a contrived exhibition of theatrical transparencies, the play forces the audiences attention onto qualities, simultaneously artificial, and despotic, of time, setting, and structure. Theatrical artifice saturates the whole fabric of *Cloud Nine*. Its two acts are separated by a century of time, but Churchill specifies that the characters who recur in Act Two have aged only twenty five years. By using her innovative and unconventional ideas, Churchill delights her audience by projecting gender issues and striking theatrical styles. The treatment of time, radical use of language, overlapping dialogues, innovative characterization, cross-casting and cross-dressing techniques etc., all these make her one of the most important British playwright. Von Mayenburg says:

She discovers new genres and forms. She then discards them and moves on, opening up possibilities for other playwrights to explore. I think many people writing today don't even realize they have been influenced by her. She has changed language of theatre. And very few playwrights do that. (*The Guardian*)

Churchill is such a playwright who is distinctive in her own way. She is completely different from the playwrights who worked within the scope of realism, and the male stream canon of playwrights whose plays are basically male-dominated. Churchill is a prominent figure of modern doctrine that attempts to knock down the notion of patriarchy and sexism through using her unconventional and innovative theatrical devices in her works. In the form, as well as in the content of her works, Churchill makes use of freedom and experimentation. Using her ingenious and unorthodox techniques, she has managed to change the structure of performances. None of her plays, indeed, follow the traditional model which is related to Aristotle's pattern in writing. Churchill's experimentation with form is way of exploring the possibilities of feminist aesthetics and her unusual use of theatrical structure always aims to reveal inequality of social orders. Several critics have recognized Churchill's ability to dismantle the tradition of theatre diversion of combining the realist aspect and social criticism in her works. Focusing most of her plays from women perspectives, Churchill clearly retells the representation of women and realities of their living in a male-dominated society. Most of her plays probe some form of social control. She illustrates clearly the coercion that caused by patriarchal force and oppressed men and women in society. Churchill also points out how the standard of behaviour was motivated by social systems that in society often manipulate the issues of racial, sexual and economic elements.

Let us now move to the innovative theatrical devices, the most striking features in the play, used by Churchill in *Cloud Nine* but before that a synopsis of the play in necessary:

*Cloud Nine* (1979), a play of two acts, talks of gender confusion and sexual politics. As far as the setting of the play is concerned, Churchill selected two completely different periods of British history. The first act takes place in colonial

Africa, roughly during the 1880s. During this time period, British colonialism was still in full swing. Churchill uses the concept “white-men’s burden”, i.e., Britain’s responsibility to civilize colonial cultures. And act two which takes place in London around 1980s, one hundred years later, though for the characters only twenty five years passed. But during this period, British colonialism had all but completely deflated, but other forms of repressions remained. Actors are cross-cast according to race and gender to show contradiction among who they are and who they want to be, or who they are supposed to be. The white patriarch father of the family, Clive, is married to a woman, Betty, who happens to be played by a man. Their Black servant, Joshua, is played by a white actor, the son, Edward, is played by a woman, Victoria, played by a dummy. Churchill, intentionally makes use of cross – gender / race and the double – casting techniques to destabilize sexual identities determined by dominant sexual system. Two different settings of the play, that of Victorian English Colonies and modern Britain helps to insist the theme of sexual and racial discrimination and exploitation present in the play. Churchill’s actor-based approach in writing *Cloud Nine* resulted in a piece very much centred around bodies and actors in space. Audiences are forced to recognize that men play women, women play men, and adults play children. These influences are highly evident in the play *Cloud Nine*.

If Churchill cheats political and narrative logic for the sake of artistic integrity, she nonetheless achieves her goals of narrative and aesthetic synthesis, and she does so through an intricate manipulation of innovative conceits that merit evaluation on their own terms. Churchill’s writing style evolved toward a less linear, more avant-garde form. She experimented with a time manipulation, cross-gender casting and different concepts of costuming and staging. Churchill sets Act One in Colonial Africa in the late 1880s and Act Two in London in around 1980s, one hundred years later, though for the characters only twenty five years have passed. This technique is called manipulation of time. Churchill cites the reason for his perplexed time scheme: “I thought the first act would be stronger set in Victorian times, at the height of Colonialism, rather than in Africa during the 1950s” (Churchill, 1985:240).

Through the deconstruction of linear time, Churchill further explores the forced, false nature of constituting separate sexual identities. The gap between personal time and actual time provides the necessary space in which issues of sexuality and gender identity are examined. She recognizes the structuring of time as symbolic social act - where the perpetuation of linearity and casualty mystifies the authorship of history and gender. This manipulation serves to alienate the audience.

It is clearly evident, in the play, that the actors are cross-cast and cross-gender to show the contradiction among them. Churchill tosses the characters from Act One into this new arena to see how they might react. Betty, in the first act, played by a man, is subverted the established conventions of this character. In Act Two, a new Betty, played by a new actor, acquires a sense of independence and evolves into the play’s protagonist. Therefore, through the use of cross-gender devices how exactly gender was symbolically conveyed. By having Betty played by a man in Act One, we see clear disconnection between Betty as a biological woman and the effect her being impersonated by a male actor produces. Elaine Aston, a feminist scholar on theatre asserts: “The attraction lies in the subversive potential of the male impersonator, the most highly changed and disturbing of theatrical devices to cross the gender device” (Aston, 1995: 34). Edward, at a young age, played by a woman in Act One, discovers a strong inclination for feminine things and an attraction to other males. The older

Edward of Act Two, played by a man, finds that he fits well into the role of mother and wife. He prefers steady companionship but has difficulty asserting himself to get what he wants.

By seeing Edward played by a woman in Act One, and also played by a man in Act Two emphasising an effeminate behaviour. We are also able to see the gap between the two genders and the corresponding foregrounding of their artificiality. Victoria, although unimportant to the first act because she is played by a dummy, emerges as a central figure of the play in second act. Joshua, a servant to Clive's family, is played by a white actor. As the play opens, Joshua appears to be a loyal servant but as the play moves, we see that he is loyal only for personal gain, and his loyalty stops when his real family is threatened. Finally, Cathy, a five year old girl played by a man, is not exactly normal. We see the lack of balance between a child's behaviour and an adult one. Jill Dolan, a contemporary feminist scholar on theatre, in "Gender Impersonation Onstage: Destroying or Maintaining the Mirror of Gender Roles?" Claims:

Our socially constructed gender roles are inscribed in our languages and in our bodies. The stage then, is a proper place to explore gender ambiguity, not to expunge it cathartically from society but to play with confound and deconstruct gender categories. If we stop considering the stage as a mirror of reality, we can use it as a laboratory in which to reconstruct new, non-genderized identities (Dolan 1992:8).

Thus, these characters define the notion of cross-gender / race casting and undermine the concept of gender in a patriarchal society.

The dissonance between actor and role, or between posture and reality, not only acquires particular significance in specific cases, but also repeats thematically in various configurations of actions and structure. Churchill makes use of cross-gender, cross-race, and role reversal techniques to destabilize sexual identities determined by dominant sexual ideology. Such depictions underline the fact that the characters in the play are not real but socially constructed which are part of reality. The actor who plays the role of Clive in Act One also plays the role of Cathy in Act Two. So, the concept of double-role playing reverses the notion of gender. The main objective, in short, of the play in using such technique is to illustrate the political messages of the play such as - gender relations, class struggle, and sexual oppression, and the notion of patriarchy. In this case, this study attempts to confirm that Churchill's plays which belong to feminist theatre try to eliminate the socially constructed gender by breaking the masculine / feminine binary oppositions in order to disrupt socially constructed woman.

Finally, the two last innovative techniques used by Churchill in *Cloud Nine* are dialogues and songs. The play opens with the patriotic song, "Come gather, sons of England, come gather in your pride ..." (*Cloud Nine* : 5). In the play the songs act as an impetus for liberation, displaying that women's choices were never really a choice at all. The plot, in the play, is constantly interrupted and subverted by songs. These songs are contemporary and are sung by actors in modern dress. They illustrate different dialogues of each character which define his / her characteristics. Joshua's singing, for instance, of an English carol to his master / or Britain:

My skin is black but oh my soul is white.

I hate my tribe, my master is my light.  
I only live for him. As you can see,  
What white men want is what I want to be (*Cloud Nine*: 6).

It shows that colonization is a kind of identity which deprives Joshua of any native culture. The song also displays Joshua's identity as a racial agent. Churchill used a number of songs in Act One and Act Two in order to strengthen her performance. It is unusual to have a song within a dialogue which is not a musical performance. She used song as an innovative tool to highlight her point.

Thus, we can say, from the very beginning of *Cloud Nine*, Churchill lets her audience know that the play, or at least the first-act will be some form of satire, a poking fun at British society and conventions. First, she shows Clive's family as stereotypically British by having them sing a patriotic song to the audience and then identify themselves. Each character tells the audience of his / her unwavering commitment to Clive or Britain. Then Churchill introduces one of the major comic devices of the act : the physical composition of the cast completely contradicts the roles that they are intended to play. The opening images of the play suggest that the characters have, somehow, been misplaced, foreshadowing the confusion to come. These images also symbolize the gender confusion that will become one of the major themes of the play. In the more realistic second act, Churchill becomes more sympathetic, allowing her audience to see the struggle of each character. She acknowledges that the quest for identity is a difficult one, coming only at the cost of much personal anguish. In Act Two, Victoria begins to experiment with homosexuality. Betty finds a job and starts anew as a single woman. Lin and Edward aggressively pursue relationships with Victoria and Gerry respectively. In modern London, Churchill shows, men become women and fathers become mothers.

To sum up, Churchill, the avant-gardist playwright, revolted and contested against patriarchy and attempted to delineate woman as subject through her innovative and unconventional theatrical devices. Churchill's ingenious theatrical devices along with her feminist crusade to bring awareness about the position of women in modern society. In a purely theatrical sense, Churchill's cross-gender casting brings out the comedy of the play. She entertains the audience by choosing a man to play wife of a homophobic Clive. One might also find humour in Clive's attempt to force son Edward, played by a woman, to act more like a man. Churchill's casting choices also create a stage image of opposite status relationships. Thematically, on the other hand, the cross-gender casting suggests gender confusion. The characters of the first act are not in touch with their sexual identities. Their identities have been manufactured by Clive, and their appearance, as cross-dresses, makes this all the more evident. For Act Two, Churchill instructs that the roles be switched so that actors play role of their same sex. With this change, Churchill focuses that the characters are drawing nearer their true identities. By confronting her audience with an ingeniously contrived devices, she effects a provocative and subversive interplay between material and mode that parades her conceits to reveal faking on metaphysical scale. Furthermore, Churchill's depiction of the two periods as the effects of conspicuous fiction renders the artifice of their envisaging. In one blow, the distance is evoked and erased. Thus, we can say, that the structural configuration of *Cloud Nine* is boldly artificial and unconventional and focuses attention on its own conceits. Through the conspicuous theatricality and artificiality of these occurrences, Churchill illuminates her own artistry as a central issue of the

piece, and thereby manoeuvres the role of choice – artistic, theatrical, political, sexual and existential – into primary question.

**Works Cited:**

Aston, Elaine. *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre*. London: Routledge, 1995. Print.

Churchill, Caryl. *Cloud Nine*. London: Pluto Press, 1979. Print.

---. *Plays: One*. New York: Methuen, 1985. Print.

Dolan, Jill. "Gender Impersonation Onstage: Destroying or Maintaining the Mirror of Gender Roles?" *Gender in Performance, the Representation of Difference in the Performing Arts*. ed. Laurence Sanelick. Hanover: University Press of Trustees of Tufts, 1992. Print.

Revenhill, Mark. "She Made Us Raise Our Game." *The Guardian*. Wed, 3 Sep 2008. Web. 20 Nov. 2011.

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2008/sep/03/carylchurchill.theatre>>