

# The Price of Empowerment: Exploring Intersectionality, Capitalism, and Feminism in *Top Girls*

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## Abstract

*This paper looks at the play *Top Girls* by Caryl Churchill as a critical response to feminism, capitalism and gender roles in modern society. In its narrative structure and complex female characters, Churchill presents a challenge to the conventional views of success and empowerment. The paper looks at major themes, character interactions and the socio-political critique of the play and discusses its relevance to current feminist discourse. The analysis will focus on two main theories: Marxist Feminism and Intersectionality to reveal the connections between capitalism, gender inequality and social identity in the play. In this paper, I will critically analyse the play using these frameworks to disclose the inherent contradictions in capitalist feminism and the diverse forms of oppression that women experience according to their social status. Furthermore, the paper will discuss the futility of individual empowerment in the fight against systemic barriers and will stress the necessity of collective action. In addition, it examines how Churchill uses historical and contemporary women to reveal the patterns of continued oppression. Moreover, the analysis stresses on the effects of the emotional and psychological aspects of surviving in a patriarchal capitalist society. The study is going to explain how power dynamics play out in people's interpersonal relationships and interpersonal communication, and how this helps to understand Churchill's choice of fragmented narrative techniques. This paper concentrates on both direct and indirect critiques of the social structures presented in *Top Girls* to connect the theoretical discourse with the real lives of the characters. Finally, the research also portrays intergenerational conflicts in the play which stresses on the circular nature of systemic inequalities and their effects.*

**Keywords:** Feminism, Feminist Theory, Intersectionality, Empowerment, Women's Struggles, Class Struggles, Women in Power, Sacrifice

## Introduction

First presented in 1982 and still one of the most celebrated feminist plays of the twentieth century, Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* shows the interaction of class, gender, and capitalism against the backdrop of Thatcher Britain. It uses a nonlinear structure to argue about the different forms of female successfulness with some instances of historical and contemporary figures. The theoretical framework which supports the analysis is Marxist Feminism; it examines the setting of capitalism as a crucial site from which gender oppression emerges and historicized materiality that stops gender working. By blending together her historical and modern women, Churchill asks her audience to reflect on the price of ambition, the value of collective solidarity, and the barriers some face because of a sense of individualism.

## Marxist Feminism

Marxist Feminism critiques capitalism as a system that perpetuates gender inequality by exploiting women's labour and reinforcing patriarchal structures. It sees women's oppression as entrenched within economic structures that often relegate women to the lowly position of subordinate at home and in the

work environment. Marlene is a success within a capitalist culture, with the cost of relationships and building a sense of collective. The conflict between individual success and collective struggle is an interplay that recurs throughout the play. Marlene's corporate success stands as a parable of how a capitalism rewards individual achievement while blithely ignoring systemic inequalities that leave behind women like Joyce and Angie.

Marlene's character can be used to comprehend Karl Marx's theory of alienation. Marx maintained that capitalism separates individuals from their labour, their society, and indeed even from themselves. Marlene's forwarded alienation son is registered by the coldness of her remoteness from her sister Joyce and her daughter Angie. Her success alienates her emotionally as well as culturally from her working-class ancestry. As Joyce bitterly observes, "You're not clever enough to get out of class. You're one of us underneath" (Churchill 89).

### **Intersectionality**

Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, analyses how gender, class, race, and other social identities interact to create interlocking systems of discrimination and disadvantage. *Top Girls* demonstrates through characters Joyce and Angie the overlapping nature of gendered and class inequalities that act to limit opportunities for women and maintain social barriers. Intersectionality offers insight into how Marlene's success does not solve systemic struggles faced by other women, particularly those of lower socioeconomic status. Angie would, therefore, stand as a particular case in the exclusion of feminist success narratives as a result of being from a limited socio-economic environment.

Intersectionality theory further complicated those systems of oppression and Crenshaw emphasized that systems of oppression are connected and environmentally dependent. While Marlene might feel the pressure of her job in the corporate arena, she does not escape the wide-ranging emotional consequences of systemic gender and class inequalities. Angie would go on to become a symbol of suffering at the hands of that cruel systemic oppression; she had inherited it from her economy and social status.

### **Capitalism and Female Empowerment**

In *Top Girls*, Marlene is described as a woman who has found her way into the corporate capitalist world. By saying that "I don't wear my politics on my sleeve, I just do the job" (Churchill 82), Marlene reveals her dedication for individual aspiration not the changes brought about collectively. But in the end, a great deal has been sacrificed in terms of emotional and personal costs. Marxist Feminism then contextualizes Marlene's success achieved at the expense of all those women, continuing to be repressed and exploited, who might not be able to avail themselves of such opportunities. Her very own daughter Angie is more of a symbol of all those left out by this version of feminism.

The play also highlights the prospect of capitalism commodifying feminism. Marlene's success is not represented as a victory of women's unity; it is viewed as an isolated win-a single achievement at the cost of her working-class roots, the very roots represented through her strained association with Joyce. When Joyce says to Marlene, "You're one of those beggars now. You'll be better than us" (Churchill 91), she signifies that Marlene being a tall tales woman is just as but fragile and misty; it can hardly bend close to erase her roots or systemic inequalities, which still continue to esta.

Marlene's character demonstrates that success within the patriarchal capitalist paradigm can thence be traced not as liberatory. But it often embodies the same structures that oppress under the guise of liberation. The difficulties faced by Joyce and Angie are not solved by Marlene; her so-called empowerment is but one of the many contradictions of capitalist feminism, wherein the survival of one does not guarantee liberation for all.

Through the exploitation of feminist ideals by capitalism, these principles are transformed into marketable commodities and corporate advertising strategies which place profit above fundamental social transformation. Feminist slogans become branding materials so corporations can sell products which fail to address the fundamental economic obstacles facing women. Through corporate feminism, people focus on personal triumphs such as Marlene's story in *Top Girls* as proof of advancement though many marginalized women continue to struggle. Capitalist

feminism focuses on “leaning in” instead of removing patriarchal and economic obstacles which places personal responsibility ahead of collective action. Commodifying and watering down the radical power of feminism allows for mainstream acceptance to happen. The depiction of women in corporate management does not explain how business systems oppress working class and minority females. People adopt feminist ideals casually but to such an extent that it only serves to maintain a weakened form of empowerment which benefits existing privileged groups. The advantage of capitalist systems is that they co-opt feminist movements to maintain current social structures instead of working to transform them.

Researchers have uncovered methods through which capitalism uses feminist ideas to sustain current power dynamics. In *Fortunes of Feminism*, (Fraser) studies the transformation of feminism from a collective social justice movement into a neoliberal framework that serves capitalist interests. In her book *The Aftermath of Feminism*, (McRobbie) reveals how feminist ideas are deployed to individualize success while ignoring fundamental social inequalities and consumerism. (Rottenberg) claims that self-focused ideology now dominates feminism because neoliberalism has transformed it. Through an examination of “confidence culture”, (Orgad and Gill) reveals that corporate marketing strategies now use feminist ideals. Mainstream feminism serves elite women at the expense of marginalized communities according to (Hooks). The views presented here support the claim that capitalist structures incorporate feminist movements to neutralize their power then transform them into safe market-friendly discourses which preserve current social hierarchies. The paper supports these scholarly perspectives by studying *Top Girls* as a play that critiques the co-option of feminist ideals by capitalist structures. Marlene represents neoliberal feminism according to Churchill because her success happens in a patriarchal structure which continues to exploit both class and gender biases. The way Marlene’s story depicts individual achievement over collective advancement mirrors how Fraser argues the market-driven reshaping of feminism has occurred.

## Intersectionality and Class Struggles

Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality, which defines and explains the manner in which overlapping social identities-balanced by notions of gender, race, class, and sexuality-converge to create unique experiences for oppression and privilege. In *Top Girls*, Churchill highlights exactly these intersections through the tension that characterizes the relationship between Marlene, Joyce, and Angie to show through the simple fact of class, gender, and status how, although they are leading unbearable lives, they have lived different conditions. So that, on the one hand, there’s Marlene, who represents capitalist ambition and upward mobility, while Joyce represents the struggles of working-class women who are still prisoner to cycles of poverty and limited opportunities. Angie is thus tragically left to bear the compounded burden of intersecting oppressions.

Joyce’s sacrifices in the name of Angela underscore systemic imposition of disproportionate burdens on women from less privileged backgrounds, and while Marlene climbs the professional ladder and gains financial independence, Joyce must stay behind with the personal appeals of caregiving and economic burden. Their clash in Act Two opens up the confrontation of dominance and differences between their respective worldviews and lifestyle choices. Joyce refers to Marlene’s upward-dragging vis-à-vis her outsized ambitions of a far loftier corporate level in life, basically putting it so bluntly: “You’re one of them now. You think you’re better” (Churchill 91). This acidic line reveals how class inequality in fact can fracture even familial ties, thus putting into stark contrast how capitalism induces individualistic isolation from one’s own community.

Marlene, for all her success, cannot escape her working-class roots. Joyce reminds her of the reality: “You’re not clever enough to get out of class. You’re one of us underneath” (Churchill 89). This line discloses a basic truth about Marlene’s success- it unfolds within the limitations provided by a system where no upward mobility is allowed for women in large numbers, and even fewer for the working-class women. Unlike the correct assumptions about Marlene, her success doesn’t destroy the boundaries of discrimination but rather gives her a stature within an irrational dimension.

Among all the characters, Angie probably brings truth to the intersectional oppression. She is slow, uncoordinated, has vulnerabilities, and is unable to meet society's expectations in terms of being productive and goal-oriented. For Marlene, it is clear her expectations couldn't have been. She is not going to make it, I don't mean stupid. She is slow (Churchill 84). This unapologetic observation encapsulates the harsh reality of capitalism which ignores the presence of non-conforming individuals that cannot fit in its straightjacket of rigorous productivity. Not just because she is a girl, but Angie suffers even more because of her background and lack of opportunity.

Angie's visit to Marlene's workplace in some sense serves as a symbolic moment in the play. Donning an expensive dress reserved for a special occasion, she hopes to impress her aunt and maybe make a bid for a place in her aunt's world. But her appearance in Marlene's workplace setting is somewhat awkward and uncomfortable, emphasizing a host of social and cultural restraints that block her path into Marlene's territory of corporate success. When Angie confesses, I'm frightened (Churchill 83), it is clear that her dread arises not just from a lack of clear guidance but from her realization of her social exclusion.

Intersectionality also demonstrates how these societal structures help sustain cycles of poverty. Angie's character is perceived to be stagnant, forever trapped by her structured potential. This speaks to how systemic inequalities compound across generations whereby socio economic and gender work together to create far-from-overcome barriers. Joyce's sacrifices are honourable, but they can't break these cycles; Marlene's successes remain solely personal victories, as opposed to systemic triumphs.

The dinner party scene furthers elaboration on the intersectionality theme. The historical figures, such as Lady Nijo and Pope Joan, illustrate how gender oppression intersects with social and economic hierarchies. Lady Nijo recounts how she occupied the privileged position of a courtesan-in-waiting at the Japanese imperial court. However, her womanhood was dependent on achieving balance in male-favor relations. "I belonged to the Emperor, and he gave me to a man when I was fourteen" (Churchill 15). Her narrative speaks of such societal

arrangements that may at once confer limited power on women while simultaneously consolidating their subjugation.

Similarly, the very tale of Pope Joan uncovers the ways in which gendered obstacles continue to exist even within power spheres. Though her rise to become the supreme authority of Rome represents a specific challenge to the very premise of patriarchy, she is, in the end, exposed and punished for being a woman. The thoughtful dynamics that led to Joan being stoned reflect the brutal realities that women face when they transgress the codes of their patriarchal norm. These historical tales are, in effect, reflections of Marlene's corporate success that indicate although women maneuver the traditional structures of power, in fact, they are still ensnared within the same structures they sought to overcome.

Churchill uses these characters to convey that oppression is not a monolithic experience but a multi-angled experience. Class, gender, and social identity do not exist in isolation; there are circumstances under which they intersect to create real disadvantages. Joyce and Angie, representing working-class women, experience disadvantage not only from patriarchal arrangements but also from economic systems refusing worthwhile opportunities for advancement to the working class.

### **Symbolism in the Dinner Party Scene**

Top Girls culminates in one of the most evocative moments of the entire theatre piece, with women from different eras and contexts in the mind's eye. Each of these women Pope Joan, Lady Nijo, Isabella Bird, and others tells their stories of sacrifice, ambition, and survival, thus creating a tapestry of women's experiences that overarch time and social class. This occasion becomes the outline to the various paths, frequently encountering excruciatingly painful experiences women must cross in order to acquire power or recognition in patriarchal societies. For instance, the unfortunate story of Pope Joan serves as a worrying account of the expansiveness women have sometimes traversed in order to attain male advantage in a male society. For example, she says, "I thought God would speak to me directly. But instead they found out, and I was stoned in the street" (Churchill 20). The fate led to show that

women challenging patriarchal authority face violent consequences, even when they reach positions of highest power. The tragedy of being exposed and murdered because of her gender reflects the most request punishment for defying the gendered norms, echoing all such violent restrictions on women roiled in history.

Similarly, Lady Nijo's tale reveals how even women with apparent privilege, such as tenants in the Japanese imperial court, remain victims of patriarchal control and exploitation. At fourteen, she was given to a man. Lady Nijo herself thought, "I belonged to the Emperor, and he gave me to a man when I was fourteen" (Churchill 15). The parallel of the concubine for sale at such a point in their lives suggests the commoditization of women's bodies and how their agency was stripped away by powerful men. In reference to the dinner party, Lady Nijo's tale serves to symbolize how women have historically been regulated in positions of relative power by the dictates and desires of men.

The dinner party within it is thus representative of the fractured nature of female solidarity in a capitalist society and becomes a site of tension between emancipation from a patriarchal capitalist world and the subversion of that world. Thus, the women here remain divided by varied experiences of pain, suffering, and social oppression along the lines of historical calendar, social class, and their different positioning within their external and social hierarchies. Pope Joan and Lady Nijo, for example, may be separated by some centuries but their subjugation stands indelibly tied within the patriarchal controls that seem to survive. Then, the dinner party becomes representative of women's struggles being thought-of as collective, permanent, and inscribed together with many forms of interactivity and contradiction.

The scene here thus marks an emphasis on a growing element within *Top Girls*: the conflict between the personal and national. In aiming for individual accomplishment, Marlene routinely alienates herself from the others. Her climb up the corporate ladder, eloquently exemplified with her "I don't wear my politics on my sleeve-I just do the job" (Churchill 82), represents a form of successful feminism that is isolated and individual, and thus

does not reckon with the system that these historical women are attempting to remedy concerning inequality based on gender and class. The dinner party, with its eclectic gathering of powerful yet marginalized women, symbolically critiques this brand of feminism that elevates one woman while ignoring the collective needs and struggles of others.

## Conclusion

In this context, *Top Girls* functions as both a powerful critique of how capitalism transforms feminism into a commodity and as proof that individual success is impossible within broken systems. Churchill disproves the theory that business success creates empowerment and then reveals that working-class women suffer from hardship. Through the application of Marxist Feminism and Intersectionality, the paper reveals the contradictory nature of capitalist feminism and the necessity of collective action. The analysis reveals through its key findings that while capitalist feminism celebrates personal achievement it preserves systemic inequalities which leave marginalized women neglected. Through Churchill's play, we see how feminine principles get adopted by capitalism to strengthen existing social order instead of breaking it down. The play shatters the myth of empowerment within patriarchal capitalism by showing that achievements in these structures force people to give up emotional and social ties. Through the character development, especially Joyce and Angie, and Marlene, the play depicts how the intergenerational oppression persists even as one woman rises through the ranks. These findings establish that we need to transition from personal drive to collective movement. The play's contemporary importance shows us why we need to attack general social inequalities instead of enjoying the limited victories of select people. Although Marlene's achievements benefit future generations by opening doors, she cannot destroy overall systems of gendered and classed oppression. Churchill's play serves as a demand for an expansive feminist movement that pursues structural transformation instead of individual pursuit of power. By the inclusion of other academic voices and critical summaries, this analysis explored more deeply into *Top Girls* as a

feminist critique of capitalism. The commodification of feminism continues to inform today's debate, and so Churchill's comments are every bit as relevant today as when originally written. Ultimately, the play encourages us to re-think empowerment using terms other than capitalist frameworks and to work for collective progress and not individual victory.

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