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Gender Politics and Patriarchy in Caryl Churchill's *Vinegar Tom* **Sanjoy Kr. Seal**

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Abstract:

*Gender implies a psychosocial and cultural tool as opposed to sex which denotes a mere physiological criterion. As an important concept of feminist discussion, it owes much to the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir, who held women to be greater victims of social injustice than biological difference with men. Gender, over the years, came to be recognized as an important site for exploring the "politics" behind sexual difference that societies continuously try to uphold in their pursuit of consolidating and perpetuating patriarchy. And, gender politics explains a society's stance on sexual difference and gender. It assists us to identify what sort of behaviour a particular society appropriates based on its perception of sexual difference and at the same time to understand the dynamics of power relations that operate among different gendered categories. Gender politics, thus, shows how women are unjustly treated and overpowered within patriarchal societies simply because of their sexual difference with men; and thereby calls for a debate or criticism of the same such that better space for women can be secured within societies. As a feminist writer experimenting with theatre, Caryl Churchill has touched upon the issue of gender politics in numerous ways. In this paper, an attempt has been made to analyse how Caryl Churchill has explored the dynamics of gender politics and patriarchy in her play *Vinegar Tom* (1976). In course of the study primary stress has been given to thematic understanding of Caryl Churchill's *Vinegar Tom* (1976), which is treated as a dramatic text for the present analytical study.*

Key Words: Caryl Churchill, Gender Politics, Gender Roles, Gender Identity, Patriarchy

Gender has been one of the important concerns of feminist writers of the contemporary era. As a term of critical discussion gender implies a psychosocial and cultural tool for perpetuating sexual difference. It is distinguished from sex in that unlike sex it does not denote a mere physiological criterion. Instead, gender has deeper implications and goes beyond a simple binary division of sex. Gender, then, is a psychosocial idea which allows scope for looking at sexual difference in a new light. It, on the one hand, provides scope for other variants of sexual difference rather than the male/female binary (for example, the third sex, the homosexuals and the lesbians); and on the other, gives a social basis to such sexual differences. Conceived in terms of gender we may go on to argue that a woman may have masculine qualities and a man may possess feminine qualities. This distinction of sexual difference based on gender has been aptly highlighted by Simone de Beauvoir in her *The Second Sex* (1949) when she states "one is not born a woman, but rather becomes, woman" (qtd. in Abrams 89).

Beauvoir's idea immediately proved to be inspirational to the contemporary feminist critics who took it as a starting point for carrying forward further investigation into the aspect of sexual difference. The logic behind Beauvoir's often quoted dictum has been that it is not physical stature rather the social attitude that makes women what she is. In other words, women are greater victims of social injustice than their biological difference with men. The idea of Beauvoir opened up a new dimension in feminist thought as the feminists began to explore the role of women within societies, their psychology, body etc. rather than being concentrated upon political suffrage. Gender, thus, came to be recognized as an important site for exploring the "politics" behind sexual difference that societies continuously try to uphold in their pursuit of consolidating and perpetuating patriarchy.

Gender politics, we can argue that, explains a society's stance on sexual difference and gender. It assists us to identify what sort of behaviour a particular society appropriates based on its perception of sexual difference and at the same time to understand the dynamics of power relations that operate among different gendered categories within the society. In other words, gender politics explores the means of construction of gendered identities in patriarchy. It helps us to unmask how patriarchy, through gender divisions, tries to uphold male/masculinity as the norm. It shows how women are unjustly treated and overpowered within patriarchal societies simply because of their sexual difference with men, and thereby calls for a debate or criticism of the same such that better space for women can be secured within societies.

Caryl Churchill, as an artist devoted to women's cause, has collaborated with Monstrous Regiment, a theatre company in England concentrating on women's issue and feminist themes, for her play *Vinegar Tom* (1976). She had been approached by the Monstrous Regiment Company to write a play about witchcraft. Accordingly she studied the historical background of witches and witchery in 17th England from books and other sources including Alan Macfarlane's *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (1970). Churchill also attended the rehearsals *Scum*, a Monstrous Regiment play which "focused on the 1871 Paris commune through the experiences of Parisian washer women" (Kritzer 87). The collaboration with Monstrous Regiment enabled Churchill to "show evidence of radical thinking about relationship between men and women" (Wandor 57). Churchill began to ponder deep into socio-economic constructions of identities that underprivileged women had to face in a patriarchal society. She started to visualize a close affinity between "real women" of present and the witches of past. As Churchill herself states:

I wanted to write a play about witches with no witches in it; a play not about evil, hysteria and possession by the devil but about poverty, humiliation and prejudice, and how women accused of witchcraft saw themselves. (Plays One 130)

The resultant play is *Vinegar Tom* (1976), which dramatizes the story of a 17th century small village in England taking witch-hunt as the issue. In the play, Churchill has highlighted the dynamics of gender politics and patriarchy by focusing on the issue of artificially imposed gendered roles and identities to women within patriarchy.

The play *Vinegar Tom* (1976) shows how women, particularly poor and unorthodox, have to become scapegoats of patriarchy. The central action of the play revolves round victimization of poor and sexually unconventional women in the hands of patriarchal agents. In this context it must be noted that within the social system of patriarchy men and masculinity are given priority over women or femininity. It abounds in gender inequalities and includes not only domination of women by men but by other women as well.

In *Vinegar Tom* (1976), the couple Jack and Margery out of jealousy and frustration complains about their poor neighbours Joan and her daughter Alice as being involved in witchcraft. Joan Noakes, a poor old lady having no other supporter but her daughter, has to go to her neighbours Jack and Margery to beg for one thing or other. Her middle class neighbours, who have five cows, a dairy and two fields to sublet in their possession, do not show any readiness to help her. Margery even denies lending her a little yeast despite being requested for several times. Instead, she accuses Joan of stealing and conspires with her husband to get the old lady punished. On the eve of their misfortune owing to some disease of their cows, they refer to Joan's cursing, accuse her of witchcraft and complain about her before the witch finders, Packer and his woman assistant Goody. The witch finders, absurd as they are in their process of identifying witches and torturing them, gets Joan hanged along with Ellen, a working class women giving herbal potions to get people out of trouble.

Joan's acute lack of basic necessities of life shows the vulnerability and economic pressure through which single woman like her have to undergo in a patriarchal society. Her statement "Who wants an old woman?" (141), is an indication of her incarcerated self in the society in which patriarchy and capitalism go hand in hand. Ironically enough, Joan is not disturbed by her failure to convince the witch finders that she is not a witch. Instead, she boldly embraces the idea of being a witch, "I been a witch these ten years... My little imps are like moles with four feet but no tails and a black colour" (173). Perhaps, it is in death that Joan has envisaged liberation from subjugation and powerlessness that women are victims of in a patriarchal society.

Alice, Joan's daughter, is also a bold woman like her mother. Her boldness is evident in her overt rejection of sexual norms and the stereotyped role of woman. She, without any hesitation, admits the

fact that she enjoys sex with any man she takes pleasure in. She also has an illegitimate child and does not show any inclination for marriage. She constantly defies the society and its assigned sexual roles to women. In the very opening scene she is shown having sex with someone she does not know; and on being asked by the man about the guilt involved in her such activity, she shows not the least of botheration:

Man: So you think that was no sin we did?

Alice: If it was I don't care.

Man: Don't say that.

Alice: You'd say worse living here. Any time I'm happy someone
Says it's a sin. (135-36)

Alice is, thus, a girl who does not show any respect for morals that a patriarchal society insists upon. She is highly dissatisfied living in a society ruled by patriarchal norms and urges the "Man" to take her to London, where as informed by him, "Each man has his own religion nearly, or none at all, and there's women speak out too" (136), she urges him to take her along. However, she was rejected on the ground of being a prostitute:

Man: A whore? Take a whore with me?

Alice: I'm not that.

Man: What are you then? What name would you put to yourself? You're not a wife or a widow. You're not a virgin. Tell me a name for what you are. (137)

The reaction of the "Man" to the request of Alice is not surprising as it is simply a reflection of the patriarchal ideology which produced him. By keeping the man unnamed, Churchill further substantiates the fact as he represents the customary reply of any of the patriarchs. It also parallels Alice's recognition within the locality as a prostitute as is revealed when Susan tells her, "no one's going to marry you because they know you here" (147). Her condemnation of patriarchy and its conventional expectations of womanhood, then, received equal condemnation from the society. She has been labelled as a "whore" for her beliefs and unconventional attitude to sex.

Alice is made a further victim by Jack, who failing to seduce her, charges her of bewitching him of his sexual organ. Jack, being sexually frustrated for not having sex with his wife for three months owing to lack of erection, approaches Alice, even the sight of whom in mere dreams can sexually arouse him, and insists upon her to have sex with him. He even gives her apples as gifts and tries to bribe her with money which Alice urgently needed. On being turned down, he complains about Alice to the witch finders. Unfortunately, in her vein attempts to safeguard herself from the witch finders, Susan unjustly confirm Alice being involved in witchcraft. Alice is tortured and jailed for such heinous activity as witchcraft, so was Susan as a silent witness and accomplice to Alice's witchcraft.

Susan is a poor housewife. She already has three children and has had several miscarriages. However, despite her poor health she is made pregnant each year by her husband. Susan's conditions reveal that she is considered merely as an object by her husband. She does not have any space within the society but to submit before her husband and procreate. Still, Susan has no complaints against her husband as "he doesn't beat" (147). Instead, she considers herself better off than Alice, who is popular as a "whore" and has hardly any chance of marriage. This again shows, how patriarchy, in order to sustain itself has upheld marriage as a tool for victimization of women. Often it is women, who do not realize this and dominate other women, adding to the consolidation of patriarchy. Alice, however, is not moved by Susan's remarks. Rather, she counter argues her and takes her to Ellen, the herbal healer, to "be rid of it" (155).

Susan is condemned for her act of abortion. She is compelled to feel guilty for having gone beyond the conventional parameters of motherhood. In fact, Packer, the witch hunter convinces Susan of being involved in witchcraft: "you went to this good witch, and you destroyed the child in your womb by witchcraft" (167). The patriarchal agents succeed to coerce Susan as she confesses: "I was a witch and never knew it... I didn't know that I was so wicked" (174). Susan, then, succumbs to male-imposed ideas of wickedness in which women do not have the right to save their own body from injury. She accepts her "sin" and blames Ellen and Alice for making her consume herbal potion. Susan, thus, represents those vulnerable sections of women who suffer for their ignorance of patriarchal domination and drag others into similar misfortune.

Ellen is a working class midwife, who "earns her own living outside of the monetary system and worked outside the sanctioned medical/male establishment" (Reinelt qtd. in Foitzsimmons 32). She is

not accepted by the society for her ability to earn money despite being single. She is accused of being a witch for helping other women to escape their miserable situations. Her accusation reflects that the society does not like her as single women working and that too beyond established codes of earning appropriated by patriarchy. She also challenges the existing socio-economic set up based on monetary transaction by asking for small gifts rather than money for her services. Her advice to Betty, the daughter of the rich landlord and the lone survivor from the torments of the witch hunters, not to be alone and get married shows how difficult it is to live alone like her in a patriarchal society. As she advises Betty:

You get married, Betty, that's safest... left alone for what? To be like me? There's no doctor going to save me from being called a witch. Your best chance of being left alone is marry a rich man. (169)

Ellen, then, is not a witch to bring down harm to people's life. She is rather a woman of flesh and bones, who is sensitive to the problems of others. It is not that she cunningly made Susan abort her child; rather it was Susan's choice. Ellen only helped Susan to escape her misery and poor health. However, she is held as a witch, tortured, humiliated and hanged in an open square till death.

Betty, on the other hand, escapes this misfortune partially because she belongs to the upper-middle class society being the daughter of the landowner and partially because she agrees to accept the conventional role of woman by virtue of marriage. Betty has been depicted at the beginning as an unconventional girl who likes to be of her own. She rejects her parents' wish to get married to a rich man and keeps on wandering about the village in the dark. She is often locked up by her parents, who regard her seclusion as a kind of hysteria. As Betty discloses:

Why am I tied? Tied to be bled. Why am I bled? Because i was screaming. Why was I screaming? Because I'm bad. Why was I bad? Because I was happy. Why was I happy? Because I ran out by myself and got away from them— and Why was I screaming? Because I'm bad, Why am I bad? Because I'm tied. Why am I tied? Because I was happy. Why I was happy? Because I was screaming. (149)

Betty's remarks show that there is inevitability about her condition. She wants to break through her situation but in vein. She is denied of the freedom she seeks by her parents. Instead, she is regarded as hysteric patient and taken to a male doctor, who uses his treatment as a tool to torture her to accept the forced marriage. Defiant in nature, Betty often escapes from the prison in her house and takes refuge to Ellen's place. However, she could not continue long and finally submits before the patriarchal agents out of fear of being accused as a witch: "I'm frightened to come anymore. They'll say I'm a witch" (169). Betty agrees to marry and escapes a possible horrifying situation that befell on other four woman of the village. So, ultimately patriarchy finds its way through Betty to make her accept the gendered role assigned to women like her.

The play *Vinegar Tom* (1976), thus, shows how society curbs individual freedom of woman under the pressure of patriarchy. Women are forced to go by stereotypical identities assigned to them and any act of deviation from this is adequately punished. They are regarded as thieves, labelled as whores, compelled to confess guilt, dejected or tied to bleed. If this does not suffice enough, they are accused of witchery and handed over to witch hunters, who themselves are patriarchal agents created to torture unconventional women, and are hanged. The play, thus, underlines the power relations that govern societies dominated by males in which women are forced to accept marginal gender-roles and gender-identities. Any woman who tries to go beyond this enclave is seen as an outcaste and is made to suffer for her actions.

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