

A Study of Epic Theatre in Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine*

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Abstract

Bertolt Brecht introduced a new type of theatre called epic theatre in 20th century. He challenged the classical drama conception to epic theatre by including some elements in his play as Historicization, Alienation, Gestus and the Fourth wall. Brecht rejects traditional plot, setting, and characterization in order to confuse the audiences and make them see the world better. By this way he aimed to direct his audiences to critical thinking. Caryl Churchill is one of the most important writers known as a socialist feminist playwright uses Brecht's epic theatre features in her play Cloud Nine since she can easily take the attention of the audiences and let them think objectively to the global problems of the world like racism, sexing discrimination. Churchill, like Bertolt Brecht, breaks down the conventions of realistic drama since it serves the purposes of capitalist ideology and patriarchy. The objective of this study is to introduce the elements of Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre and analyze how Caryl Churchill used these epic elements in her play Cloud Nine to terminate sex discrimination and racism. Moreover, she aimed to create tolerance on the 'other' in the society.

Keywords: Brechtian technique, patriarchal society, fixed gender roles, social change.

I. Introduction

The term epic theatre was used by Brecht for the first time in 1926. Indeed, Erwin Piscator was the pioneer of the epic theatre but Brecht is the one who perfected and popularized it. Epic theatre is a revolutionary form of drama. "After World War II due to need of rebuilding society, the stabilization of the economy, nationalizing tendencies brought about by the intensification mass product techniques during the war and the pedagogical strategies of Germany Communist Party, a more matter of fact utilitarian approach took hold in the arts" (Mumford 77). In the article of 'A Short Organum for The Theatre' Brecht defines the new type of theatre as "making live representations of reported or invented happenings between human beings and doing so with a view to entertainment" (Willet 180). Brecht did not only choose social themes but he also aimed to awaken his audiences by the alienation effect (Verfremdungseffekt) and giving them the idea that they were watching only a play. He wanted his audiences not to sit passively. He also wanted the audience to have a critical rather than an emotional viewpoint. To achieve this, he denied the fundamentals and requirements of Aristotelian drama and attempted to change classical rules of plays. Willet explains that Brecht is disturbed to see how crudely and carelessly man's life is presented not only in old works but also in contemporary ones created with old recipes (183). Brecht rejects traditional plot, setting, and characterization in order to confuse the audiences and make them see the world better. "Epic theatre is thus an umbrella term for all those technical devices and methods of interpretation from showing the Gestus, V and H effects that contribute to analytic narrative perspective. But it also embraces structural issues such as organization of space and time so that particular view of the individual and society is communicated" (Mumford 78).

Caryl Churchill is one of the most important writers known as a socialist feminist playwright. She has written many plays for radio, television and theatre since the 1960s. As a feminist she was affected by feminism and lefties climate of the 1970s. She tried to introduce her political and social ideas especially her feminist point of view with "Brechtian Epic Theater". Churchill's intention is not different from Brecht's; she aims to awaken the audiences and bewilder and attract them. Churchill, like Bertolt Brecht, breaks down the conventions of realistic drama since it serves the purposes of capitalist ideology and patriarchy in order to emphasize the feminist position against traditional male position in the society (Akçeşme 94). Churchill employs Brechtian theatrical features such as alienation, historicization, gestus, collapse of the fourth-wall, and open-ended plot structure to provoke feminist ideas in patriarchal society. In other words, she becomes the voice of women of her era employing epic theatre conventions for her own ends.

II. Analysis

Cloud Nine is a two act-play in which Churchill explores the issues of sex, gender, racism, colonization, politics, and patriarchal oppression. The first act of the play is set in a colonized African country during Victorian era and depicts the life of a white upper-middle class British family in Africa. The second act, however, takes place in England in the twentieth century—almost a century later, though only 25 years pass in the play. The characters in the second act are white middle-class representatives of modern society and they deal with problems of their era such as trying to be individuals and get accepted in the society without prejudices.

Like Brechtian plays, Churchill uses various alienation effects to keep the audience awake and let them see the things that are not happening as they should. Her aim is to question the constructed roles considered natural for women by way of using epic elements. Apparently, the mainstream discourses are to be blamed for creating these myths because individuals “are objects of these regimes as they are configured and deployed within the system, yet they are also the agents because they internalize mainstream identity politics and impose them on others. In this way, identity politics and heteronormative policies survive thanks to the contribution of individuals, even if unintentional” (Ertin 265). In the play, it is obvious that these myths are taken for granted by the representatives of the mainstream discourses. However, Churchill employs the alienation effect with her characters in order to subvert and undermine the widely-accepted values: “If the part is played by somebody of the opposite sex, the sex of the character will be more clearly brought out; if it is played by comedian, whether comically or tragically, it will gain fresh aspects” (Willet 197). The characters are not like the ones we see in dramatic theater. At the beginning of the play, there is the cast list and the characters are briefly described there. On the list, it is seen that Betty, the wife of Clive, is played by a man; Edward, their son, is played by a woman; and Joshua, their slave, is played by a white man. The actors in this act do not match the gender or race. Some of the woman roles are played by men and some man roles are played by women. Furthermore, a character may not be played by the same actor throughout the play. For instance, Betty, Edward and Victoria are played by two different actors. The actor who plays Clive in the first act plays Cathy in the second act. On the first page where the characters and their roles are described Victoria, the daughter of Clive, is played as a dummy, but in Act II she is an intellectual woman who can stand on her own feet economically. All these striking elements are employed by Churchill to question the gender assumptions and to reveal that they are indeed nothing but constructions.

Another method the playwright employs to create alienation effect is the use of chronological disruption. Chronological disruption distances the story, defamiliarizes the audience, and empowers them, and as a result forces them to think. It also forces the audience to make critical interpretations rather than sit in an accepted linearity of narration. The time lapse between the two acts is a hundred years since the first act takes place in Victorian era and the second act takes place in the 1970s in England, but the characters get only twenty-five years older. It creates artificiality in the play to wake the audiences. In addition, there is an unrealistic temporal flow between the scenes. Each scene is independent and seasons even change with the scenes; the play starts in winter and it ends in late summer, but the events happening in the scene do not follow one another.

Besides chronological disruption, songs are also used as an alienation effect in Brechtian Theater. (Willet 203) The intention of the songs is to describe or recite what is going on. The songs also satirize the situations. Churchill’s play opens with a song called “Sons of England”. The song tells the audiences about two subjects; gender roles and colonization. It is a satirical aspect of the play. The characters are singing loyalty to England in a country which is colonized. Joshua, the black servant, ironically sings British Christmas song “Deep in the winter” as a Christmas song. It is a song of a world that he does not have any idea about. It is also a meaningless song for Joshua because it is about winter, something that he cannot visualize or comprehend as an African (Churchill 272). Edward sings a song “A boy’s best friend” as if he were a dutiful boy and has a good relationship with his mother. The last song is the cloud nine and it is the most meaningful song in the play (Churchill 312).

Brecht developed an acting technique of Gestus in Epic Theatre “For the theatre practitioner, showing Gestus involved crafting gestures, compartments and groupings so that they vividly illuminated the way human behavior and social relations are both shaped by economic and historical forces and open to change” (Mumford 172). Since it is an acting technique it can be better understood while the audience is watching. Nevertheless, a reader can still find the element of Gestus in Churchill’s play *Cloud Nine*. For example, the attitude of embracing can be seen as ‘Gestus’ because the characters embrace each other many times. All the characters embrace each other except Clive. Churchill aims to show that they may have different genders, races, beliefs or choices in their life, but it does not comprise an obstacle to live in peace. “They embrace. The other have all gathered together. Maud rejoined the party, and Joshua” (Churchill 271). The most important act is the embracement of the old and new Betty. They unite and each one accepts the ‘other’. The plays ends, “Clive goes. Betty from Act One comes. Betty and Betty embrace” (Churchill 320).

Churchill utilizes the ‘breaking fourth wall’ convention in order to address the audience directly and also remind that they are watching a made-up story. The fourth wall convention in drama, an imaginary wall between the stage and auditorium, is made of a performance in which the actor behaves as if he were a real person and as if the audience were not present to create a realistic effect (Mumford 78). For instance, In *Cloud Nine* the players introduce themselves to the audience so the audience and the players interact as if they are not on the stage:

CLIVE. This is my family. Through far home
We serve the Queen wherever we may roam
I am a father to the natives here,
And father to my family so dear.
BETTY. I live for Clive. The whole aim of my life
Is to be what he looks for in a wife. (Churchill 251)

The use of history in epic theatre functions as a means of distancing dramatic events in order to analyze the situation objectively. Also with historicization the audience is forced to compare the Victorian era to contemporary life because historicization or “H-effect designed to provoke an inquiring attitude towards the present through the past and change dominant versions of history” (Mumford 173). With historicization the writer brings criticism of past colonial and gender roles. The audience sees how people of the country felt about civilization project. When England was civilizing the others, they called the others ‘the beast’, killed many innocent people, and they burned many villages just to satisfy themselves and felt relief as if they were civilizing the countries. They civilized the others without acting as civilized. Churchill is disturbed by idea and criticizes it with an epic element. The whites beat the members of the tribe to discipline them by a slave Joshua:

MRS SANDERS. Who actually does the flogging?
MRS SANDERS. I imagine Joshua.
EDWARD. I did not want to see any more. They got what they deserved. Uncle Harry said I could come.
MRS SANDERS. I never allowed the servants to be beaten in my own house... (273)

Joshua seemed to be civilized and loyal and accepted himself as a white man. He is civilized in the gaze of the white man but is he really civilized? Churchill questions the

internalized patriarchal oppression over 'the others' by using the character Joshua who is a servant in a white man's house. Joshua considers himself white and does not even care about the death of his own family since they are enemy of the white men. Indeed, the people of his tribe are innocent people looking for independence in their own country. Briefly civilization means taking part in white men side and protecting his profits.

Historicization in epic theatre has got some aims. It is either done to question an event at present through past or to tell the audience that a social issue is changing. (Mumford 72) In this play Churchill also highlights that gender roles and self-conscience are changing in the society. The use of cross gender and cross race casting does not only alienate the audience but also brings the problem of gender roles and racism into limelight. The women in Victorian era were traditional and their world consisted of their husband. They had to behave as their husband liked. Similarly, Betty says, "Clive is my society" (Churchill 258). Maud the mother of Betty is as traditional woman as the others in her era gives advices to Betty and states, "Betty you have to learn be patient. I am patient. My mama was very patient" (258). Maud reminds her women's position and man's responsibilities and women should not dare to change it:

BETTY. Tell me what you know. Clive tells me nothing.

MAUD. You would not want to be told about it. Betty. It is enough for you that Clive knows what is happening. Clive will know what to do. Your father always knew what to do. (274)

Harry also reminds Betty the roles of women that are expected in the society. Harry says, "You're a mother. And a daughter. And a wife" (268). Thus, Betty is limited in her borders. For this reason, Betty has a cross gender role; she is played by a man. Betty's inability to have a female body represents her lack of recognition as a woman in the patriarchal hegemonic world. Although Maud reminds her that she is lucky to have Clive as a husband she is not happy and looks for love. She is also bored because of her life in Africa, but there is no way to go away in a patriarchal society since she will be criticized if she prefers to leave her husband in Africa. As a result, she looks for little excitement in her life like having visitors in their house:

CLIVE. But you like him well enough. You don't mind him coming?

BETTY. Anyone at all to break the monotony. (253)

A woman's success can only be evaluated by a good husband. This idea is emphasized with Maud who says, "You are looking very pretty tonight. You were such a success as a young girl. You have made a most fortunate marriage" (258). Indeed, Betty does not share the same idea with Maud, she feels unhappy and bored so she is looking for a little bit of excitement with the love of Harry. Betty admits her love to Harry and states, "When I'm near you it's like going out into the jungle. It's like going up the river on a raft. It's like going out in the dark" (Churchill 261). Although Harry also feels more than a friendship toward her, he wants her to stay as Clive's wife since her role are designed and cannot be changed. There is even an inequality between men's and women's perception of faithfulness in the concept of marriage. When Joshua tells Betty's feelings about Harry to Clive Betty's husband, he gets angry. On the other hand, he cheats on his wife by sleeping with Mrs. Saunders but he continues his life as if nothing happened. In the eyes of man, women are the weaker sex.

Clive says, “Absolutely, I know the friendship between us. Harry, is not something that could be spoiled by the weaker sex” (282). For Clive, women are irrational, inconsistent, treacherous, lustful, and they smell different from them (282). The women have lower status even than the slaves. Churchill aims to stress that a woman is worthless in the patriarchal world, when and where the women live is not the matter. Betty commands Joshua but he does not fulfill her orders and responds to her rudely and as a result she complains about him to Clive. However, Clive does not take it seriously and claims, “There now. It won’t happen again, my dear. I’m very shocked Joshua, very shocked” (Clive winks at Joshua unseen by Betty Joshua goes) (255). A boy or male servant has a higher status than woman. The position or age is not important the sex is important in patriarchal society. For the second time Joshua denies her command and Betty gets Edward’s help to make Joshua to respond her command. Joshua listens to a boy’s command but not a woman’s:

BETTY. Fetch me some blue thread from my sewing box. You got legs under that skirt.

JOSHUA. You’ve got your legs under that skirt.

EDWARD. You fetch her sewing at once, do you hear me? You move when I speak to you, boy (278).

If you look at non-cross-dress actors they are all passive because they are passive in the eyes of men. Victoria is called a dummy and she never talks, Maud is an old lady and Ellen is a weak one because she is under the command of Clive as a governess. So, they are all deficient characters. On the other hand, Mrs. Saunders is different from the others; she is trying to stay on her feet as a widow in the world of men. She is living alone and she refuses to marry Harry. Clive accepts that she is different from other women and for him she should be trained. Clive says, “My God, what women put us through. Cruel, cruel. I think you are the sort of woman who would enjoy whipping somebody. I’ve met one before” (262). In another event Mrs. Saunders is criticized because she is independent like a man and this behavior is not appreciated for women:

MRS. SAUNDERS. I never allowed the servants to be beaten in my own house. I’m going to find out what’s happening.

BETTY. Will she go and look?

MAUD. Let Mrs. Saunders be a warning to you, Betty. She is alone in the world. You are not thanks God... (274)

Edward the son of Betty and Clive is played by a woman but still he is expected to be a real man. On the other hand, Victoria is expected to play with a doll but she does not want to. Desires or interests are not cared for in the society; instead, everybody is obliged to act according to their roles given by the patriarchal society:

BETTY. Edward, I’ve told you before, dolls are for girls

BETTY. You must never let the boys at school know you liked dolls. Never, never. No

 one will talk to you, you won’t be on the cricket team, and you won’t grow
up
 to be a man like your papa

EDWARD. She is not Victoria' doll, she is my doll. She doesn't love Victoria and
Victoria does not love her. Victoria never plays with her.

MAUD. Victoria will learn to play with her. (274)

The women in Victorian era are fragile in the eyes of men. People act like they are incapable of things. Clive is talking to his wife as if she is fragile. Clive says "That's a brave girl. So today has been all right? No fainting, No hysteria" (255). Joshua as a black slave can have a higher status than a woman, but still he is under the command of a white man. Joshua had to be trained because he was the beast in the eyes of white man. He thinks like a white man does and feels like a white man does, too:

JASHUA. I hate my tribe. My master is my light.
I only live for him. As you can see,
What a white man want is what I want to be (251).

Churchill takes the play from past to present to show the transition to contemporary life. Indeed, the play is written in 1979 so it is just the beginning of changes especially in roles of women for instance; women started to work. With the feature of epic theater, she can easily bring this issue to the foreground. Joshua does not take in part in Act II because there is no slavery anymore. Also, Clive has no role in Act II. because it is the end of patriarchy. The biggest sign of transition is seen with Betty. Betty is played by a woman emphasizing the transition of the traditional old world to modern world which recognizes the woman. She has a status as a woman and tries to be an individual in the society. She is divorced and earns money and lives alone. She starts to like sexuality and being sexual. She accepts her lesbian and gay children and she is even ready to live with them. She is a woman in the contemporary world who does not deny her past or her old roles. At the end of the play the old Betty comes and they embrace each other and they unite.

Victoria does not only talk but also reads and discusses intellectually. She has to make a decision. She will either continue to her career in another city and get divorced or stay with her husband and be unhappy. Betty in Victorian era was searching for her role but Victoria in Act II is unlike her mother and she is independent and an educated woman but this time she is looking for her sexual identity. She cannot decide to live with Cathy or continue her life as a single mother. Indeed, she needs nobody and she wants to go by her own and continue her career without Cathy or Martin. Cathy in Act II is also very different from Maud and Betty. Cathy is a single lesbian working mother. She is a powerful woman who knows what she wants.

There is a transformation of self-awareness and self-expression without the fear of society. In Act I, Ellen is a lesbian and she tries to tell this to Betty but Betty does not accept this idea and tries to direct her to heterosexual marriage and tells her:

BETTY. If you go back to England you might get married, Ellen. You're a quite pretty, you shouldn't despair of getting a husband.

ELLEN. I don't want a husband. I want you.

BETTY. Ellen don't be silly. Come, don't cry. You don't feel what you think you do. It's the loneliness here and the climate is very confusing. Come and have breakfast, Ellen dear, and I'll forget all about it (281).

Also in Act I, Harry thinks that they both have negative feelings towards women and indirectly states that he is a gay. Clive as a man representing the Victorian values overreacts and sees it as a sin and forces him to marry. The other way is unthinkable for him. Even Harry cannot support himself bravely because of the society and explains his situation as a disease rather than a choice and begs for help:

HARRY. It is not a sin, it is a sin, it is a disease.

CLIVE. A disease more dangerous than diphtheria. Effeminacy is contagious. How I have been deceived...

HARRY. Clive, help me, what am I to do?

CLIVE. I cannot keep a secret like this. Rivers will be named after you, it is unthinkable.

You must save yourself from depravity. You must get married (283).

Act I, ends with the marriage of lesbian Ellen and gay Harry because the other way is not accepted. On the other hand, Act II displays self-determination in society. Ellen explicitly tells that she is lesbian (291). Edward lives with Gerry and most importantly Betty knows that both of children are not heterosexual and recognizes their identities:

GERRY. I'm very involved with him

BETTY. I think Edward did try to tell me once but I didn't listen. So what I am being told now is that Edward is 'gay' is that right?

BETTY. Well people always it's the mother's fault but I don't intend to start blaming myself. He seems perfectly happy (320).

Churchill finishes *Cloud Nine* with an open-ended scene. The new Betty is juxtaposed with Betty from Act One played by a man. They embrace each other and unite. This attitude shows that it is the end of gender discrimination. However, this interpretation is left to the audience to interpret.

III. Conclusion

Churchill combines many elements of epic theater to support her strong socialist feminist point of view. Aristotelian drama was not enough to call attraction of people to social problems. She rejected the traditional dramatic narrative in Aristotelian structure since it does not serve for her purpose. In the light of epic theatre, she achieves to take attraction of people to gender and racial problems. Churchill encourages the audience to question traditional gender roles and identities imposed on people especially on women in patriarchal society. Of all the plays that Churchill has written *Cloud Nine* perfectly faces and handles the problems of her era. "It captured the tumultuous project of sexual experiment in its experiments in its utopian aspect while equally capturing the confusion of pain of rapid social change" (Reinelt 28).

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