Annual Methodological Archive Research Review
http://amresearchreview.com/index.php/Journal/about
Volume 3, Issue 9 (2025)

Online ISSN 3007-3197
Print ISSN 3007-3189

http://amresearchreview.com/index.php/Journal/about

A Room of their Own: Subverting Patriarchy in Caryl Churchill's Cloud Nine and Aphra Behn's *the Rover*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Aphra Behn's *The Rover* (1667) and Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* (1978) as feminist subversions of entrenched patriarchal structures across two different centuries. Through close textual analysis, it explores how both playwrights depict the commodification, subjugation, and objectification of women within social and cultural institutions. Behn highlights women's struggles for autonomy against arranged marriages and sexual exploitation, while Churchill critiques internalized patriarchy, colonialism, and restrictive gender roles, offering alternative models of sexuality and family structures. Despite their temporal distance, both plays foreground women's resistance to oppressive gender norms and underscore the continuing relevance of feminist interventions in literature.

Keywords: Aphra Behn, Caryl Churchill, Patriarchy, Feminism, Gender Subjugation

Introduction

Women have had a long history of grappling patriarchy throughout the history. Male dominance has held sway for most of the time. It has been a constant struggle and at times playwrights produced works that run counter to the reigning male centered narratives in literature (Hughes & Todd, 2006). Woman dramatists have fought against rampant patriarchy through their works.

Aphra Behn was one of the earliest feminists holding her own in a man's world. Her works deal with issues central to woman. She dealt with themes of marriage and independence of women with a zealous commitment the cause of those routinely marginalized (Hughes, 2001) . While British playwright Caryl Churchill has taken up the female cause in a changing socioeconomic milieu of 20th century.

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Aphra Behn wrote her play *The Rover* in 1667, while Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* was written in 1978. Both deal with similar themes of women subjugation and power patriarchal order despite the gap of many centuries in-between (Goodman & Owens, 2013). The paper at hand analyses the plays as powerful subversion of patriarchal control and authority through the depiction of the female figures in the plays.

Seventeenth century's early feminist playwright Aphra Behn's *The Rover* and *Cloud Nine* by Caryl Churchill cope with the similar themes. They embed strong themes of women subjugation, female commodification, sexual objectification along with others (Hughes & Todd, 2006). These issues are still relevant to this day (Amoko, 1999). The two major characters in Aphra Behn's *The Rover* embody the inferior status of women in 17th century England. Helena and Florinda have to submit to the authority of their brother. They engage in a constant struggle to negotiate their future and secure better prospects for themselves. Similarly, in Cloud Nine, Clive's dismissive remark—"All I dreamt wife should be. And everything she is she owes to me"—reveals how internalized patriarchy limits women's subjectivity (Churchill, 1978).

Conceptual Framework

Entrenched patriarchal values limit and control women in such a manner that they appear to be willing participants in their own doom. Both plays navigate gender politics as used as means for control and subtle subjugation. This is laid bare by then contents of the plays at hand. The power dynamics between man and woman, with the latter at the receiving end, as portrayed in *The Rover*, is also evident in Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine*. The secondary status of woman becomes clear from the very onset of the play, where patriarchal prejudice forces woman to an inferior position. The gender politics is so dominant that Clive's wife Betty, appears to have internalized the patriarchal narrative as she assents to her status:

> "I live for Clive. The whole aim of my life is to be what he looks for in a wife. I am man's creation as you can see, and what men want is what I want to be" (Churchill, 1978).

The only means through which the male gender dominance has been upheld, has been so by wresting power and authority from women and making them dependent

Online ISSN 3007-3197
Print ISSN 3007-3189
http://amresearchreview.com/index.php/Journal/about

on their male counterparts for their very survival in the society (Amoko, 1999). The plays show that the men feel entitled to the bodies of women and the consent of the latter is brutally ignored. When Mrs. Saunders, in Churchill's *Cloud Nine* reasons with Clive, that she, although she was open to intimate relations before, does not want it at the moment, saying : "I had to defend myself with a shotgun and I thought you would take no for an answer." (Churchill, 2013, p. 25). Clive ignores her protests and forcibly sleeps with her. This is a clear breach of her private space and indicative of treatment of women at the time.

The male characters in Aphra Behn's *The Rover* are no different in their disdain and contempt for women (Hughes, 2001). They see women as commodities and as means to gratify their sexual urges. As the women, being prostitutes, gratify their physical desires and have to give sexual favors. Much like, Churchill's Betty in *Cloud Nine*, Florinda in Behn's *The Rover* subjected to threats of violence if she dare deny sexual favors. Her oppressors ignore her appeals that she is not a prostitute fall on deaf ears. They blame Florinda herself when she calls it rape.

> "A Rape! Come, come, you lie… What I'll warrant you would have the world believe now that you are not so forward as I." (Act 3, Scene 3)

The second act of *Cloud Nine* is set in 1980s. We see Lin challenging ordained gender roles by adopting the mask of masculinity. It leads her to the extent of donning her daughter and herself with male clothing. Lin realizes before long that her happiness does not lie in her attempt to own the opposite gender. She wonders: "Why shouldn't I have some decent clothes? I'm sick of dressing like a boy, why can't I look sexy?" (Churchill, 2013, p. 45). Her daughter Cathy, too, ditches masculine clothing in favor of female dresses. Line and Cathy emerge as epitomes of female characters coming to terms with their own sexuality. Salvation lies in the characters that erase traditional sexual dichotomies of genders (Bradley, 2006). *Cloud Nine* had its first public performance in 1979 at Dartington College of Arts in London. The play received both popular and critical acclaim (Bradley, 2006).

It portrays female oppression through its female characters. The first act is set in a 19th century British colony, therefore traces a comparison of colonialism with subjugation and oppression of woman. Here, Churchill explores such topics as women's liberation, gay liberation, and the sexual revolution all hot topics in 1970s.

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Cloud Nine mocks the repression in the Victorian family with their rigid gender role and expectations (Hughes & Todd, 2006). The idea of double colonization of women at the hand of colonizers and their men. The colonial mindset in the play emerges as Clive refers to the 'natives' with contempt. He assumes the same role of authority and control towards the natives as he controls his family. He is full of contempt for the locals and hardly hides his colonial prejudice when he 'admires' his black servant Joshua that someone can hardly notice that he is black.

Analysis and Discussion

Churchill depicts a black servant, Joshua, in a colonial setting who prides himself on ditching his own identity in favor of that of his master. He has internalized the foreign values as he says at the onset of the play, "My skin is black but oh my soul is white." (Churchill, 2013, p. 51). Joshua's state foregrounds Betty's internalization of patriarchal values in her submission to Clive. Her altered state is depicted in act 1 of the play. We see the male characters Clive and Harry Bagley having adventurous while the men are confined to their homes. The female characters i.e. Betty, Maud, and Ellen live very monotonous lives lacking in any fun and adventure. Betty spends her time waiting for Clive. He is the center of her universe. Churchill's depicts the society where gender roles are explicitly defined, and the woman have internalized this situation as natural. It is evident in Maud's statement that men and women have their own sphere of duties. Betty never attempts to find her own true self but considers her isolation as a service to her husband and by extension to the empire. The male characters of the play look down upon the women. Clive is deprecating of his wife. Symbolic of his views of all women as whiny given to ostentatious displays of emotions. Clive thrives on the weakness of women. He can see himself above as a picture of strength. The very idea of authority or independence in women fills him with disgust and clear contempt.

The bigotry in gender division pervades other areas of life as well. Men make fun of Ellen and Betty playing catch. They can not see strength in woman. This patriarchal bias has also affected the nine yare old Edward. He does not want them to play as they can not catch. Such is the persuasive influence. And again, Betty finds herself in agreement with that judgement. Edward cannot catch and is mocked by Harry and Clive . Gender bias is further revealed when Clive ridicules notion that

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Print ISSN 3007-3189
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she has hurt Edward's feeling with boys are not supposed to have feelings of their own, manifesting embedded gender stereotypes reared by patriarchal institution.

Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* triumphs at exposing inherent gender bias and succeeds at deconstructing gender stereotypes. Edward is frowned upon for playing with dolls as it undercuts the blueprint for correct attitudes of members of both genders. Churchill is, therefore, able to force the audience into a conscience awareness of misplaced gender norms that place men as the tougher, superior species while relegates women as weak and submissive thriving on her passivity.

This theme of freedom from false control mechanism of patriarchy is further engaged in the second act of the play. The characters redefine themselves by cutting themselves off from 'gender types' that they need to fit into. This is largely made possible due to the progress in society keeping pace of modern change of attitudes.

Betty finds independence in her job and learns to reclaim her body and understands her sexual desires by engaging in autoeroticism, as a form of protest against her husband. She is no longer ashamed and does not repress her natural urges. This theme of acceptance is highlighted in scene three of act two when Victoria joins in with Lin to sing for ancient goddesses. Homosexuality is no more regarded as unnatural in as Edward and Gerry live in the open and profess their sexuality. Even Betty is not upset at the fact that her is a homosexual or that her daughter Lin is in a sexual relationship with her girlfriend Lin.

Act 1 of the play is a satire on the Victorian concept of family that finds difference in sexual orientation abhorrent and represses it. There is an alternative structure of family in the second act of *Cloud Nine*. We see Edward living two women along with their two children although he has come out as gay. Lin is a lesbian, and Victoria does not have any qualms about her bisexuality. This portrait of the family stands in sharp contrast with the ne presented by Clive in the beginning of the paly.

This belief is expressed by Clive after he has praised male friendship to Harry. 'There is something dark about women, that threatens what is best in us," (Churchill, 2013, p. 282) and this is one reason Mrs. Saunders, must be expelled. She does not fit in the world that Clive chooses to believe he lives in. Yarrow maintains that it is sex and sexual orientation that loom large in Cloud Nine, the very title of

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which is a reference to sexual ecstasy, and it is the repressing of the sexual instinct, particularly same-sex attraction, that leads the characters into the lies and cover-ups that feature in Act I.

Aphra Behn's *The Rover* strikes a similar tone as is the case most of her plays. The themes of women as a commodity vying for the attention of men finds center stage. This theme was also tackled by Ms Behn in her play *The Forced Marriage* of 1670. The idea of marriage on set terms where women are deprived of a voice resonates through all her 17 plays. The idea of woman as man's property or chattel.

Dowry had a reason. Back in sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the woman to men ratio was 13 to 10. There had to be competition to court viable suiters. Marriage for love or marriage through choice were a rarity. As things. As Margaret Cavendish observed, 'sons bear the family name, but daughters are to be accounted but as Movable Goods or Furnitures that wear out'. (Anita, 166).

Aphra Behn challenged the commodification of women through her play. Her character provide a vivid portrait of socioeconomic status of women who have to 'maneuver' out of their troubles as women were appraised in terms of their market value. Given that their destinies have already been devised, one is to marry a wealthy count, and the other join a convent, the two sisters, Florinda and Helena have to hide their true identities and disguise themselves as gypsies to subvert the stringent patriarchal order laid out by their father and brother, Don Pedro.

As per Behn (1966) women being left out of the institutions of marriage is captured in the opining scene of *The Rover*:

> Florinda: What an impertinent thing is a young girl bred in a nunnery! How full of
>
> questions! Prithee no more, Hellena; I have told thee more than thou understand'st already.
>
> Hellena: The more's my grief. I would fain know as much as you, which makes me so inquisitive (1.1. 1-3).

Hellena wants to gain access to the means of knowledge where women have long been denied entrance. Aphra Behn's this lament is echoed by a few other writers as well from Margaret Cavendish, Bathsua Makin, Mary Astell, to Judith Drake.

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Aphra Behn's Hellena is desirous of more power, control and knowledge than showered on her lot at the time. She takes a stance and explores her own means out her predicament than giving herself to the convent.

Behn ensures the significance her deliberate choice of words i.e. value, credit, money is not lost on the audience (1966). They are a conscience flag as 'commodity signifiers' that reverberate throughout *The Rover*. The recourse of the women to 'veils' to disguise themselves at the carnival also translates in a traditional hindering of representation from the other side. The side that men rarely see, and women keep to themselves, and wherein in lies their identity, although it be presented as a 'lying look' (Pacheco, 2017, p. 172).

Behn's Willmore is a cavalier in moral and sexual sense while Belville hankers for true love in sync with his upper-class moral code. Blunt has in store total humiliation, which is his fate, as he is tricked by a whore, turned naked, and cast into the sewer.

According to Goodman (2013), in *The Rover* Aphra Behn chose to alter her source material of Killigrew's Thomaso to bring her women and their unique predicaments to the foreground (Behn, 1966. p. 68). Women struggle to navigate through the chains of patriarchal control and attempt to fenagle their way out of the masculine maze. They find themselves already spoken for. The girls' father wants Florinda to marry an old count for his vast estate, and the other daughter Helena is to go to a convent, that is tantamount of robbing her voice. Florinda longs for freedom choses to maintain asserts her individual worth over ordained instructions:

> . . . and how near soever my Father thinks I am to marry that hated Object, I shall let him see, I understand better, what's due to my Beauty, Birth and Fortune, and more to my Soul, than to obey those unjust Commands (1.1.19–22).

Florinda has to tread softly to get her way out of the dilemmas so to proclaim her liberty and avoid offending rampant patriarchy of the time: 'I wou'd not have a man so dear to me as my Brother, follow the ill Customes of our Countrey, and make a slave of his Sister' (1.1.59–61).

Wilmore, the 'rover' of the play, is given to sexual escapades and libertinism. Behn has modeled him on Killigrew's hero Thomaso and is a tongue in cheek of depiction

Online ISSN 3007-3197
Print ISSN 3007-3189
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libertine heroes. A sexual wretch who lacks commitment in love and volatile in affections: 'I am parlously afraid of being in Love' (5.1.393–4).

Men in Behn's play, much like Cline in *Cloud Nine*, use rape as weapon against women when defined their wanton ways. Willmore, along with Blunt both want to take advantage of Florinda ala Clive in Churchill's *Cloud Nine*.

Conclusion

To conclude, both the plays are a strong diatribe against a patriarchal system of monopoly and control. A system that defines itself along the idea that intelligence, strength, control are a lot of men while passivity, submission and docility are set aside for women. The system survives because it promulgates its skewed patriarchal design through constant and long-term constructions of 'acceptable' and 'normal' roles for members of different sexes (Bloom, 1987). Women raise the children and remain as housewives while men are the bread winner and the high achievers of the society. They are no longer the property owned by men. To make broader dents in the male centered patriarchal narratives, the counter discourse needs to be updated and in tune with modern developments. Behn and Churchill have succeeded in redefining the means that women can utilize to subvert those narratives and theses stay relevant even today.

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