



## THEME OF FEMALE SUBJUGATION IN THE PLAYS OF CARYL CHURCHILL WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO VINEGAR TOM

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**Cite This Article:** Punit, "Theme of Female Subjugation in the Plays of Caryl Churchill With Special Reference to Vinegar Tom", International Journal of Scientific Research and

Modern Education, Volume 8, Issue 1, Page Number 42-46, 2023.

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### Abstract:

In the 1980s, Caryl Churchill rose to prominence as one of the most significant British playwrights of the late 20th century. Churchill is most known for his writings that discuss themes of female equality and injustice, according to critic Amelia Howe Kritzer. Themes of introspection and societal satire are hallmarks of her plays. Churchill is concerned about how the weak and the impoverished are suppressing women. Caryl Churchill is a steadfast supporter of women's rights and an iconoclast who has earned a special position among contemporary British playwrights. Churchill defies convention as a twentieth-century artist working in the modern era by rejecting both devout morality and the conventions of literary achievement. Since Caryl Churchill wants to challenge preexisting systems of representation, gender concerns are commonly featured in her works. Her plays explore issues that challenge long-held beliefs about gender and sexuality because they examine the ideals of patriarchal society as well as gender roles and power relations. Churchill stands out when it comes to emphasising the part women play in society. Churchill's plays, which are mostly based on the experiences of women, eloquently recount how women are represented and the realities of living in a patriarchal society. In this paper, the researcher examines the play Vinegar Tom's theme of female subjugation.

In Vinegar Tom, a working-class community of women in a small, seventeenth-century English society becomes the subject of a witch hunt caused by economic imbalances and unlucky circumstances (Kritzer 87). The drama examines the interactions between low-class, poor women living in a small, confined community during the time of witch-hunting and class distinctions in that society. The play's principal theme is the victimisation of these women who have been abused by patriarchal figures. As a result of not adhering to societal standards and practises, these repressed women are socially and economically isolated. These disobediences include having sex without the necessity for a husband, living on their own in poverty and old age, using the right to an abortion, healing other women, and disrespecting their parents. Because of their unusual actions, they are persecuted and accused of being witches.

In Vinegar Tom, the ladies are marginalised members of society who are accused of being witches and whose sins include poverty and unconventionality. The idea that women were witches "existed in the minds of its persecutors," as Churchill claims (Churchill 129). These include an elderly beggar widow, a single mother who defied social norms and did not limit herself to one sexual partner, a mother who miscarries, a midwife, and an unmarried rebellious girl. These women are the weakest members of the community. These women suffer from two forms of oppression because they are silenced by both poverty and patriarchy.

One of the characters, Alice, who may be a witch, responds and separates herself and the other women from witches by posing some questions about a witch who had just been hanged by an unnamed Male with whom she had sex on the side of the road. She wanted to know whether "the spirits flew out" like "black bats" (Churchill) of the woman accused of being a witch. She continues by saying "I've heard plenty tales of witches and I've heard some called witch, there's one in the next village some say and others say not, but she's nothing to see. Did she fly at night on a stick? Did you see her flying?" (Churchill, 136) Alice is attempting to show that because these ladies are viewed as "deviant," they are labelled as "witches." They have questioned societal norms and patriarchal structures. They must be imprisoned and subjected to persecution as a result of their deviant behaviour, just like witches, because society norms appear to have been set in stone and no one should resist them. On a symbolic level, we might see this as a bourgeoisie oppressive deed against the working class. Alias Solomon asserts:

Vinegar Tom concerns the violent expulsion from a repressed society of women who will not conform to acceptable social patterns. Hence, the women who do not fit into the expected female roles are the ones declared as witches. They are condemned to torture and hanging because of their rejection of the society's values through their lower class life style, and their acknowledged sexuality. (Solomon 51).

Alice is regarded as a prostitute by the locals because she defies gender stereotypes and established sexual conventions. She acknowledges that she enjoys having sex despite coming from a lower social stratum. She is a prostitute because of her disregard for morals and her financial struggles. She spends her time with whatever man she finds enjoyable and has an illegitimate child. She enjoys having sex with men in this way, but she has no desire to wed. She does not feel content in a rigid community that is governed by patriarchal

authorities, though. She is thereby trapped by society's traditional and conventional ideals of womanhood, which she criticises nonetheless. She receives criticism from the neighbourhood as a result of her beliefs.

When Alice is imprisoned in the final scene, she makes a last-ditch, fruitless effort to vent her rage by declaring, "I'm not a witch. I wish I was, though. After what they've done, if I could still live, I'd be a witch. Well, if I could talk to the devil right now, I would offer him everything in exchange for power. We have no other option besides the devil. If only I had magic, I could make them experience it". (Churchill 175). Her empowerment and apparent level of control over her life are only shown in this one scene.

Joan Noakes, Alice's elderly and impoverished mother, is another woman who has been charged with witchcraft. "Who wants an old woman?" she enquires. She is portrayed as an outsider in the community because, in the capitalist society she lives in, poor women like her are locked up (Churchill 141). We have repeatedly seen instances of women, divorced or widowed people, or senior citizens who are subjected to oppression due to their financial situation. In essence, these women who belong to the lower socioeconomic strata of society make up the alienable members of the community.

In fact, Joan represents all of our weaknesses. She is an elderly woman who lives on the outside and has nobody to assist her. In the capitalist world she lives in, she is likewise on the verge of poverty. Due to her vulnerability and the financial restrictions she experiences, she lacks access to basic essentials of life including food, housing, and clothing. She then transforms into an old, scurrilous woman who curses Margery and Jack, her middle-class neighbours, who refuse to assist her and instead accuse her of being a witch and inform the witch hunters. Ironically, Joan doesn't appear to be upset or depressed about being labelled a witch and given the death penalty when, at last, she is unable to persuade the witch finders that she is not a witch. She instead accepts the concept since it frees her from her oppression and helplessness in that patriarchal, capitalist world.

Another female character in the play named Susan is a three-time miscarrier who works as an impoverished housewife. She is suspected of being a witch for having an abortion and for her frequent pregnancies. Because Susan questioned how society defines parenting, she has been vilified for violating social and religious norms. The accusations made by Packer are evidence of the community's attempts to make her feel guilty about what she has done. "You went to this good witch, and you destroyed the child in your womb by witchcraft" (Churchill 167).

Churchill is actually attempting to defend women's rights to terminate a foetus because they have a right to protect their own bodies from damage by bringing up the topic of abortion. In fact, this gives Churchill the chance to condemn the patriarchal anti-abortion authorities that disregarded the rights of abortion. Sadly, the oppressive power appears to be succeeding in forcing Susan to confess that "I was a witch and never knew it... I didn't know that I was so wicked" (Churchill 174). Susan gives up to the male-imposed notions of evilness. She accepts the church's charge that she is a witch since she thinks she was a bad mother. Susan is partly to blame for Alice's passing because she told the witch hunters that Alice was a witch. She tells Packer:

"She [Alice] took me to the cunning woman [Ellen] and they made me take a foul portion to destroy the baby in my womb... and she made a puppet... but that was my baby girl, and the next day she was sick... and dies" (Churchill 167).

She accuses Ellen and Alice of practising witchcraft, which ultimately leads to their deaths, and blames them for forcing her to drink Ellen's herbal concoction. She expresses regret for having the abortion and accepts the culpability of both herself and her fellow victims as a result. In this regard, Janelle Reinelt asserts "Churchill shows how women can remain unconscious of their oppression and can victimize themselves and others" (Reinelt qtd. in Fitzsimmons 33).

The strong woman who serves as an advisor and would give others the herbal part to help them out of difficulty is Ellen, a working-class midwife. She is a typical traditional woman who supports herself independently of the financial system. Ellen is charged with being a witch or devil's agent who rescues other women from hopeless circumstances. She is thus also executed by hanging. By preferring presents to payment for her services, she also raises awareness of the socioeconomic issues that are prevalent at the period. She offers to make a love potion for Betty in order to assist her. Being concerned about Betty, she advises her, "do you want a potion to make you love the man?" (Churchill 156).

In light of her personal financial struggles, Ellen counsels Betty to get married and avoid being single. "Just get married, Betty, that's safest," she advises. Why was I left alone? to emulate me? No amount of medical intervention will stop people from calling me a witch. If you wed a wealthy man, your chances of remaining alone are higher (Churchill 169). Susan has made her own decision to terminate her kid, despite her assistance. In general, Ellen doesn't actually cause harm to people's lives like a true witch would. She is, however, helpless and unable to protect herself against patriarchal agents by the play's conclusion.

Betty is an upper- middle class girl and a landowner's daughter who does not accept her parents' wish to get married to a man that her parents have chosen. In scene two, she escapes from the confines of her household to Jack's and Margery's house, the upstart middle class couple, and tells them that "I'm not let go where I like... They lock me up. I said I won't marry him so they lock me up" (Churchill 139-140). Instead of sympathizing with Betty, Jack and Margery coax her into fulfilling her parents' wishes. In Betty's case, her

parents and the doctor who diagnoses her as a hysteric patient are the agents of patriarchy. The doctor claims "Hysteria is woman's weakness....cause behaviour quite contrary to the patient's real feelings... you will soon be well enough to be married" (Churchill 149).

Here, the power of the doctor as the patriarchal agent is clearly revealed. He labels Betty as a hysterical patient and he uses his treatment as a tool to torture her to accept the forced marriage. Hence, we can see that both the family and the doctor are oppressing her. Betty's situation compared to the other women accused of witchcraft in the play is much better as claimed by Kritzer (1991) who asserts:

"Betty's usefulness as the glue in an economic alliance protects her from accusations of witchcraft although the cruel medical treatment and forced marriage present her with inexorably grim prospects" (Kritzer 92).

But, Betty is spared death by these oppressors when she submits to patriarchy out of fear of being accused of witchcraft at the play's conclusion. She accepts her father's decision and flees a potentially terrifying circumstance. In doing so, she says:

I'm frightened to come anymore. They'll say I'm a witch... they say because I screamed that was the devil in me. And when I ran out of the house they say where was I going if not to meet other witches...He [doctor] says I'm his patient so I can't be a witch to Ellen. (Churchill 169)

Males feel superior, which contributes to their dominance of women. Patriarchy and class are two topics that can be brought up while talking about this superiority complex. In this play, there are several male oppressors. One of them is an unnamed man who introduces himself as "I'm the devil. Man in black (Churchill 135). He is the one who had sex with Alice at the roadside at night. Alice does not know him and his name; however, she asks him to marry her while he rejects her cruelly:

Alice: Will you take me with you to London, to Scotland? Nothing happens here.

Man: Take you with me?

Alice: Please I'd be no trouble...

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. (Churchill 137)

Women should get married so that they can engage in sexual activity. If they continue to engage in sexual activity, they will face punishment. Because Alice had sex and does not view these activities as sinful, she is referred to as a "whore" in this situation. "So you think that was no sin we did? (Churchill 135) Hence, she had to pay for her sexual engagement by being hanged by the patriarchal authorities. Bell Hooks in her outstanding book *Feminist theory: from margin to centre* (2000) says:

"Feminist thinkers believed that assertion of the primacy of sexuality would be a liberatory gesture. They urged women to initiate sexual advances, to enjoy sex, to experiment with new relationships, to be sexually free" (Hooks 148).

However, in *Vinegar Tom*, this kind of sexuality is depicted as an exploitation of Alice. Although Alice enjoys sex, it is portrayed as a "sexual assault" (Ollenburger) for her, which is evident when she tells Susan: "I hate my body" (Churchill 146).

Margery, a married, middle-class farmer who owns property and operates a dairy, is the first example of patriarchy and capitalism. Margery, while having more money than some other women in her state, is annoyed by her menial tasks, especially after her husband Jack calls her "a lazy lady," saying "You know that? Already difficult times. The small black calf does not appear healthy (Churchill 145). Being the family's head and her superior, Margery is financially dependent on her husband. As a result, her spouse frequently abuses her. Danelle Rowe in *Power and oppression* comments:

Margery is a capitalist oppressor. She is the one who humiliates working class women plays a very important role in convincing Jack that Joan is a witch who has cursed them and their cattle. Margery belongs to the dominant class, while Joan, the working-class woman, who has neither land nor the basic necessities of life, is the subordinate class. Joan is then indicted as a witch by Margery who impeached her of using witchcraft rather than granting the poor old woman's request for food and other essential supplies (Rowe 2003).

Margery, on the other hand, acts like a patriarchal and capitalist agent, fails to fulfil her obligation to support other women, and kicks Joan out of her home. With her rudeness towards her monetarily superior neighbour, Joan subverts social and economic inequalities. Margery is essentially an oppressive capitalist middle class person who treats Joan badly and accuses her of being a witch. In the course of the play, Jack and Margery misplace their livestock. As a result, the couple looks for someone to blame. Margery speculates that a witch is to blame. She tells her husband "If we're bewitched, Jack, that explains all" (Churchill 152). Then, after accusing Joan of being a witch, they hand her over to the witch hunters. Here, Margery plays the part of a bourgeois who uses economic difficulties to detonate Joan in her role as a proletarian.

At the time of Joan's execution in scene nineteen, Margery thanks God, content with the sentence. Margery stupidly thanks God for helping her defeat the witches while attributing to Him the terrible deed of killing the inferior, lower class women. Her prayer incorporates both Christian and capitalist ideas. She also mentions how Betty was saved from a witchcraft accusation. Betty was in danger of being accused of being a witch, but she escapes this charge by agreeing to her father's proposed planned marriage. Even though Betty is under patriarchal oppression, her middle class status puts her in a better and safer position than those from lower social classes.

Along with Packer, a male witch hunter, Goody, a female assistant, and a member of the Church hierarchy, they torture the witches and take part in and profit from the patriarchal economic structure of the society. She portrays an oppressor who targets Alice, Joan, Ellen, and Susan, all of whom are thought to be witches. She hangs women after condemning them as witches. In this sense, Goody, who mistreats other women, is a symbol of both her sex and gender. She accuses Joan of being a witch despite the fact that she has not detected any Devil marks in her after examining her. She also affirms Alice's status as a witch and compels her to confess to witchcraft by saying "you'd better confess, my dear, for he'll have you watched night and day and there's nothing makes a body as wretched as not sleeping (Churchill 171).

She claims that Alice is a witch even though she is aware of this fact and does so to serve her own interests. From a different angle, Goody's zeal for finding the witches might be compared to capitalism. She pursues witches in an effort to increase her income. She makes more money the more witches she discovers. This notion effectively situates her within capitalism. In this sense, the play's working-class and middle-class women are portrayed as being victims of both capitalism and patriarchy.

In addition to Margery and Goody, the drama also has Kramer and Sprenger as two additional characters that uphold patriarchal standards and mistreat women. They are portrayed as two female theologians who conduct research on women and are the authors of *Malleus Maleficarum*, a book about witch trials. They espouse misogynistic views in their book and demonstrate their animosity against women by opposing witchcraft. The aforementioned calls Churchill's attempt to appeal to extreme religious beliefs by designating theologians as oppressors. In this sense, they also give a prayer of thanks to God, "blessed be the Most High, which has so far preserved the male sex from so great a crime" (Churchill 178). This is also supported by Geraldine Cousin who infers:

"According to the authors of the book, there are more female than male witches because women are more credulous, impressionable and dishonest than men, and they also have feebler intellects" (Cousin, 37).

### **Conclusion:**

Churchill does not explicitly support her female characters, but she persuades the audience to side with the downtrodden women by illustrating their issues. Churchill brilliantly critiques patriarchal-capitalist supremacies in *Vinegar Tom* by addressing problems like gender inequality, the subjection of lower class women, poverty, sexuality, the right to abortion, and women's hysteria. In this play, Churchill also examines how women are perceived and their social obligations in a patriarchal, capitalist society. The play's examination of women's issues and challenges is significant because it draws attention to both the position of women in regard to males and to other women in society. In a nutshell, women who experience economic hardship are more susceptible to exploitation and marginalisation in a patriarchal-capitalist hierarchy. There are certain women who are represented as oppressors who call other women 'witches' despite the fact that the men in the play are strong, discriminate against, and torture both lower class and middle class women. By include women in the cast of witch hunters Churchill effectively draws attention to the fact that oppression and sexism do not only affect men. In other words, patriarchy can be practised by women, and they can oppress other women. In fact, *Vinegar Tom* illustrates how women are in a marginal and vulnerable position as a result of both men's and women's patriarchal responsibilities.

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