

Female Witches and Poverty in Caryl Churchill's Play *Vinegar Tom*

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Abstract—*The aim of this paper to investigate the oppressions by the capitalist society against woman in Vinegar Tom are described as persons who are on the margins of society, accused of heart witches, whose faults are poverty and unconventionality. Indeed, as Churchill asserts, accusing women of being witches “existed in the minds of its persecutors”. These women are the weakest members of the capitalist society and they include an old beggar widow, a single mother who has rejected the moral orders of the society and who has not restricted herself to one sexual partner, a mother who miscarries, a midwife and an unmarried rebellious girl. These women are doubly oppressed as they are silenced not only by patriarchy but also by their poverty. The play explores the relationships of the poor minor categorize women in a short enclosed polite society under patriarchy and class or category differences during witch- hunting. The discrimination of these women who have been littered by patriarchal agents is the crucial concern of the play. These oppressed women are socially and economically marginalized if they do not live according to the conventions and the norms of their society. All of these women are the victims of patriarchy and capitalism and are tormented, offended, and finally are accused to death. They all are not real witches like the witches of the earlier centuries because they all do not do harm people, but they are the ones who get injured just because they do not obey the rules to patriarchal principles and assume the traditional roles of women.*

Keywords: *Women's oppression, Discrimination, poverty, Patriarchy, Capitalism, dissimilarity, inferior, superior, witches.*

The great British woman dramatist of the late twentieth century, Caryl Churchill is known as one of the most creative British female playwrights. She has written many plays for radio, television, and theatre since 1960s. Her plays largely focus on social criticism with radically strong views on feminism and gender issues. Her plays explore the values set by patriarchal society, and examine gender roles and power relationships in the society; and thereby brings forth such issues which tend to deconstruct traditional ideas of sex and gender. In one of the famous plays *Vinegar Tom* (1976) Churchill focuses on women's oppression through capitalist society. *Vinegar Tom* is set in the period of witch persecution and witch trials which can also be symbolically read as patriarchy's and capitalism's attempt to sacrifice women. The

play is set in seventeenth-century rural England, and is organized into twenty-one scenes. The play, as Churchill states, is “a play about witches with no witches in it; a play not about evil, hysteria and possessions by the devil”. She adds that *Vinegar Tom* is a play that explores “poverty, humiliation and prejudice, and how the women accused of witchcraft saw themselves”. During the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries in countries like England and Scotland the kings and the Christian Church would punish the people who were believed to be evil witches and those who vended their souls to the devil by hanging or burning them at stakes.

“In England, about a quarter of all criminal trials from the early sixteenth to the end of the seventeenth century were witch trials, and most who were accused died. Neither witch trials, nor the idea of the witch being evil, existed before this period. In England, witchcraft became punishable by death in 1532. Between 1066 and that date, there had only been six recorded executions of witches, and those were cases of treason. Witch trials died down again in the eighteenth century, with witchcraft no longer a crime in most of Europe by the mid-eighteenth century. The most intense phase was 1580 to 1630 during the decline of feudal relations, the rise of mercantile capitalism and increasing migration and day labouring. The trials were no hangover from medieval times, but part of the project of the rise of capitalism and the ‘Enlightenment’.”¹ (Stardust, 2:2007)

The women in ***Vinegar Tom*** are described as those who are on the margins of society, accused of being witches, whose faults are poverty and unconventionality. Five women in the play are accused of witchcraft: Joan, who is an old poor woman; Alice, who has sex outside of marriage; Susan, who attempts birth control; Betty, who does not want to get married; and Ellen, a “cunning woman” who practices healing. Joan and Ellen are hanged, Alice and Susan probably will be, and Betty is tortured until she agrees to get married. The women then accused of being witches. These women are the weakest parts of the community.

Alice the major character in the play is sexually abused and she is the one who is blamed and persecuted. She is the major subversive character of the play who is opposite to all other stereotypical witches. Alice is a mother who is known as a prostitute among the community members as she rejects accepted sexual norms and the stereotyped role of a woman. She is from the lower social class and admits the fact that she enjoys sex. As Susan tells her

“no one’s going to marry you because they know you here. That’s why you say you don’t want to be married because no one’s going to ask you round here, because they know you”. (Churchill, 147:1985)

Her lack of respect for the morals as well as the financial problems she has, makes her a prostitute. She has an illegitimate child and spends her time with any man she takes pleasure in. In this sense, she likes to have sex with men but she does not desire to get married. Because of all these reasons society does not accept her as a part of it.

French feminists Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous emphasize in their writings how women have been historically limited to being sexual objects for men: virgins, prostitutes, wives or mothers. Irigaray states in *This Sex Which is Not One*: ‘Mother, virgin, prostitute: these are the social roles imposed on women. The characteristics of (so-called) feminine sexuality derive from them: the valorization of reproduction and nursing; faithfulness; modesty, ignorance of and even lack of interest in sexual pleasure; a passive acceptance of men’s ‘activity’; seductiveness, in order to arouse the consumers’ desire while offering herself as its material support without getting pleasure herself...Neither as mother nor as virgin nor as prostitute has woman any right to her own pleasure’ (Irigaray ,1985 [1977]: 186/7).

Packer, the witch-finder, is a patriarchal-capitalist oppressor of women who establishes and organizes the denunciation of women. He captures women suspected of witchery around the country and hangs them. In doing so, he gains double benefits: not only does he earn some money, but he also positions himself as the envoy of patriarchy who subjugates women. When he examines Alice cruelly and could not find any sign of the devil in Alice’s body he tries to make her confess of being a witch. Nevertheless, to his dismay, Alice denies the accusation.

He investigates the four women characters to find traces of the Devil in them. However, in spite of being unsuccessful, he still accuses them of witchery. By taking advantage of peoples’ superstitious beliefs, Packer tends to ascribe himself to God in order to gain people’s trust.

Goody is a female assistant of Packer, plays the role of an oppressor who oppresses Alice, and her mother Joan, Ellen and Susan who are all supposed to be witches. She condemns women as witches and hangs them. Goody who oppresses other women is a representative of both her gender (as she impersonates men in torturing women) and her sex (as she

persecutes her own sex). Although she examines Joan, and when she does not get any fiend marks in her than she points the finger at her to be a witch. She too verified Alice is a witch and forces her to plead guilty of witchery by saying;

“you’d better confess, my dear, for he’ll have you watched night and day and there’s nothing makes a body so wretched as not sleeping . (Churchill,170:1985).

She knows that Alice is not a witch but tells Packer that “She is witch” for her own benefit.

Goody is female oppressor (the male witch finder), and one of the Church authorities, tortures the witches and participates in and benefits from the patriarchal-economic structure of the society. From a different point of view Goody is interested in hunting the witches can be connected by capitalism. She hunts witches in order to gain more money. The more witches she finds, the more money she gains. This idea places acceptance of her, within the system of capitalism. Thus, in this manner, the inferior and middle class women in the play are shown as victims of both patriarchy and capitalism. Goody the oppressor gets benefit from dominant and capitalism observes, tells Packer,

“You’re a considerate man, Mr. Packer. We earn our money”. (Churchill,171: 1985).

It must also be noted that Goody confirms her possible resemblances to the powerless women and she ill-treats. She declares the truth that if she does not do occupation she might be also like the lower-class women. Nevertheless she thinks that she has overcome her subjugated site as a woman by identifying herself with Packer, a man and symbol of patriarchy.

The other woman Susan, Alice’s friend, is a poor housewife, the mother of three children who has had several miscarriages. She constantly gets pregnant and is also accused of being a witch because of the abortion she has had. According to social and religious codes, Susan has been condemned as having gone against nature by challenging the society understands of motherhood. The community tries to make her feel guilty about what she has done as reflected in the claims made by Packer :

“you went to this good witch, and you destroyed the child in your womb by witchcraft” (Churchill ,167:1985)

Susan goes to the ‘cunning woman’, Ellen, who offers a herb that ends her current pregnancy. But Susan feels guilty about taking the potion and joins her neighbors in accusing Ellen of witchcraft. The most serious threats to the ruling social order are those who attempt to live outside it, so Ellen and Joan are hanged as witches while the younger women’s fate remains uncertain and at risk.

The other woman who is accused of being a witch is an older unmarried woman Joan Noakes and is Alice’s poor and old mother who is accused of being a witch. One bourgeois

farmer's wife oppresses Joan While her husband lusts after Joan's daughter, Alice, a sexually active single mother.

Joan is depicted as an outcast in the community because she lives in the capitalist society, women like her who are poor are incarcerated. Time and again, we have been seen cases of various women, divorced, widowed, or the old aged who are conquered and oppressed because of their poverty. When Joan asks Margery for giving lend to her a little yeast reveals the fact that Joan is economically dependent on the middle class people and this is also evident in the following lines:

"A little small crumb of yeast and God will bless you for kindness to your poor old neighbour... lend me a little yeast like a good woman... you'll die without a friend in this parish when if you gave yeast to your good neighbours everyone would bless you..."(Churchill,144:1985)

On the other hand Margery acts like patriarchal and capitalist manager not succeed in her duty to help other women and expels Joan from her house. Margery is a capitalist oppressor. She accuses Joan of being a witch. She is the one who humiliates working class women, plays a very important role in convincing Jack her husband that Joan is a witch who has cursed them and their cattle. Joan is the poor lower-class woman and she has neither property nor the basic requirements of life is the subordinate class. Margery belongs to the dominant class. Joan is then indicted as a witch by Margery who impeached her of using witchcraft.

Jack and Margery lose their domestic animals. Thus, the couple strives to find somebody to put the blame on. Margery suggests this is caused by a witch. Then, they turn Joan over to the witch seekers, reproachful her of being a witch. Margery plays the role of a bourgeois who gets irritated with Joan. Joan as a worker with financial failures. In last scene when the time of Joan's lynching, Margery satisfied with the chastisement thanks God.

Margery negligently accuses the evil action of carnage to the inferior, blue-collar women to God and thanks him for helping her demolishing the witches and her prayer comes together capitalism and Christian concepts both. She also points to Betty's rescue from being accused of witchery.

When packer He examines Joan, pricks her, injures her and makes her suffer as she screams, "Ah, ah, you're hurting, let go, damn you", (Churchill, 166:1985) but he insists that she is a witch. He blames Susan for her abortion and makes her accept that this action is from the devil and his agents, the witches. Punishing Ellen, he declares that "these cunning women are worst of all. Everyone hates witches who do harm but good witches they go for help and come into the devil's power without knowing it. The infection will spread to the whole country if we don't stop it" (Churchill, 167:1985).

Packer's uncanny description of power in the hands of women as "the devil's power" and "infection" expresses insecurity of a misogynist mind as it can subvert the

patriarchal binary opposition empowered men/disempowered women and so this power needs to be contained and curbed.

Another character Betty is a decent girl who doesn't want to marry, and finds herself perceived as ill, tied to a chair and bled into submission: the ancient treatment creates a theatrical image of draining away the girl's energy to resist, as well as showing her 'treatment' to be punishment. 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. She escapes from the confines of her household to Jack's and Margery's house, the unknown middle class category of couple in society. Betty tells that couple 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,139:1985)

Because of being a daughter Betty cannot get marriage with whom she wants. She has to obey her parents. Margery also points to Betty's release from being blamed of witchery. Even though Betty was in the hazard of being accused as a witch, she is freed from this indictment by accepting the arranged marriage by her father.

Ellen is another the working class midwife, the empowered woman who acts as advisor and who would give the herbal potion to others to get them out of trouble. She belongs to the lower socio- economic class is also accused of being a witch and sentenced to death while what she does is far from witchcraft.

"I've done nothing... it's healing, not harm. There's no devil in it". (Churchill, 170: 1985)

She is a typical classic woman "who earns her own living outside of the monetary system and worked outside the sanctioned medical/male establishment".

Ellen is accused of being a witch or devil's agent who helps other women to escape from their miserable situations. As a result, she is also sent to the gallows. Ellen's accusation foregrounds society's attitude: the society does not accept her as a single woman working "outside of the monetary system". Other than that, she also challenges the existing socio-economic problems of her time by asking for gifts rather than money for her services. She also offers to help Betty out by making a love potion for her. Being concerned about Betty, she advises her, "do you want a potion to make you love the man?(Churchill , 156:1985)

In one of the books *Burning Women: The European Witch Hunts, enclosure and the rise of capitalism*, published in 2007 by Lady Stardust. The statement of Lady Stardust is under, matched the character of Ellen (the healer).....

The healers were skilled practitioners benefiting from generations of accumulated anatomical and herbal knowledge. The very fact of attempting to cure, or affect health or the natural world, was viewed as witchcraft if practiced by women, whether it helped people or not. It was irrelevant

whether the person got better, got worse, or was not affected at all by the acts of the woman accused. In 1548 Reginald Scott said 'At this day it is indifferent to say in the English tongue, "she is a witch" or "she is a wise woman". (Stardust, 14:2007)

Reflecting on the economic problems in her life, Ellen advises Betty not to be alone and to get married. She says,

"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". (Churchill, 169:1985)

However, these oppressors save Betty's life when she resigns herself to patriarchy as she is frightened of being accused as a witch at the end of the play. She agrees to her father's decision and escapes from a possible horrifying situation. 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, 169:1985)

Although Betty finds Ellen as her healer and her place as a place for escaping and hiding from her father's "prison", the dreadful social situation makes her believe in the doctor and in the process she is seen to succumb to the powers of patriarchy. Lady Stardust writes.....

"All healing was considered a kind of miracle, and the female healers also used superstitious spells and charms. Over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, magic and miracles became the sole domain of god and the Church, or else of the devil, and thus people's magic was denied or viewed as diabolical. One witch-finding manual stated: '...in the same number we reckon all good Witches, which do no hurt but good, which do not spoil and destroy, but save and deliver...It were a thousand times better for the land if all Witches, but especially the blessing Witch, might suffer death. '(Stardust, 15:1985)

In conclusion both women Goody and Margery are oppressors talk about in above section can be seen as appropriating power from the patriarchal order of society and betraying other women and in doing so are seen to benefit economically. Margery, the first oppressor recognizes and introduces the stereotypical witches and Goody; the second oppressor catches and hangs them.

As money, wage work, new professions and urbanisation grew, the witch-hunts were one of the mechanisms to control and subordinate women whose social and economic independence was a threat to then-emerging social order. Mary Daly claims that the witches were '*women whose physical, intellectual, economic, moral and spiritual independence and activity profoundly threatened the male monopoly in every sphere*'. As women were excluded from

economic and political life, ridicule and violence were used to enforce and justify the new gender relations. Pg 8 Witch-finding became a business - for example, the witch finders taking bribes for not accusing people and the wages of the various executioners, hunters, administrators etc. (Stardust, 22:1985)

The play shows how class and fear divide the women and prevent them from supporting each other and how ruling institutions, such as medicine and the church, legitimated oppression. In this play women are doubly oppressed by their poverty and patriarchal society.

The tactic of demonisation of women, back up with gender violence, has been used across centuries and around the world. It has been used to break up communities or resistance to exploitation, and to foster class divides (gender divides and divides between sections of the class). (Stardust, 24:1985)

The main concerns of the play is the empowerment of the upper class patriarchal agents as well as the repression of women which is everlasting in the societies ruled by patriarchs. Here, Churchill's mission is to make an attempt to dismantle the patriarchal ideas which has made women's repression commonplace. In addition, the play reveals the relationships between economic situation and gender oppression. The power and injustice practiced by both patriarchy and capitalism are seen in relation to four working-class and one middleclass women in the play. Women's oppression is represented via the acts of torture and hanging. Some of them (Joan and Ellen) are economically lower while some others (Alice and Susan) are sexually repressed. Margery, the first oppressor recognizes and introduces the stereotypical witches and Goody; the second oppressor catches and hangs them. It is noticeable that earlier witches from the previous centuries would do harm and trouble to people's lives, but the witches of Churchill's play are the ones who are being harmed by people of their community. In conclusion, Churchill situates the blames of witchcraft by these "witches" in the context of their socio-economic problems.

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