

A Study of Female Identity Crisis in Caryl Churchill's *Vinegar Tom*

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ABSTRACT

The British playwright Caryl Churchill is a well-known figure in the field of gender studies. She has made a mark by exposing gender subjugation, sexual politics, patriarchy, and objectification. *Vinegar Tom* is an interesting modern play that imports the epic theatre technique into a setting dating back to seventeenth-century Europe. The play revolves around the tribulations of the mother-daughter duo Alice and Joan in a small rural village. *Vinegar Tom* (1976) tackles the issues faced by a spinster and a widower in a patriarchal society, the fragile nature of the male ego, the recurring themes of witchcraft, and the holistic act of female subjugation throughout the discourse of history. The play reveals the social unease with female autonomy by highlighting how single and independent women are frequently labelled or accused of witchcraft. It challenges the brittleness of the masculine ego through its story, which often manifests as animosity and oppression toward women who don't fit the definition of traditional gender roles. The recurrent ideas of witchcraft are also woven throughout the play, although not as a supernatural component, but rather as a historical instrument of punishment and control over women. This paper seeks to discuss the psychology of patriarchal society, protest against the malignant victimisation of female characters, and thus analyse the identity of various female characters as presented in the play, *Vinegar Tom*, with the aid of intersectional feminism.

KEYWORDS: Intersectional Feminism, Weaker Sex, Identity, Subjugation, Crisis.

1. INTRODUCTION

The general tendency of a human being is to find a voice, to echo their thoughts and feelings, and, more importantly, a way to establish their identity. Women are depicted as a fairer sex, or rather the weaker sex, as pointed out by the creator of human language (language created by socio-cultural ethos, which has always tried to rob them of this particular voice, leading to a race of subjugated individuals across generations. This patriarchal attitude might be a product of male ego, but it is also practised by females across the globe. Global Literature has tried to illustrate such subjugated voices since the first days through the publication of a seminal

work by Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792), to Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970) and finally the *Vaginal Monologues* (1996) written by Eve Ensler in recent times. Caryl Churchill is one such voice in British Literature who has tried to pen the gender discrimination of women in a few of her plays, like *Cloud Nine* (1979) and *Top Girls* (1982). The paper aims to fill the research gap with the application of Intersectional Feminism and Marxist Feminism by closely analyzing the intricate power of gender oppression across the various social and economic factors that are often linked with the patriarchal as well as capitalistic powerplay with the aid of qualitative study of the primary texts and critical books in the area of the critical framework.

2. LITERARY REVIEW

2.1. Caryl Churchill, the Modern Feminist

The British playwright, Caryl Churchill, was born on September 13, 1938, in London, England, whose work frequently dealt with feminist issues, the exploitation of power, and sexual abuse. Churchill's plays are

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internationally studied and performed, acclaimed by theatre scholars. One of the most significant British dramatists of the late twentieth century, Churchill's works dealt frequently with gender and sexuality. Caryl Churchill's success is attested to by her selection as writer-in-residence at the Royal Court Theatre (1974), her receipt of several important awards, as well as the widespread performance and publication of her pieces. She is a theatre icon for feminism beyond all else.

The more "mainstream" acceptance of her "alternative" theatre can be attributed in part to her skilful exploration of "power and oppression" issues, which inspired her audiences to embrace the corrupting forces of a materialistic, patriarchal society. She offers perceptive social commentary on topics including racism, colonialism, gender roles, and the detrimental impacts of materialism and greed.

2.2 *Vinegar Tom* through Feminist Looking Glass

Vinegar Tom (1976) is a modern play about the harsh abuse of female identity in seventeenth-century England. Several voices are featured in the 1976 drama *Vinegar Tom*, including those of an elderly beggar widow named Joan, a single mother named Alice, a mother named Susan who lost a child, and a disobedient kid named Betty. These women are oppressed by patriarchy and their financial hardships. The dramatist, Caryl Churchill, depicts a variety of women, including married, widowed, divorced, and unmarried. Society as a whole is against them. These women all face economic challenges and social misogyny, which oppress them. Through the prism of the English witchcraft trials of the 17th century, the piece explores gender and power dynamics. The three women who have been harmed are Betty, Alice, and Joan. Margery is repeatedly asked for a cake of yeast by Joan, an elderly widow who is poor and often drunk.

When Margery refuses, Joan curses her. Later, when Margery's head hurts, her cows die, and her husband Jack refuses to make love to her, she blames Joan's curse. She persuades Jack that Joan is a witch and that the only way to resolve their issues is to get rid of her.

Jack likes how easy the solution is to implement. It doesn't take long for Alice, Joan's lovely daughter, who won't sleep with him, to be thought of as a witch as well. Despite having a suitor, Betty is not interested in getting married. After receiving a medical diagnosis, she is transported to a doctor to be bled till she recovers. She is once cautioned that, "It's not safe to grow up strange."

Churchill establishes the economic hardship and social ostracization of these women in the first scene through the interaction between Alice and the unknown man named as Man who wants to identify himself as the devil. "ALICE: If you're saying it as a man, I'll go with you. There's no one round here knows me going to marry me. There's no way I'll get money. I've a child, mind, I'll

not leave the child." (Caryl Churchill, 1976, Scene I, 135)

Tom Vinegar portrays a male-dominated society where women like Alice and Susan are constantly fighting against the patriarchal notions in the small hamlet in England. Kate Millet, the renowned Feminist critic, in her seminal feminist work *Sexual Politics* (1969) denounces Sigmund Freud's ideas on sexuality as one of the key sources of patriarchal attitudes in society. Churchill draws a contrasting picture of women in London and the village where the play is set in; she showcases the huge difference in sexual freedom between an urban woman and a village belle like Alice. The conversation also highlights Alice's eagerness to escape from the patriarchal system established in her village. The following words by the Man in scene one support it;

"MAN: There's some in London say there's no sin. Each man has his own religion nearly, or none at all, and there's women speak out too. They smoke and curse in the tavern and they say flesh is no sin for they are God themselves and can't sin. The men and women lie together and say that's bliss and that's heaven and that's no sin. I believe it for there's such changes.

ALICE: I'd like to go to London and hear them. " (Caryl Churchill, 1976, Scene I, 136)

2.3 Witches, Witches Burning Bright: Damn Their Identities

Churchill's play centres on the incidents of burning witches in England in the seventeenth century. In the introduction of this play, she had written that the women who were accused of witchcraft were the ones who were unusual in their approach towards life, open about their sexuality, socially excluded, economically oppressed and who were threat to the rise of modern medical profession practiced by men. i.e., women practicing medicinal cure through traditional herbal methods. She also highlights the social barring of women practiced in Christian lessons, which was closely linked to the extreme fascist attitudes towards witches (or the women in question) during medieval times in England.

"I discovered for the first time the extent of Christian teaching against women and saw the connections between medieval attitudes to witches and continuing attitudes to women in general. The women accused of witchcraft were often those on the edges of society, old, poor, single, sexually unconventional; the old herbal medical tradition of the cunning woman was suppressed by the rising professionalism of the male doctor. "

(Caryl Churchill, Introduction to "Tom Vinegar" 1976).

The paper aims to answer the research gap by applying intersectional feminism¹ to deal with unique experiences of oppression and privilege through the framework of various social factors like race, gender, sexuality, and disability portrayed in the discussed play. It recognises that not all women are equally impacted by sexism and that feminism needs to combat several types of discrimination at once.

It is interesting to note that the subjugation of women was not only limited to society and culture but to the economy as well, where she posed a threat to the rise of modern male doctors. Thus, it was directly related to the power in the society. Marxist analysis holds that worker exploitation in capitalist society leads to oppression. The subjugation of women is similar to this. Eisenstein mentions that the basis for the reduction of oppression to exploitation in Marxist analysis is the equating of the social power structure with the economic class system. With the help of Marxist Feminism², we can perceive the play for a robust understanding. *Caliban and the Witch* by Silvia Federici makes the case that the early modern European witch hunts, which aimed to suppress women's reproductive work and eradicate communal forms of life, were an essential component of the shift to capitalism. She connects the emergence of wage labour, privatization, and the contemporary capitalist state to this harsh repression of women.

(The play follows the plight of these women and their subsequent accusations of being witches without the inclusion of supernatural elements. As Churchill herself comments, it is a play on witchcraft devoid of witches, but more about prejudices against women through systematic social humiliation and dehumanization. She had mentioned in the introduction of the play

"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 the women accused of witchcraft saw themselves." (Caryl Churchill, Vinegar Tom)

The real quest for identity begins when characters like Betty, Alice, Ellen, and Joan behave against the conventional norms of society. Alice appeals to Man, with whom she had a sexual confrontation, to take her away, either to London or Scotland. The man tries to classify Alice into the constrained social roles that are given to women rather than viewing her as a unique individual. He methodically deprives her of any identification that might lend her respectability: she is neither a widow,

bearing the sad dignity of a departed spouse, nor a wife, legally connected to a husband's last name, nor a virgin maid, untarnished and considered 'pure' by society. Since there isn't any more appropriate classification for her, he uses the most potent tool of societal rejection calling Alice a 'whore.' In addition to being an insult, this disparaging term deprives her of agency and diminishes her value to that of a fallen woman in the eyes of the public. This instance demonstrates how patriarchal systems aim to describe women only in terms of their association with men, denying them the ability to be themselves outside of these roles. If a woman does not fit the predetermined roles of bride, widow, or virgin, she is excluded, her life negated through shame and condemnation. This makes naming or misnaming a strong tool of control. Alice's battle serves as a symbol for the play's larger struggle, emphasising the oppressive forces that try to control feminine identity and the terrible outcomes that those who dare to rebel must endure. The Man refuses and he tries to label her identity into various social roles reserved for women, neither a wife with husband's surname, nor a widow and lastly not a virgin maid and thus he resorts to social defamation by labeling Alice as a whore;

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."

(Caryl Churchill, Vinegar Tom 1976, Scene I, 137).

The conversation proceeds, the Man uses more explicit words like damned strumpet, succubus and witch for Alice. The social convention dictates that a woman of a certain age act in a convincing manner, to behave as well as follow the rules of serving a man as a wife or lady. Betty declines to get married, and she is locked inside the room as a punishment. "BETTY: They lock me up. I said I won't marry him, so they locked me up. Don't you know that? (Caryl Churchill, Vinegar Tom 1976, Scene II, 140)."

In scene three, a dialogue between the mother-daughter duo, Joan and Alice reveals the domestic violence and economic dependency a woman has to tolerate for a square meal a day. Joan implies the need to get a man for a better life and a full stomach when she is reminded of the cruel beatings she was often subjected to.

¹The term intersectional feminism was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in the year 1989 emphasize how examining race or gender alone is insufficient to completely comprehend the inequality faced by Black women. Rather, they face challenges at the nexus of both.

²The Marxist Feminism denotes that capitalist system, which uses both wage labour and unpaid domestic labour (including childcare and housework) to sustain profit, is closely linked to gender inequity.

It is noteworthy to notice that women need men despite being denied the basic rights by the same men. The conversation reveals the actual scenario:

JOAN: If we'd each got a man, we'd be better off. ALICE: You weren't better off, mum. You've told me often you're glad he's dead. Think how he used to beat you. JOAN: We'd have more to eat, that's one thing.

(Caryl Churchill, *Vinegar Tom* 1976, Scene III, 141).

Apart from social identity, the play also tackles with the notion of religious identity. The Christian faith is commented upon and the playwright mentions the original sin in Christianity. Historically, this theory has been applied to defend the oppression of women by presenting them as essentially defective and responsible for the fallout from Eve's (mother of humanity) sin. Susan, one of the protagonists, maintains that physical suffering is an essential part of faith and is heavily influenced by religious doctrine. She supports the biblical idea that women must suffer through delivery as a result of original sin, which is a punishment from God. She views this pain as both unavoidable and proof of devotion and morality, which favours the notion that women must endure their struggles in quiet to uphold Christian principles.

Alice, on the other hand, addresses the topic from a more practical and logical standpoint because she is pregnant. She talks decently about the health concerns and physical complications of pregnancy rather than accepting her pain as a divine destiny. Her viewpoint challenges the expectation placed on women by religion to accept suffering as their fate. But women like Alice and others who value reason over faith are resented for their rebellion. As the play goes on, society demonizes these women for challenging strict religious conventions and supporting reason, science, and bodily autonomy. They are called bad, charged with contravening God's will and finally called witches. The historical persecution of women who opposed patriarchal and religious authority is reflected in this condemnation, which shows how religious organizations have frequently employed superstition and terror to stifle dissenting opinions. The play emphasizes the perils of strict doctrine and the ways that faith has historically been used as a weapon to oppress and marginalize women through this nuanced inspection of religious identity.

A religiously conditioned character, Susan speaks in favor of physical pain to remain faithful to the gospel of Christianity, where women are cursed to bear the pain of labor, whereas the expectant Alice speaks about the bodily challenges associated with pregnancy. These women who preferred logic over religious notions were termed as evil and labeled as witches in the subsequent scenes.

"SUSAN: They do say the pain is what's sent to a woman for her sins. I complained last time after churching, and he said I must think on Eve who brought the sin into the world that got me pregnant. I must think on how woman tempts man, and how she pays God with her pain having the baby. So, if we try to get round the pain, we're going against God.

ALICE: I hate my body.

SUSAN: You mustn't say that. God sent his son..."

(Caryl Churchill, *Vinegar Tom* 1976, Scene V, 145)

A researcher named S. Ilakkiya comments in the research paper, "Predicament of Women Characters in Caryl Churchill's *Vinegar Tom*" that *Vinegar Tom* is a drama that criticizes patriarchal society, in which women continue to face discrimination everywhere."

The idea of patriarchal labeling of women is not only restricted to men; even women are the propagators of the misogynistic thoughts. Alice who has been a victim of the patriarchal attitude turns to be another one hurling defamatory labels at Susan, who suffered from miscarriage multiple times. It is also repeated by Susan, who assassinates Alice's character with questionable traits unfit for a marriage with a respectable man in the vicinity.

At first glimpse, Alice seems to be a victim of the deeply rooted prejudices of a patriarchal society, having experienced its exploitative restraints and preconceptions. But instead of overcoming these ingrained beliefs, she feeds the same cycle of condemnation and judgments. She targets Susan, who has already had severe mental and physical suffering as a result of her miscarriages, with her resentment and ingrained biases. Alice unfairly throws weary labels at Susan rather than expressing empathy or solidarity, which perpetuates social norms that denounce women for their reproductive complications. Alice is not the end of this cycle of moral policing and guilt. Susan responds by attacking Alice with her character assassination. She portrays Alice as having negative qualities, casting doubt on her ethical character, and suggesting that she is unequipped to marry a decent man in their traditional social setting. Susan reflects on the very condemnation she has experienced, showing how adopted patriarchal ideals force women to turn against one another instead of opposing domineering social systems. The discussion between Alice and Susan highlights the unfortunate fact of how deeply ingrained gender conventions influence morality and worth views, frequently setting women against one another to comply with strict social expectations.

"ALICE: Three babies and what, two, three times miscarried and wonderful, he doesn't beat you.

SUSAN: 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."

(Caryl Churchill, *Vinegar Tom* 1976, Scene V, 147).

Alice, a pregnant lady who has some questionable character (as mentioned by Susan) and seems unfit for marriage, is approached by Jack, the next-door married 'so-called' respectable gentleman, for sexual favours in exchange for monetary gains. The hypocrisy of the male-dominated society is visible in the following quote: "JACK: Alice, I'd be good to you. I'm not a poor man. I could give you things for your boy . . ." (Caryl Churchill, *Vinegar Tom* 1976, scene V, 148).

Intriguingly, American philosopher and gender studies expert Judith Butler discusses how gender and social roles are dynamic cases of performance rather than static phenomena. In her seminal work on gender marginalisation, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), In the context of gender performativity, a radical perspective on gender is offered.

She tests the conventional notions attributed to gender, a product of performance repeated through cultural practice, social conventions, and individual behaviours. She argues that gender is a continuous aspect rather than a fixed notion. While doing so, an illusion of gender stability is created, which cloaks the aspect that gender is a fluid entity. questions the widely held belief that gender is a fixed and innate trait. She contends that gender is a continual and performative feature of human existence rather than a fixed or innate identity. Butler contends that the appearance of gender stability is shaped by social standards and deep-seated habits, giving the impression that gender is an inherent and irreversible reality. It is absolute rather than being a dynamic one. But this ostensible consistency is only a manmade façade that conceals gender's essential flexibility. Butler's works (as mentioned earlier) draw attention to how cultural and societal norms influence how people express their gender by highlighting the performative production of gender via repeated behaviours. This reinforces a two-fold system that does not fully capture the complexity of identity. Her work has greatly affected feminist theory and played a crucial role in dismantling conventional gender standards.

Thus, when the characters in the play, *Vinegar Tom*, resort to sexual freedom (a practice attributed to men in the society), they are labeled as outcasts, ones who don't resort to the social conventions of the weaker sex. Judith Butler, in her work, writes on the traditional gender roles and challenges the whole notion:

There is no reason to assume that gender also ought to remain as two. The presumption of a

binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it. (Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*).

Richard Schechner, in his pivotal book *Performance Theory* (1977), dealing with performance theory, states that: "Performance means: never for the first time. It means: for the second to the nth time. Performance is 'twice-behaved behaviour.'" This quote underlines Schechner's argument that performance is not wholly impulsive or novel, but rather entails reproducing or re-enacting previously learned behaviours. It illustrates his larger theory that performance encompasses daily life, theatre, and rituals. It is stimulating that one of the most influential theories in contemporary drama, Performance theory, also focuses on the evolution of human behaviour on and off the stage. It views social interactions, rituals, and cultural events as performances in which participants assume roles and control their perceptions. Caryl Churchill adapts the performance theory and expresses her act of resistance against the loathing by the patriarchal society of the cultural practice of witchcraft prevalent during the setting of the play

It is the same man, or rather men, who won't leave a single chance to label the women with scornful names. The play sheds light on another incident when Betty is intentionally characterized as the devil, suffering from hysteria. One can wonder about the systematic approach adopted by the privileged sex to label the other sex when she refuses to abide by the whims, fancies, desires, rules, and regulations laid down by men. She is subjected to physical torture by the doctor (a man of science) and anti-women propaganda of cleansing the soul of a woman, or rather a little girl, because she refuses to get hitched with someone. In Scene Six, Caryl Churchill presents a violent scene, where Betty suffers from mental and physical agony on being subjected to an episode of bleeding. She questions the norms; she feels helpless against this inhuman torture forced upon her. The Doctor refers to Hysteria, a signal of Women's weakness and the immediate medical procedure to get rid of the unwanted blood and gas, which are the causative agents of such socially, morally, as well as culturally unacceptable behaviour; not willing to get married. The following words by the Doctor are quoted below to support the statement;

DOCTOR: Hysteria is a woman's weakness. Hysteron, Greek, the womb. Excessive blood causes an imbalance in the humours. The noxious gases that form inwardly every month rise to the brain and cause behaviour quite contrary to the patient's real feelings. After bleeding, you must be purged. Tonight, you shall be blistered. You will soon be well enough to be

married.

(Caryl Churchill, *Vinegar Tom* 1976, Scene VI, 149)

When it comes to Witchcraft, *Vinegar Tom* describes two of its kinds, firstly the bad one, which Joan, Alice, Betty (hysterical to be more specific), and Susan are accused of, and the other kind, known as good witch or partially acceptable Ellen, who is an herbal medical practitioner along with panache for crystal balls, is categorized as a good witch. However, the patriarchal society cannot accept a good witch, thus, a professional witch hunter like Henry Packer reminds that even Ellen should be punished. Ellen is aware of this fatal situation and she convinces herself by saying that she is the healer who helps the sick patients, which is ethical without any kind of harmful notion to it. "I'll explain to them what I do. It's healing, not harm. There's no devil in it" (Caryl Churchill, *Vinegar Tom* 1976, Scene XV, 170).

The mother-daughter duo, Joan and Alice, are accused of practising witchcraft by the next-door neighbour, Margery, and Jack, owing to their misfortunes in their life. They are probing about the cat's name, *Vinegar Tom*. (In a 1640s witch trial, the name "*Vinegar Tom*" was mentioned. It was reported to be the name of a woman's familiar spirit that manifested as a long-legged greyhound. Churchill purposefully uses this name to ground her drama in historical fact.) spoiling everything in their happy life. Joan, an ageing lady with no ends to meet, often seeks help from her neighbour, but she is turned away (in the present scenario) with insulting remarks, and in a fit of rage, she curses Margery and Jack. The situation escalates to risky heights when Joan is falsely condemned and publicly hanged with the aid of a witch hunter, Henry Packer (a symbolic representation of people with hatred towards the power of women). Joan's fatal fate is shared by Ellen, a traditional witch who cures patients from various ailments with the help of herbs. The whole village enjoys the sadistic game of capital punishment; witches being hanged till death.

3. CONCLUSION

It is interesting to note that not only are their soul and body exploited by the capitalistic society, they are even robbed of their human rights and, more importantly, their human identity since the beginning of the play. This paper has tried to use the theoretical framework of intersectional feminism (It seeks to acknowledge overlapping oppressive structures to make feminism more inclusive, just, and conscious of actual inequities.) to decipher how various factors like society, race, gender, power play, and gender politics have played key roles in snatching the identity of women like Joan, Alice, Ellen, Susan, and Betty, leading to a crisis, an identity crisis.

They suffer from acute identity crises owing to their deviant lifestyle, questioning minds, unusual choices, economic autonomy, and sexual liberation in a society dominated by male chauvinism. In the end, two of them are publicly hanged, one is tortured in prison, and another one is brainwashed in believing that she had been a witch, a wicked soul in society. The socio-cultural rules being governed by men made it possible to traumatize and terrorize in physical as well as psychological ways. The patriarchal attitude also succeeded in demeaning and dehumanizing these marginalized women by depriving them of their basic human right to live freely or live in reality. The paper challenges the constraints of mainstream feminist discourse, which has traditionally focused on the experiences of white, middle-class women while ignoring the hardships experienced by women of other (non-white) origins, by recognising these overlapping systems of power. By taking this intersectional feminist approach, the paper emphasises the need for an inclusive feminist framework that takes into consideration the various interrelated kinds of inequality and discrimination that influence women's lives in various social, cultural, and political contexts.

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