

## CARYL CHURCHILL: SEXUAL POLITICS AND *CLOUD NINE*

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Caryl Churchill, born in London in 1939, graduated from Oxford University with a B.A. degree in English in 1960. She wrote many plays for both the stage and radio while she was a student but she did not become actively involved in the feminist movement until she was married and had children. What finally politicised her was finding herself within the enclosures of marriage and motherhood and being isolated from the 'outside' world. It was within this social context that her political identity was formed, yet, when asked to define herself politically, she showed definite reluctance in having to commit herself to any specific ideology:

If pushed to labels, I would be prepared to take on both socialist and feminist, but I always feel very wary. [I still have] a massive sense of my own political uneducatedness — a feeling of having started personally and emotionally and still groping towards finding what that means in political terms.<sup>1</sup>

Churchill is here referring to the slogan 'the personal is political', which was coined by the student movement of the late sixties and was taken up by the feminists and applied to women's lives.

The British feminist movement, which did not actually get off the ground until the mid seventies, drew considerable inspiration from the United States, especially from the feminist theories put forth by Kate Millett in her book, *Sexual Politics*, which hit the British market in 1977 — one year before Caryl Churchill wrote *Cloud Nine*. In order to outline the political and social background in Churchill's play, a summary of Millett's work may be useful.

The term 'sexual politics' was coined by Wilhelm Reich (psychoanalyst and member of the Austrian Communist Party), who maintained that there was a connection between the repressing structures of existing civilization and the sexual repression of the patriarchal family. This idea was taken up by Kate Millet. For her, 'sexual politics' meant a power-relationship whereby one group of persons is controlled by another; for example: whites over blacks, rich over poor, male over

female. The latter, says Millett, constitutes the most fundamental and pervasive structure of power in our society. Our society is, and always has been, patriarchal. Patriarchy's chief institution is the family, which in turn is a microcosm of the state. The overthrow of the patriarchal system, Millett claims, is only possible through a sexual revolution. That is, by lifting existing taboos on homosexuality, lesbianism, bastardy, adolescent sexual intercourse before and outside marriage. No monogamous marriage would survive free sexual activity and, consequent to this, the foundations of the patriarchal family would crumble<sup>2</sup>.

With feminism came the consciousness-raising groups which sprang up all over the United Kingdom. Male domination was being challenged in all fields: in society and politics and also in the arts. On the theatre scene a breakthrough was especially vital. Caryl Churchill was one of the very few women playwrights whose plays were actually performed (only 10%-15% of performed playwrights were women). She wrote *Cloud Nine* for the Joint Stock Theatre Group on a workshop basis, that is, in joint cooperation with the director and actors. In the written introduction to the play she explains that it was to be centred on the subject 'sexual politics' but that it eventually also came to include colonial oppression.

The play is divided into two acts. Act I takes place in 19th century Africa under British rule (the historical inaccuracy is irrelevant). Act II takes place in a London park in 1979. Although a period of more than one hundred years divides the two acts, the characters have only aged by twenty-five years. Churchill explains her reasons for this:

In *Cloud Nine* having the historical first act wasn't so much to have a background scene saying 'this is how 'this is how we came to be as we are'; it was more in order to show the sorts of changes that people even now felt they'd had to make. When we discussed our backgrounds it occurred to us it was as if everyone felt they had been born almost in the Victorian age. Everyone had grown up with quite conventional and old-fashioned expectations about sex and marriage and felt that they themselves had had to make enormous break-aways and leaps to change their lives from that. That was why it was an appropriate image for that to set the people's childhoods in Victorian times.<sup>3</sup>

What makes *Cloud Nine* so original, however, is not the defiance of the unities of time and place but the doubling of certain characters played by men and one of the male characters played by a woman. The daughter in Act I is a dummy, in Act II she becomes a woman. The black servant in Act I is played by a white man because he aspires to 'white' values. The idea came through talks with the theatre group:

They talked about their sexuality, and we did improvisations about stereotypes. One person would have a stereotype they would lay on another, and the first person would find themselves becoming like that —

how people would expect them to be. A wife expects her husband to be dominating and he expects her to be hysterical. We made those things happen<sup>4</sup>.

The search for one's identity and coming to terms with what one actually is, both find a climax at the end of Act II when Betty, who is played by a man in Act I, comes on to the stage and embraces her counterpart, Betty, played by a woman in Act II.

It is evident that through the doubling of characters and having men playing women's roles, the final effects will result in comedy. Indeed, Act I was intended to be funny. One can afford to laugh at the moral prejudices that ruled society during the Victorian era. They lie in the past! It becomes difficult, however, to laugh at the 'present' in Act II when one realizes that the Victorian values are still inbred in us all and are difficult to shake off. Betty, played by a man in Act I may provoke laughter but four-year-old Cathy, played by a grown-up man in Act II becomes decidedly grotesque. There is a psychological 'distance' between actors and audience in the first half of the play (the audience observes but does not feel involved in the events) which turns into serious subjectivity in the second half: one is being asked to look into oneself and question deep-rooted beliefs about gender roles and draw political conclusions from them.

The style of the language in Act I is consistent with the Victorian age. The dialogue is sharp and witty but it is always controlled by what Victorian society felt was proper language for a woman and by what society deemed was permissible language for a man. Thus, none of the women in Act I resort to vulgar expressions and none of the men would consider using improper language in the presence of the women. Act II, on the other hand, abounds in vulgar terminology and 'taboo' language which sound especially shocking when voiced by four-year-old Cathy (played by a man). Nothing is sacred. Consider the following examples: the first is sung by Edward and is called 'A Boy's Best Friend'.

[...]  
 Then cherish her with care  
 And smooth her silv'ry hair,  
 When gone you will never get another.  
 And wherever we may turn  
 This lesson we shall learn,  
 A boy's best friend is his Mother.<sup>5</sup>

Sung by Edward in reverence to his mother! Cathy's version in Act II offers a crass contrast:

Yum yum bubblegum.  
 Stick it up your mother's bum  
 When it's brown  
 Pull it down  
 Yum yum bubblegum.<sup>6</sup>

There is a great deal of wordplay and racy language in Act I, especially between Betty and Harry and later between Clive and Mrs Saunders. This is reminiscent of love scenes in Victorian comedies where the lovers could not permit themselves to express their sexual attraction for each other openly:

Betty: Please like me.  
 Harry: I workship you.  
 Betty: Please want me.  
 Harry: I don't want to want you. Of course I want you.

Mrs. Saunders: I didn't want you to come after me.  
 Clive: Of course not, you just galloped off with no idea that I would follow you.  
 Mrs. Saunders: I thought you might.  
 Clive: You thought I might.  
 Mrs. Saunders: I hoped you wouldn't.<sup>7</sup>

In Act II the language is very colloquial and down-to-earth, to the extent of breaking through all taboo barriers. It is only Betty whose language has not changed with the times. It remains very correct and refined when compared to four-year-old Cathy's language which is gross and obscene to an extreme.

All the world's a stage,  
 And all the men and women merely players.

The above quote from Shakespeare must surely have found its apotheosis in Victorian Britain. Act I is about playing one's role in Victorian society and playing it well, that is, abiding by the numerous rules and regulations which rigidly constricted the men, women and children of that age. It goes without saying that we are here only concerned with the upper classes in Victorian society. The lower classes were a world apart.

Each member of Clive's family has a part to play. Edward is constantly reminded that he must not play with dolls, that he must honour his father and his mother, that he must like cricket and must be good at sports. He must grow up to be 'a man' and be good at 'manly' things. If he cannot conform then there will be no future for him.

The Victorian woman was also forced into a moral straitjacket. If she was to live up to an ideal she was to be as frail, as fragile and as helpless as possible. Hysterics and fainting fits, depression and boredom were common ailments. It was her duty to become the 'angel in the house': she was to provide her husband with a comfortable place of escape from the wicked, cruel world outside the home. No mind of her own, no ambitions. As Maud advises her daughter, 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.<sup>8</sup>



Maud reminds Betty that women have their own 'part to play'. Queen Victoria and Alfred, Lord Tennyson, both thought likewise. Queen Victoria firmly believed that God had created men and women different and that they should remain in their own position: the man is to rule, the women to be ruled. Tennyson eternalized his thoughts into verse:

Man for the field and woman for the hearth.  
Man for the sword, and for the needle she.  
Man with the head and woman with the heart:  
Man to command and woman to obey;  
All else confusion.

Keeping up appearances thus became a way of life and Betty and Clive manage to do this quite successfully. Betty spends her time at home playing the piano and reading poetry. Clive admires her for being so delicate, so sensitive and for creating 'a haven of peace' to come home to. Betty, on the other hand, assures Clive that she misses him when he is away (out in the wilds, keeping the 'savages' under control). If his foot hurts, she feels the pain, and if she is bored sitting at home doing nothing all day, well —

If I lack society that is my form of service.<sup>9</sup>

Harry Bagley, Clive's friend, sees Betty as the perfect mother, in fact, he leaves no doubt in her mind as to where her duty lies. She is a mother, a daughter and a wife. In other words, she can only be defined in relationship to other people; her duty is to her children, to her parents and to her husband. Not to herself. This is the mask Betty is forced to wear. What lies under the mask? Boredom. Her life is lacking in excitement, adventure and passion. It comes as no great surprise that she longs to be a man and that it is a man who plays the part of Betty:

I live for Clive. The whole aim of my life  
Is to be what he looks for in a wife.  
I am a man's creation as you see,  
And what men want is what I want to be.<sup>10</sup>

Secretly, Betty admires Harry Bagley who possesses all the qualities she most admires. She toys with the idea of running away with him but her secret passions never materialize simply because she cannot let herself go. When her innocent flirtations are disclosed to her husband, she begs him for forgiveness:

I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Forgive me. It is not Harry's fault, it is all mine. Harry is noble. He has rejected me. It is my wickedness, I get bored, I get reckless, I imagine things. There is something so wicked in me, Clive.<sup>11</sup>

Betty sincerely feels she is wicked. She has only allowed Harry to kiss her and now she feels immoral, stained and full of remorseless guilt. One mask superimposes

the other. She cannot be what she really is if she does not know what she really wants.

Clive is the only character not playing a part. He has no need to do so because he is perfectly at ease in his role as representative to his Queen in Africa, as master of the house and as head of the family. He is the stereotype of the paternalist imperialist:

This is my family. Though far from home  
We serve the Queen wherever we may roam  
I am a father to the natives here,  
And father to my family so dear.<sup>12</sup>

Clive represents all that is negative in the male stereotype. He is ruthless, aggressive and sadistic. He declares his passion for Mrs. Saunders thus:

Caroline, if you were shot with poisoned arrows do you know what I'd do?  
I'd fuck your dead body and poison myself. Caroline, you smell amazing.  
You terrify me. You are dark like this continent. Mysterious. Treacherous.  
When you rode to me through the night. When you fainted in my arms.  
When I came to you in your bed, when I lifted the mosquito netting, when I  
said let me in, let me in. Oh don't shut me out, Caroline, let me in.<sup>13</sup>

Clive's chauvinism stands in crass contrast to the homosexuality of his son and his friend, Harry. Ellen's homosexuality (or lesbianism), on the other hand, is very much in the background and is only revealed to Betty, whom she loves. Harry, who has seduced Clive's son, Edward, makes a point of telling him that homosexuality is a 'sin and a crime and it's also wrong'. The only release Edward has is expressed in his passionate hate towards his father which, mixed with deep feelings of guilt, ultimately reaches a climax at the end of Act I when he sees the servant, Joshua, raising his gun to shoot Clive but does nothing to warn him. It is also Edward who is 'killing' his father.

Harry Bagley's homosexuality is enforced upon minors (Edward) and inferiors (Joshua and the natives). His host, Clive, cannot cope when he learns of his friend's secret. He reviles Harry's 'weakness' and obliges him to salvage his honour by marrying.

It is significant that Mrs. Saunders and Ellen are played by the same person. Ellen's lesbianism and Mrs. Saunders' open sensuality and love of independence are the makings of the future woman of Act II. Ellen may be obliged to accept Harry's offer of marriage but in doing so she is being offered a refuge from a world which considers sexual deviancy a punishable crime. Mrs. Saunders refuses to depend on any man. A lover of her newly-found independence, it is her ambition to return to England, buy a farm, and introduce threshing machines—all in all—a 'manly' project. A reversal of gender roles has begun.

The leap between Acts I and II is not only one into the present and a new generation. It is primarily a leap into a new type of morality, characterized by

sexual liberation. The characters in Act II have changed completely. They have wrenched free from their moral chains. We do not know *how* they attained this new freedom but there is ample proof that their sexuality has found a more positive expression in the type of life they now lead. Edward is no longer played by a woman, Betty is no longer played by a man. Edward's sister, Victoria, who was a dummy in Act I, is now a working mother with a bright future. Edward shares a house with his lover, Gerry (who eventually leaves him). Betty has come to terms with herself and decides to leave Clive (who, surprisingly, is still alive but no longer dominates the scene). Victoria experiences delight in her newly-found bisexuality and moves into a 'maison à trois' relationship with her brother and her lesbian friend, Lin. All sexual taboos have been broken. The patriarchal family has been dissolved.

One aspect that remains unchanged in Act II is the presence of imperialism. Lin's brother, a British soldier in Ireland, is killed. He 'appears' to Lin and her friends after they have engaged in a spiritual and sexual orgy in the park late at night. The message is clear: the extreme chauvinism in Victorian colonialism is still very much in existence in British-occupied Ireland. The victim of the patriarchic colonial system in Act I was Joshua, the black servant. His counterpart in Act II is Bill, the soldier. Both have been forced into their roles and have suffered a complete loss of identity as a consequence. Bill's last speech may be grotesque but it is, at the same time, poignant. Sexual liberation is political freedom. Sexual repression leads to violence and a negation of oneself. The message is Wilhelm Reich's:

Lin: Have you come back to tell us something?

Bill: No, I've come for a fuck. That was the worst thing in the fucking army. Never fucking let out. Can't fucking talk to Irish girls. Fucking bored out of my fucking head. That or shit scared. For five minutes I'd be glad I wasn't bored, then I was fucking scared. Then we'd come in and I'd be glad I wasn't scared and then I was fucking bored. Spent the day reading fucking porn and the fucking night wanking. Man's fucking life in the fucking army? No fun when the fucking kids hate you. I got so I fucking wanted to kill someone and I got fucking killed myself and I want a fuck.

## Notes

1. Catherine Itzin, *Stages in the Revolution*, Eyre Methuen, London, 1980, p. 279.
2. John Charvet, *Feminism*, Everyman's University Library, 1982, p. 123.
3. *Plays and Players*, January, 1984, p. 10.
4. *Stages in the Revolution*, p. 286.
5. Caryl Churchill, *Cloud Nine*, Pluto Plays, London, 1979, p. 30.

6. Ibidem, p. 39.
7. Ibidem, p. 16.
8. Ibidem, p. 26.
9. Ibidem, p. 9.
10. Ibidem, p. 7.
11. Ibidem, p. 29.
12. Ibidem, p. 7.
13. Ibidem, p. 17.
14. Ibidem, p. 57.