



# **NEW READINGS IN BRITISH DRAMA**

**From the Post-War Period to the Contemporary Era**

Edited by Mesut Günenç and Enes Kavak



**PETER LANG**

Mesut Günenç and Enes Kavak (eds.)

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“New Readings in British Drama: From the Post-War Period to the Contemporary Era” offers new readings of British plays produced after the Second World War by underlining the fact that literary theories have never been stagnant and exhausted in the field of drama as part of literary studies. Scholarly editions focusing exclusively on contemporary drama and its critical readings are still a rarity, as contemporary literary scholars tend to neglect drama in favour of fiction. Therefore, our contributors have attempted to examine the works of Tom Stoppard, Caryl Churchill, Sarah Kane, Roy Williams, Mark Ravenhill, Thomas Eccleshare, Anders Lutsgarten and Jackie Kay from the perspectives of the major theories by emphasising how key theoretical approaches can help elucidate theatrical texts and their performances from a contemporary critical standpoint.

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Gül Kurtuluş

# Memory, Gender and Innovation in Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine*: The Brechtian Legacy in the Postmodern Theatre

## Introduction

During the 1970s and 1980s the term “theatre” was deficient in describing modernist work and the term “performance art” became more popular and encompassing. Theatre has always been closely attached to a certain tradition, which requires a conventionally composed script, a specific type of narrative structure, and a presentation or performance in an accustomed manner. A rise in the new interest of the avant-garde seen in spectacle activities of various kinds prepared the ground for the presentation of new non-structured events. A blend of dance and theatre has been exhibited via the media, especially with the utilization of film and video. Such innovations and experiments have been coined as postmodern theatre, “characterized through its emphasis on voice and image, rather than on narrative and character, emphasizing the collective and interactive over the individual and self-sufficient text.”<sup>1</sup> Current changes give a new shape and content to theatrical activities in England. Like female dramatists who actively produced works during the last decades of the twentieth century, Caryl Churchill has presented political concerns in her plays. Social and political concerns combined with innovative staging and style typify the work of Caryl Churchill. With her unique language and style, Churchill goes beyond her time and expands traditional feminist views and theories. It is possible to confer her language and narrative in tandem with characteristics of postmodern drama and examine her work in view of postmodern feminist theory taking into consideration *Cloud Nine* (1979) that bears postmodern elements.

*Cloud Nine* exposes the issues of sex/gender constructions and sexuality within a patriarchal and heteronormative framework that is also very much sexist and racist, and challenges established norms and expectations related to sexuality and gender. Churchill achieves this firstly by cross-acting; she makes men play female characters, and women play male characters, and a White actor plays a

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1 Jeanette R. Malkin, *Memory-Theatre and Postmodern Drama* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 17.



Black character (there is also a dummy instead of an actress in the first act). Using Brechtian methods, she reverses the social positions of characters and puts them in absurd situations, thereby exposing and criticizing patriarchy. She also utilizes manipulation of time to establish gender as a social construct. Patriarchal and colonialist values are depicted evanescent. Characters and conditions immensely change in hundred years, and Churchill proffers that times indeed change, and nothing ever stays permanent. Despite the oppression by those in powers in the second act, a lot of power has shifted from the male authority to women and homosexuals. All characters, including Betty, have the freedom to explore and talk about their sexuality in the second act. Caryl Churchill does not have a lot of care for people's sensibilities, but the shocking effect serves to emphasize the absurdity of the power balance between genders that men seem to simply dominate in the first act. To Churchill, sexuality is a powerful element in feminist discourse; especially female sexuality and homosexuality are toxic for patriarchy, and this is perhaps why the play is so full of sex. This chapter aims to explore Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* in relation to history, memory and audience's role in making the play an intersection between Brechtian and post-Brechtian theatre, and also postmodernist theatre. Furthermore, the chapter intends to offer a reading of the play in tandem with postmodernism in theatre.

### **British Political Playwriting and Memory**

Caryl Churchill and other British political playwrights focus on a deeper and more general discussion of political issues, and in their plays, they prefer more conventional types of theatrical styles which are reflectionist and interventionist.<sup>2</sup> The reflectionist tradition promotes reality and it aims to imitate nature as accurately as possible, which makes it the representation of life itself. A dramatic framework is used to narrate the events in the play. Its plot structure is conventional (exposition, development, and denouement). Characters in the plays are representatives of their social types, and dialogues communicate the ideas stated in the play. Political insights stated in the play depend on a consensus. Milena Dragičević Šešić and Milena Stefanović suggest that “collective memories leading towards ‘national memory’ help construct national identity and representation.”<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, reflectionist tradition in theatre contributes to the

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2 Michael Patterson, *Strategies of Political Theatre: Post-War British Playwrights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 15.

3 Milena Dragičević Šešić and Milena Stefanović, “How Theaters Remember: Cultures of Memory in Institutionalized Systems,” *Култура/Culture* 24, no. 4 (2014): 11–12.

national memory because it aims to convey political message(s) to the audience. In reflectionist plays, the audience is expected to measure the political analysis in a realistic plot and compare themselves to the theatrical characters in the play.

Different than the reflectionist tradition, the interventionist tradition promotes the interpretation of reality. It aims to challenge people's perception of reality. Lauren Harlow claims that history and memory are different from one another and that one should not mistake one for the other. "History is the use of collected facts and primary sources in effort to create a living conversation between the past and present [while m]emory on the other hand, how a single person or a group of people chooses to remember these historical facts in relation to their personal lives and cultures."<sup>4</sup> Thus, collective memory is not a fact, but a remembrance. Interventionist playwrights interpret those remembrances of historical facts subjectively because they believe that objectivity controverts their point of view. They object to an established consensual view of the world. "The strategy of this theatre was therefore not to induce empathy with the central characters so much as to judge their behaviour within the social context."<sup>5</sup> Its plot is not traditional because of the lack of a sense of inevitability. The narration of the story is in leaps. The characters in such plays are contradictory and alterable beings. Thus, all of these are different than what the conventional theatre is accustomed to, which leads to an altered audience. In interventionist tradition, audience is more active than in reflectionist tradition. It judges and makes choices throughout the play. As the audience is already knowledgeable about the ending, they focus on the plot development, which encourages them to respond actively.

Reflectionist and interventionist traditions are both used after the 1960s by the political playwrights although they are distinct styles, and interventionist tradition captures the postmodernist world. Bertolt Brecht's interventionist style is efficient in competing with reflectionist tradition as a relatively new mode in dramatic writing. As a Marxist playwright who advocates taking history as a point to consider the present, Brecht makes use of plot structure albeit it is not the focal element of the play. Brecht's epic theatre is the theatre of alienation, and it has the estrangement effect while addressing contemporary issues. It challenges plot structure of well-made plays and leaves issues unresolved, confronting the audience with uncomfortable questions. Political plays originated in Brechtian

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4 Lauren Harlow, "The Misconception of Memory: Part One," accessed 15 January 2021, <https://stlukesmuseum.org/misconception-memory-hsl-2-2/>.

5 Patterson, *Strategies of Political Theatre*, 18.

style make the audience think and evaluate the current situation. Brecht's effort to integrate the audience into his plays actively results in audience's functioning role in theatre. The alienation or estrangement effect enforces the audience to think critically about ethics, morality, power and other socio-economic and political convictions not challenged before and engages them with plays' content actively as well as intellectually rather than emotionally. In her article, Helene Keyssar states, "In Caryl Churchill's plays, neither the sequence nor the unraveling events are central to the drama since she rejects the temptations of narrative and exploits the ability of the live stage to provoke our acknowledgment the vulnerability and plasticity of human."<sup>6</sup> Alienation, disillusionment, immorality, selfishness, and loss of values that Churchill emphasizes in almost all of her plays attract attention as reflections of modern life that the audience is familiar to. Individuals of today move around in a senseless rush, just like Churchill's characters. The modern individual, who speaks the same language with her characters, shares the same concerns, and even lives in the same world, and has become alienated, losing his/her ties with the roots. Doomed to an inevitable loneliness, the individual cannot be happy and able to communicate with those around him. People sometimes resort to violence because they find it difficult to find solutions, and they often live in a fantasy world, escaping reality, as witnessed in Churchill's plays. Since the world they live in is a virtual world, they engage in meaningless and contradictory actions. The degeneration of the individual, and therefore the society, who can no longer distinguish between reality and illusion, gains momentum.

As stated above, Brechtian elements are prominent in *Cloud Nine*, and Churchill's innovative writing styles like gender-bending and comedic tone are significant for expressing the ideas of the play. The historical aspects of the play – colonialism, racial oppression and the traditional gender expectations of the period – provide criticism on social matters with regard to both the time the play is set in and the present time. Reinelt states that "one of Brecht's major discoveries was that by historicizing the incidents of the narrative, a playwright can cause the audience to become conscious of certain habitual perceptions which have been established by the historical tradition and therefore partially determine the present."<sup>7</sup> Churchill uses this technique in *Cloud Nine* as well,

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6 Helene Keyssar, "The Dramas of Caryl Churchill: The Politics of Possibility," *The Massachusetts Review* 24, no. 1 (1983): 198.

7 Janelle Reinelt, "Beyond Brecht: Britain's New Feminist Drama," *Theatre Journal* 38, no. 2 (1986): 160.

effectively creating a bridge between the past and the present. Her comedic tone also plays an important role in portraying the absurdities of extreme gender and identity performance. Especially, on stage, the gender swaps heighten the conventional gender behaviours, standing out when performed by the opposite sex. Diamond explains this as: “When Betty utters the confused clichés of the oppressed Victorian wife, we laugh not only because they are consistent with the stereotypes, we have of that figure but because the stage image is radically disorienting.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, Churchill’s writing style in *Cloud Nine* shatters the boundaries and invents new ways of expressing political views.

### Audience’s Role in Political Plays

Borowski suggests that even though different political plays refer to various events in history, the political concern is the same, and this connects all of them.<sup>9</sup> Though the spectators are part of the play on stage, and they have already experienced history, there is an audience with a more extended “collective memory” recently, where plays may find rich contexts and explore from that archive. According to Brecht, non-Aristotelian theatre is the most appropriate method to create awareness about politics.<sup>10</sup> The audience is encouraged to make a choice and criticize so they become part of the political dialogue and actions in the theatre.<sup>11</sup> In alliance with Brechtian terms, epic theatre is the most suitable method to perform a political play. Brechtian techniques comprise breaking down the fourth wall using a narrator, freezing frames, using technology, using minimal settings, coming out of characters. Rather than allowing the audience to sit passively and get lost in the show, the actors will sometimes directly address the audience with a speech, comment or a question. “Brecht’s special contribution was to envisage a particular role for the actor in all this, using him to help destroy conventional illusion [and] to arouse a thinking, enquiring response in

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8 Elin Diamond, “Refusing the Romanticism of Identity: Narrative Interventions in Churchill, Benmussa, Duras,” *Theatre Journal Staging Gender* 37, no. 3 (1985): 277.

9 Mateusz Borowski and Małgorzata Sugiera, “Political Fictions and Fictionalisations: History as Material for Postdramatic Theatre,” in *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political: International Perspectives on Contemporary Performance*, edited by Karen Jürs- Munby, Jerome Carroll and Steve Giles (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 78.

10 Patterson, *Strategies of Political Theatre*, 19.

11 *Ibid.*, 19.

the spectator.”<sup>12</sup> Short movie clips are put together, often to show factual events. “Film clips can be timed to support, expand or comment on the stage action, the images on the stage and on the screens even suggesting cause and effect.”<sup>13</sup> Montages are used to highlight the issues Brechtian plays aim to communicate. Narrator tells the audience what is about to happen in the play, before it happens, to prevent them grow intensely emotional about the events. Sometimes actors come out character, often at heightened moments of drama, to remind the audience that it is a piece of fiction that they are watching. “Brecht’s stage was to be stripped of its theatrical magic, and the audience refused the state of emotional, empathetic trance.”<sup>14</sup> A placard or projection screen can be used to give the audience information about the time of the event; screens are placed “on either side of the stage, upon which were projected photographs of the main characters, together with written summaries of the action in each scene.”<sup>15</sup> Actors go into a freeze frame to let the audience stop and think critically for moment, so that the narrator can speak, or so that an actor can come out of character and directly address the audience. “Direct address to the audience would be complete, unlike the traditional hasty aside. Set changes would be made in full view of the audience. In this way stage and audience would be joined, not separated, and speaking directly to the house would be courage.”<sup>16</sup> Audience can participate in the play, unlike traditional theatre where they are passive recipients. Actors directly speak to the audience during the performance. Considering the above-mentioned characteristics, Brechtian techniques create political awareness.

In political plays, audience makes a connection between reality and the collective memory. Collective memory provides common knowledge to social group members. It generally occurs at local levels. Each group has a different point of view about their past. Not only their past but also their remembrance and interpretations of the events are different. Thus, collective memory seems a fabricated version of personal memory.<sup>17</sup> Even though each political performance creates its own meaning, the audience’s role becomes important since the context changes according to their collective memory. Changing the opinions

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12 J. L. Styan, *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice 3: Expressionism and Epic Theatre* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985), 140.

13 *Ibid.*, 131.

14 *Ibid.*, 142.

15 Styan, *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice 3*, 129.

16 *Ibid.*, 143.

17 Noa Gedi and Yigal Elam, “Collective Memory – What Is It?” *History and Memory* 8, no. 1 (1996): 47.

and beliefs of the audience is not easy in political plays. The audience already has collective memory and interprets the performance according to that knowledge. Political plays give the audience the feeling that “they are not alone in their beliefs, that others are actively involved and pursuing the same goals.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, postmodernist mode in theatre provides emotional support (patriotism, courage and fighting spirit) to the audience who has already collective memory about the political topics.

Traditional theatre and postmodernist theatre have differences, and the changing role of audience is one of them. Audience becomes more active than before. Brechtian techniques create an opportunity for the audience to participate in the performance. Political awareness of the audience rises due to this method. Subjectivity of the epic theatre does not totally block the political message of the performance. The collective memory of the audience creates emotional and intellectual support. The concept of collective performative memory has always been a core subject in the field of theatre studies as it functions in the way of the audience possessing the memory of specific theatrical and dramatic conventions and in way of appealing to the audience’s memory in political remembrances. Recipient’s role becomes more important than ever in postmodernist plays. The referential connection of the audience’s interaction with the play affects their way of receiving the message and the audience becomes more active due to their own meaning-making process. “The expectations an audience brings to a new reception experience are the residue of memory of previous of such experiences.”<sup>19</sup> There is also inclusion of multi-media, and non-verbal theatrical communication between the performer and audience. Collective performative memory engages with the audience’s political opinion within a performance. Therefore, performance makes the audience question the subject, though Brecht’s way of expressing and criticizing a problem has been different and the style separates itself from the traditional theatre. The interaction between the performer and spectator is an important aspect of the British political plays from 1970s onwards. Breaking the fourth wall in this context allows the actor to communicate directly with the spectator; therefore, it leads the spectator to question the matter at hand. Churchill does not take a side on deciding who is right or wrong in her plays. This is one of the characteristics of modernist plays where the ambiguity and lack of clear resolution in the events inspire the audience to form their own opinions.

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18 Michael Kirby, “On Political Theatre,” *The Drama Review: TDR* 19, no. 2 (1975): 135.

19 Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 5.

For this, Churchill includes the Brechtian element of “avoiding catharsis at the end of a production.”<sup>20</sup> In her plays there are no clear endings with a specific moral or social lesson, and the interpretation is left to the audience. In the following section, Caryl Churchill’s *Cloud Nine* is discussed to illustrate a similar attitude about the subject of patriarchy, changing role of the audience in theatre and the function of collective memory in the formation of the play.

## Deconstructing Gender Identity and Patriarchy, Constructing Meaning in *Cloud Nine*

Caryl Churchill is regarded as an important contemporary woman playwright with her unique theatrical expression.<sup>21</sup> She adopts a non-Aristotelian drama and uses Brechtian theatre instead of integrating intellectual audience participation into her plays.<sup>22</sup> She is a critique of patriarchal society and looks for social reformation through her plays. She calls herself, and is referred to, as a socialist feminist because of her approach to contemporary issues in her plays. Referring to contemporary issues, especially gender and identity, in *Cloud Nine*, Churchill uses some theatrical techniques like cross-gender, cross-casting and non-linear narrative, and adopts Butler’s gender performativity theory and has a unique characterization of the characters in the play, through which she disrupts the traditional understanding of gender and subverts the authority of patriarchy.

To comprehend Churchill’s significance as a contemporary woman playwright, it is necessary to take her social and professional background into consideration. Born in London in 1938, Churchill started her career by writing short stories. Her acceptance to the Royal Court Theatre to work with a group of writers, most of whom were men, during 1960s and 1970s was a milestone in her authorship. Her experiences at the Royal Court influenced

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20 Alicia Tycer, *Caryl Churchill’s Top Girls* (London: Continuum Books, 2008), 42.

21 In the preface of Mary Luckhurst’s *Caryl Churchill* (London: Routledge, 2014), Caryl Churchill, for her ground-breaking works, “has been internationally celebrated for four decades. She has exploded the narrow definitions of political theatre to write consistently hard-edged and innovative work. Always unpredictable in her stage experiments, her plays have stretched the relationships between form and content, actor and spectator to their limits.”

22 In her plays, under the influence of Bertolt Brecht, who argues that “the modern theatre is the epic theatre” (Bertolt Brecht, “The Modern Theatre Is the Epic Theatre: Notes to the Opera,” in *Modern Theories of Drama: A Selection of Writings on Drama and Theatre 1850–1990*, edited by George W. Brandt (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 227), Churchill deals with gender and sexuality, as a feminist dramatist.

her writing, and inspired from “socialist realist” attitude of those writers, she served for defining the status of women in society with her plays.<sup>23</sup> She criticized the influence of Thatcherism and Margaret Thatcher as a woman prime minister for not improving women’s position in society; she was involved in political issues and struggled with patriarchy, prohibiting women freedom of exhibiting their potential of creating and producing for themselves in private and public spheres. In addition to this, “her life as a working mother coincided with the women’s movement, and feminist concerns began to influence the content and politics of her plays.”<sup>24</sup> Churchill’s authorship and theatrical identity were formed within such social, political and family background, and she positioned herself as a contemporary woman playwright at that time with her idiosyncratic ideology and the content of her plays.

Churchill is recognized mostly with her unique theatrical techniques. She is known to have adopted Brechtian theatre and its techniques in her plays. Brechtian epic theatre enhances spectators’ reaction during the play’s performance and intensifies their role by suggesting that they question the society reflected in the play during the performance and even change it. Brecht strongly proposes that, in modern epic theatre, the emphasis should be on the narrative, rather than the plot, which is a typical of dramatic “old fashioned” theatre.<sup>25</sup> In line with this view, Churchill’s *Cloud Nine* begins with a song, which significantly stresses the importance of eloquence within the narrative:

Come gather, sons of England, come gather in your pride.  
Now meet the world united, now face it side by side;  
Ye who the earth’s wide corners, from veldt to prairie, roam.  
From bush and jungle muster all who call old England “home.”  
Then gather around for England,  
Rally to the flag,

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23 Churchill is known to have worked with other writers, directors, and actors of Joint Stock Theatre Group in a workshop as part of her writing process before she published *Cloud Nine*. Joint Stock Theatre Company’s aim is to create the theatre collectively with actors, writers, directors, and other artists in “an attempt to find a more dynamic means of representing revolutionary phenomena.” Mary Luckhurst, “On the Challenge of Revolution.” *The Cambridge Companion to Caryl Churchill* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 52–70.

24 Gabrielle H. Cody and Evert Sprinchorn, *The Columbia Encyclopedia of Modern Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 263.

25 Bertolt Brecht, “The Modern Theatre Is the Epic Theatre: Notes to the Opera,” in *Modern Theories of Drama: A Selection of Writings on Drama and Theatre 1850–1990*, edited by George W. Brandt (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 227.



From North and South and East and West  
Come one all for England!<sup>26</sup>

Rather than explaining in dialogue form the two key terms, patriotism and colonialism, which shape the Victorian era, in which the play is set, Churchill prefers to set the tone with a relatively short song that opens up the play. Clive, Betty, Edward, Victoria, Maud, Ellen, and Joshua are all different characters, each of which stands for a notion, yet they all sing the opening song together, which indicates that they are all united when political concepts are considered. Audience's reaction to what this eight-line song depicts would be different if the idea conveyed by it has been delivered in a dialogue's content between two or more characters. As Judith Butler concludes, the "plot itself is already a shaping of events. What readers in fact encounter is the discourse of a text. If we talk about events that have been shaped into a plot, it is to highlight the meaningfulness and organization of the plot."<sup>27</sup> Accordingly, Churchill makes use of the narrative in the very beginning of the play to give the basic information needed, instead of coming up with a couple of events, which still would not be as revealing as this song, to state the same facts. In postmodern plays, an emphasis on the plot is redundant and it serves no use in performances. Without doubt, since Shakespeare's Globe Theatre – which welcomed all people from different social classes – tastes and expectations of theatregoers have shifted considerably. As Gobert states, "Theatre history is history too, with its own lingering memories and ideologies. Metatheatrically, *Cloud Nine* plays with it: Joshua alludes to blackface minstrelsy, Act 1's Betty to panto camp, Act 2' Cathy (played by a male actor) to the long history of cross-dressed boy actors."<sup>28</sup> The element of homosexuality is integral to the play as it draws attention further into the ideologies during the time of the play's publication. Some critics did not enjoy the inclusion, as they thought it detrimental to Churchill's point. Harding writes "Even in representations that do not involve sex acts, especially if the play purports to subvert the patriarchal constructions of gender, the play's progressive agenda mixes with repressive ideological currents."<sup>29</sup> The characterization of sexuality in her plays is what makes them immersive. Reading or

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26 All quotes from the text of *Cloud Nine* are from Caryl Churchill, *Churchill Plays: One* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), 251.

27 Jonathan D. Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 86.

28 Darren R. Gobert, *The Theatre of Caryl Churchill* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 97.

29 James M. Harding, "Cloud Cover: (Re) Dressing Desire and Comfortable Subversions in Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine*," *PMLA* 113, no. 2 (1998): 264.

watching the plays makes the audience acknowledge how humans are vulnerable. Therefore, in *Cloud Nine*, Churchill fulfils the expectations of the audience, in the modern sense, Brecht portrays.

As Brechtian theatre addresses social issues and politics about patriarchy, Churchill's plays deal with the issues of gender politics and feminism and support the audience participation in making meaning of the plays' content. She "challenges audiences to join their imaginations with hers in seeking answers to the difficult questions posed by her plays."<sup>30</sup> She is totally against audience passivity and encourages them to speak up in relation to the important issues presented in the plays after questioning them. The type of theatre Churchill acquires enables her to talk about crucial issues like women's status, gender and patriarchy in society freely. In *Cloud Nine*, Churchill comes up with a shift in time, as well as contradictory characters and oppositions in deeds that highlight dichotomies, such as conventional-modern, colonizer-colonized, violence-security, male-female, ruler-ruled and marriage-adultery, to launch an argument regarding the British society. Although themes of her plays resemble those of other contemporary female playwrights like Aphra Behn and Sarah Daniels who write plays in distinct centuries, "her use of theatrical form to alter the relationship between play and audience sets her work apart"<sup>31</sup> and makes her unique.

Another aspect of Churchill's technique is her interest in Butler's idea of gender performativity in *Cloud Nine*. Butler argues that "gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being."<sup>32</sup> Churchill adopts Butler's idea of gender performativity and redefines the notions of femininity and masculinity through her revolutionary construction of characters. Although Churchill is not the first and only woman playwright to have disrupted traditional gender roles with the construction of characters beyond social expectations, her way of applying Butler's theory to her play is peculiar to her. The best example of this is the representation of Edward as a male within social boundaries but as a female inside. He is under the pressure of patriarchy from the beginning mainly because of his father as he insists on

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30 Amelia Howe Kritzer, "Theatricality and Empowerment in the Plays of Caryl Churchill," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 4, no. 1 (1989): 126.

31 Kritzer, "Theatricality and Empowerment in the Plays of Caryl Churchill," 126.

32 Abdol Hossein Joodaki and Paria Bakhshi, "The Collapse of Heterosexism and Phallogocentrism in Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine*," *Studies in Literature and Language* 1, no. 6 (2013): 127.

teaching him “to grow up to be a man.”<sup>33</sup> Betty and Ellen are displeased with the fact that Edward is playing with dolls, and they try to find excuses for Edward’s misbehaviour to prevent Clive from getting angry at Edward, telling him “He’s not playing with it. He’s minding it for Vicky.”<sup>34</sup> Edward keeps displaying feminine manners although Betty warns him, voicing family members’ idea that “dolls are for girls,”<sup>35</sup> and that he “must never let the boys at school know [he] like[s] dolls”<sup>36</sup> Edward acts against society’s expectations. Churchill embraces Butler’s gender performativity and integrates it into her play through characterization of Edward. She comprises Butler’s idea that gender “is an assignment which is never quite carried out according to expectation, whose addressee never quite inhabit the ideal s/he is compelled to approximate.”<sup>37</sup> She defies conventional codes of society and creates a totally new world in *Cloud Nine*.

*Cloud Nine* provides a link between Brechtian and post-Brechtian theatre, and the play embodies prominent postmodernist theatrical features with its two-act structure, juxtapositions, doublings of roles and chronological disruption. Churchill’s success relies on her intellectual endeavour in exposing socio-cultural and socio-political realities of modern English society. Her ability in combining her theatrical ingenuity with contemporary issues is exemplified in the play’s hybrid structure, reverse chronology in cross-acting and cross-dressing. There is a clear distinction between the first and the second act with its audacious time lapse between two. Representation of the characters and the mood of the play drastically changes in the second act. While the setting in the first act is Victorian Africa, the second act takes place in London and although hundred years pass between the acts for the characters it is 25 years late. This sort of disruption in time brings the change in characterization with it because in the second act the characters have more freedom to express their sexual preferences. Churchill exposes how individuals go through a process of exploring their identities and how they can perform their preferred genders when they find the proper conditions of time and space. “A more radical critique of patriarchy comes with the time shift in Act II in which Churchill violates the theatrical convention that character time will be coterminous with the time frame of the text,”<sup>38</sup> which

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33 Churchill, *Churchill Plays: One*, 252.

34 *Ibid.*, 257.

35 *Ibid.*, 274.

36 *Ibid.*, 275.

37 Joodaki, “The Collapse of Heterosexism and Phallogocentrism in Caryl Churchill’s *Cloud Nine*,” 128.

38 Diamond, “Refusing the Romanticism of Identity,” 278.

also turns “the spectator into an observer,” making the play in line with another Brechtian feature, due to the fact that “in Act II time has advanced a hundred years but for the characters it is only twenty-five years later. By disturbing diachronic time Churchill lays bare the problematic of history and female identity. No longer the period setting for the zany actions of Act I, the Victorian era can now be read as a set of coded practices that continues to bear pressure on the contemporary characters of Act II.”<sup>39</sup> We see Betty embracing the old Betty in the final scene, and this scene renders one of Churchill’s theatrical features, inventiveness. She “refuses the finality and closure of stage realism by creating alternative theatrical fictions, parallel universes displaying a different logic and temporal scheme. One of Churchill’s means of refusing the closure of representation and the tyranny of the past.”<sup>40</sup> Usage of parallel universes creates some comparison and contrast of the characters without separating them as two different things. The past and the present are combined as the past is also part of the character’s present.

With all the theatrical innovations in *Cloud Nine*, Churchill’s aim is to emphasize “the possibility of the emergence of gender identities who do not match the historically settled and cherished gender categories in the dominant discourse of heterosexuality”<sup>41</sup> and she attempts to “denaturalize and destabilize gender.”<sup>42</sup> With her exceptional representations of femininity and masculinity, she “blurs the distinctions between femininity and masculinity”<sup>43</sup> by disrupting the association between the body and the gender. Churchill’s approach to gender is distinctive because she manifests “the emptiness and absurdity of such terms as not only feminine and masculine but also the polarized attributes ascribed to femininity and masculinity.”<sup>44</sup> Therefore, Churchill has a distinct place in 1970s, 80s with her unique style of turning the perception of gender upside down as an epitome of her consistently innovative dramatic form.

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39 Ibid.

40 Reinelt, “Beyond Brecht,” 186.

41 Joodaki, “The Collapse of Heterosexism and Phallogocentrism in Caryl Churchill’s *Cloud Nine*,” 129.

42 Ibid., 130.

43 Ibid., 130.

44 Ibid., 131.

## Conclusion

Churchill still maintains her significance as a woman playwright. Benedict Nightingale, chief theatre critic for the *Times* (London) and a contributor to the *New York Times* describes her as “‘uniquely important’”<sup>45</sup> due to the fact that “her writing has been greatly influenced by collaborative processes in which she has participated.”<sup>46</sup> It is important that for years she has been regarded as “one of only two contemporary women playwrights in the English theatre to receive critical and scholarly attention (the other was Pam Gems).”<sup>47</sup> She is given great attention within politics of literature mostly because “in a world where the writing of women remains under-supported, undervalued, and underproduced, Churchill’s work has received widespread critical acclaim and has inspired countless theatre makers but has particularly influenced feminist practitioners and scholars.”<sup>48</sup> It has been more than thirty years since *Cloud Nine* was premiered, yet the play manages to be extraordinary and gripping even in today’s standards, as well as still having the ability of raising controversy – since it still relates to the major contemporary issues – thanks to Churchill’s abolishment of the suppression of sexual feelings, her narrative technique, and noteworthy arguments. The play has been hailed as a major theatrical piece that compels textuality and theatricality. “It was a landmark play in Churchill’s repertoire: it confirmed her as a major, innovative, and political dramatist in British theatre, and brought her to international attention when, in 1981, the play transferred to New York where it ran for two years.”<sup>49</sup> *Cloud Nine* provides a reading in transition from Brechtian to post-Brechtian and to postmodernist theatre with Churchill’s groundbreaking presentation of fringe drama. Rather than redefining sexual politics in the play, Churchill suggests that sexual orientations and tendencies cannot be categorized and repressed.

*Cloud Nine* is written in a distinctive structure and the play’s cast is required to cross-dress and role-play as each other, the play itself is oriented according to the identities of a Victorian household in the first act, as their identities are questioned and replaced, challenging the restraints of social constructs of society

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45 Cody and Sprinchorn, *The Columbia Encyclopedia of Modern Drama*, 262.

46 Ibid., 264.

47 Elaine Aston, *Feminist Views on the English Stage: Women Playwrights, 1990–2000* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 18.

48 Gabrielle H. Cody and Evert Sprinchorn. *The Columbia Encyclopedia of Modern Drama*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 263.

49 Gobert, *The Theatre of Caryl Churchill*, 209.

reflected in individuals. Restraints of social structure is contested and criticized through the individuals in society. All the above stated questionings and deflations are corresponding with what postmodernism stands for. As Darren Gobert states in his analysis of Caryl Churchill's theatre, "she turned to the question of how the body is shaped not only by self-concepts but also by the social and ideological contexts that condition its material expression: contexts that tell a boy to carry himself in this manner or a woman to sit down in that. Churchill's play theatricalizes how the body expresses the weight of its historical burdens as it adapts to fit a role predetermined by ideological pressures."<sup>50</sup> One can see the mirrored ideals of postmodernism in Churchill's theatre, which opposes traditional concepts and instead calls for ambitious and stylized writings in opposition to modernism.

*Cloud Nine* has its unique place in Churchill's repertory vis-à-vis deconstructing social expectations and challenging the identities that are assigned to and held upon the individuals to adopt. Characters in *Cloud Nine* often lose their identity and change characteristics, which is also required of the play's cast to be performed. They push the boundaries of identity and what it means to be a person without the constraints of societal norms and regulations. This, too, is related to postmodernism that confers Churchill's writing style to compel the boundaries of conventional narratives.

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50 Ibid., 85.

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