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# THE SILENT VOICES IN CARYL CHURCHILL'S TOP GIRLS AND CLOUD NINE: A LYOTARDIAN READING

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## ABSTRACT

In the realm of the sublime, silence becomes something other than absence or nothingness. As the French theorist Jean-François Lyotard argues, the sublime is the privation in complex conflicted silences, those spaces where the unrepresentable is 'present'. Lyotard also criticizes meta narrative as the only legitimate of particular forms of narrative that functions violently to suppress and control the individual subject disregarding individual or cultural differences. At the same time, postmodern theatre with the intention of converting to a new way of thinking became more overtly political, with particular emphasis on silent voices and marginalized groups. Caryl Churchill, as a leading figure in shaping the contemporary British theatre, uses main concepts of postmodern theatre in a political and social context to illustrate her strong objection to absolutism, determinism and marginalization of minority groups. In the present study, it is attempted to analyze her *Top Girls* and *Cloud Nine*, in the light of Lyotard's concept of sublime and meta narrative. By reading these plays, it was observed that women, homosexuals, natives and different kinds of minority groups are the victims of the grand narratives of society; therefore, they are rejected, oppressed and doomed to be silent as the incongruent voices in a harmonious culture. Churchill suggests that the only way to get away from the mono-centric system is to resist it and to respect each and every little narrative, which is the silenced and suppressed voice of people of different cultural and socio-political strata. Nevertheless, like Lyotard, Churchill provides no ultimate and decisive answer to struggle against the validity of little or grand narratives.

**Keywords:** Grand narrative, Little narrative, Meta narrative, Postmodernism, Lyotardian sublime, Romantic sublime

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the realm of the sublime, silence can be defined as an indefinable space and a subsonic noise that lies within and beyond silence and cannot be represented (Wawrzinek 13). Put into simple words, the sublime is deeply concerned with the way we represent the relation between the self and the world, or between self and other/s. The sublime is within the contemporary society, culture and politics. It indicates whenever there is a request for a 'revolutionary overthrowing' of a powerful individual or group, and the right of self-determination for the marginalized groups. Sublime is also contextualized in the realm of silences as the evidence of the suppression of difference, of multiple communities or of others (13).

Jean-Francois Lyotard as one of the major postmodern philosophers and thinkers in the realm of sublime tries to lead the critique into investigation of silenced and excluded voices in historical events and literary works. He has the belief that the sublime is the tension between joy and sorrow, the joy of having a feeling of the totality and the sorrow of not being able to present an object equal to the Idea of the totality (Shaw 121). Lyotard claims that grand narratives are considered as powerful tools of the central authority of the society to marginalize and suppress minor and silenced groups (Malpas, *Lyotard* 43). He rejects communicative consensus and suggests that little narratives and liberty of languages weaken the totalizing predisposition (44).

On the other hand, in her *Top Girls* (1982) and *Cloud Nine* (1978), Caryl Churchill uses the main concepts of postmodern theatre in a political and social context to illustrate the effect of majority on the individuals. In these two plays, women, homosexuals, natives and minority groups are illustrated to be the victims of the grand narrative of their societies. They are suppressed and doomed to be speechless voices of a homogenous culture. Therefore, these plays can be considered as good examples of manifesting Lyotard's concept of sublime and meta narrative.

## 2. DISCUSSION

## 2.1. PRESENTING THE UNPRESENTABLE FUTURE: POSTMODERN SUBLIME IN *TOP GIRLS*

*Top Girls* depicts the transformation of the very ordinary and nondescript woman into 'the Top', messianic super heroin, leader of the resistance of the other sex (Djundjung 162). *Top Girls* exhibits some of the qualities often associated with the sublime, "including a sense of irresistible elevation, of 'transcendence', and of enraptured, ravished, and ravishing power" (Wawrzinek 14). This narrative is typically Romantic. Accordingly the present section tries to consider two main characters of this play according to Romantic Sublime aspects.

First, the mode of Marlene's transformation exemplifies a Romantic sublime that depends on an agonistic struggle with an overpowering other (14). Significantly, she operates as a masculine-like-director under the name of Marlene\_a completely feminine name (combination of Maria and Line, from Helene or Magdalene). She was born into a working class family where domestic violence was a routine; Marlene has taught herself to escape her fate as a working class woman, because she "hate[s] the working class" (Churchill III.139) and their offensive ways of living, since she was thirteen. At the same time, 'power and control' are desirable for her, so that her leaving is the form of control and power she seeks to define her own future (Djundjung 163). She resists the power and control in the family and the society by running away from all that limitations imposed by her society. She is in the search of going beyond existing situation in her society. When she is recruited by an 'Employee Agency', she is at the high position. She has a limitless pleasure that leads her to the discovery of a capacity within the self-greater than nature. Her unbounded delight from her current situation and from her 'extraordinary success' is presented in the first act:

Marlene: Well it's worth a party.

Isabella: To Marlene.

Marlene: And all of us.

Gret, Nijo and Joan: Marlene.

Marlene: We've all come a long way. To our courage and the Way we changed our lives and our extraordinary achievements. *They laugh and drink a toast.* (Churchill I. 67)

Here, she admits that she converts to an extraordinary character that transcends the conventions of society and lives against the norms of society. Marlene provides a poignant example of the "deconstruction of the masculine, imperial subject and her mind enables her to transcend the everyday world and to be aligned with a greater power" (Djundjung 162).

It is this very structure that can also be found in pre-twentieth century accounts of the sublime, and which demonstrate the longevity of the ideal of the autonomous subject who is master of her own destiny. The sublime is deeply concerned with questions about the way human perceives the world and its others, the way she understands and represents the relation between self and world. (Wawrzinek 16)

The second ordinary character who rises above the forces of the natural world is Joan. As a 'second class citizen' in the ninth century (Djundjung 165), Joan, indirectly and quietly, tries to assert her right to get education denied by the central system of narrative at that time, which is represented by the Church. In order to acquire knowledge and education, Joan disguises herself as a man and enters the Church, and consequently occupies the top position in the system and becomes the Pope. She goes beyond the natural power of her femininity and 'transcends' the limits of community (166). As a successful and authoritative Pope, Joan behaves against the convention of the system and converts herself into a leading and prominent resident of her society. She also has a limitless power to control the system, as what she has revealed to Marlene (Parlak 124):

Joan. I had thought the Pope would know everything.  
I thought God would speak to me directly. But of course he knew  
I was a woman [...] And I realized I did know the truth.  
Because whatever the Pope says, that's true [...]. Yes,  
I enjoyed being Pope. I consecrated bishops and let people  
kiss my feet. I received the King of England when he came  
to submit to the church. (Churchill I. 68-69)

Marlene and Joan's arrival at the top of social and religious society is marked by a clearing of impossibilities which had previously swathed the community, so that they can now look out over the expanse below them

(Wawrzinek 17). Both of them reject their ability of being mother in order to achieve their high position and this ignorance leads them to the sense of 'pain'. While the sublime condition allows Marlene and Joan to gain a sense of their place in the order of things, the atrocious reality confronts them with the appearance of their children's fate (17). They lost their children in the favor of their being at the top.

Joan gets pregnant with one of her chamberlains. Because Joan has a very few knowledge about her body and her potentials as a woman, she ignores her pregnancy and her being able to bear a child. She thinks that she is just getting fat because of her luxurious life as a pope. The result of that ignorance is fatal to Joan and she loses her new born child and consequently her high position during papal procession (Djundjung 167).

Marlene: Didn't you think of getting rid of it?  
 Joan: Wouldn't that be a worse sin than having it?  
 But a Pope with a child was about as bad as possible [...]  
 But I wouldn't know how to get rid of it.  
 Marlene: Other Popes had children surely.  
 Joan: They didn't give birth to them.  
 Nijo: Well you were a woman.  
 Joan: Exactly and I shouldn't have been a woman.  
 Women, children and lunatics can't be Pope [...]  
 And the baby just slid out onto the road [...]  
 They took me by the feet and dragged me out of  
 town and stoned me to death. (Churchill I. 69-71)

Joan's unawareness that she is a pregnant woman specifies how a woman is punished because of her ignorance. The pain of this unawareness and the sense of her unfamiliarity with her own body and its abilities lead her to being suffered.

Marlene became pregnant when she was seventeen and left her child to be raised by her then-married sister. This painful figure represents a source of horror and anxiety. Marlene mentions her pain to Joyce:

Marlene: I come down here after six years [...]  
 If I don't come for another six years she'll be  
 twenty-one, will that be OK? [...]  
 I was afraid of this. I only came because  
 I thought you wanted... I just want... *she cries*  
 and continues "No, let me cry. I like it". (Churchill III. 135)

Nevertheless, the efficacious Marlene, who has gone beyond the bounds of her society, is filled with remorse over her lost maternal feelings. Her desire for having a child is indicated when Joyce tells Marlene to have a child again. Marlene's guilty conscience for giving her baby away and not taking care of it leads her to suggest taking Angie, her own child, back if Joyce does not want Angie. In spite of being an autonomous, successful and powerful member of her society, Marlene falls in the trap of 'the maternal instinct'. In one part of the play, Marlene speaks for all of the characters, asking one question "Oh God, why are we all so miserable?" (Churchill I.72). This question is an irony, that despite all the sacrifice, she does not feel happy or satisfied over what she has achieved. She has to pay a price for her success with abortions and giving away her daughter so that she can pursue her career.

"For Lyotard any discussion of the sublime is a discussion about the privation attending complex conflicted silences, those spaces where the unrepresentable is 'present'" (Mafe 58). This is also a space marked by the "indeterminacy generated by the shocking immediacy of the event. It is in effect and by definition aesthetics of fear" (58). Lyotard writes,

the sublime is kindled by the threat of nothing further happening [...] Terrors are linked to privation: privation of light, terror of darkness; privation of others, terror of solitude; privation of language, terror of silence; privation of objects, terror of emptiness; privation of life, terror of death. What is terrifying is that the *It happens* does not happen, that it stops happening. (Lyotard 99)

The foremost terror in *Top Girls* is related to Angie, the representation of the younger generation in the play. Angie is involved in an empty life with no sense of security or tranquility. Marlene, her real mother, does not accept her and leaves her; now Angie lives with Joyce and knows her as a mother. Joyce as the representative of a 'defunct socialism' and a traditional woman with her royalty to the morality and her own gender has no successful position in her own family and her society. Her husband abandons her and her relation with Angie is filled with the lack of communication and the absence of mutual understanding. However, Marlene as a 'capitalist' and modern woman, disloyal to old beliefs, family values, ethics and her own femininity becomes an efficacious director. She values individuality, focuses on herself and acts as a 'Byronic heroine' against the limitations of society. Her social success and her bondage to the civilization exclude her from the security of the family life. Joyce's aggressive and apathetical behavior and Marlene's 'instrumental rationalism' towards Angie leads her into an empty life. Angie is deprived of the sense of security as a result of the socialist and the capitalist society and filled with the sense of fear and anxiety. Even without overlaps in dialogue, the characters in the present scenes manage not to hear or communicate with Angie.

Joyce answers Marlene's questions to Angie for her, not allowing the child to impart any of her plans or dreams of the future. She is simply cut off with "She hasn't an idea in her head what she wants to do" (Churchill II.82). Angie is trapped in an empty and nightmarish position without any protection. As in the last act of play, Angie demonstrates her horror:

Angie: Mum?  
 Marlene: No, she's gone to bed. It's Aunty Marlene.  
 Angie: Frightening.  
 Marlene: Did you have a bad dream?  
 What happened in it? Well you're awake now, aren't you pet?  
 Angie: Frightening. (III. 141)

Nevertheless, "the sublime feeling itself comes into being when terror mingles with pleasure" (Mafe 60) and, the terror-causing threat... [is]...suspended, kept at bay, and held back. This suspense, this lessening of a threat or a danger, provokes a kind of pleasure that is certainly not that of a positive satisfaction, but rather, that of relief. This is still privation, but it is a privation at one remove; the soul is deprived of the threat of being deprived of light, language, life (Lyotard 99).

In the second act, Angie and Kit create a disruptive event in Joyce's backyard, with their resistance against her traditional view. They ignore Joyce's existence, speak softly and try to hide their own presence. When Joyce calls Angie, she remains silent and still and after Joyce leaves her, she says "Wish she was dead" or "I'm going to kill my mother and you're going to watch" (Churchill II.89-90). Angie refuses and rejects Joyce's way of living and is in the search of her aunt, Marlene who is her real mother. She creates a little new world and community in the back yard and has a joyful sense about her own 'totality'. She enjoys her own 'narration', her own privacy and her secrecy. She tries to code her society and this coding is the source of her pleasure.

Joyce: So what's the secret?  
 Marlene: it's a secret ...  
 Joyce: it's some game, some secret society she has with Kit.  
 Marlene: you don't know the password.  
 You don't know the cod. (III. 131)

Privation, that sense of the poverty of nothing happening, generates terror as Angie becomes silenced or eliminated from either a discourse or a sense of being as defined by language. It is as though her ability to participate and to be present as a self is threatened or at least threatened with suspension. Outside some discursive frame she is rendered speechless. Contemporary society accompanied with its representations lead the new generation in the backyard of a house, instead of an 'idyllic garden', where they try to 'represent' their 'unpresentable' identity.

## 2.2. TOTALISING GRAND NARRATIVES: THE FIRST ACT OF *CLOUD NINE*

According to Lyotard, there are two key types of modern meta narrative: the speculative grand narrative and the grand narrative of emancipation.

"For the speculative grand narrative, all possible statements are brought together under a single meta narrative, and their truth and value are judged

according to its rules [...] which means that the truth or falsity of any statement or language game is determined by its relation to the whole of knowledge. Unlike the speculative grand narrative in which knowledge is an end in itself, the grand narrative of emancipation presents knowledge as being valuable because it is the basis of human freedom.”(Malpas, *Lyotard* 26)

*Cloud Nine* is about “Imperialism and invention of race [categories, which are] fundamental aspects of western, industrial modernity” (McClintock 17). The first act is located in the heart of Victorian Africa and Clive heads a family of three generations. The ethics and his norms of authoritarian society are presented in rhyming couplets as Clive introduces himself and the family:

Clive: 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. (Churchill I.i. 251)

The society in macro-political form and the family, as a microcosm of the cultural norms, and the policy of uniting the separate phrase of an unity and to bringing all possible statements together under the single meta narrative of a family and the society, have the role of the speculative grand narrative. Clive, as a head of his family and his society, tries to adjust all rules according to his defined values. Disobedience, desire, lesbianism and homosexuality do not exist in his territory. He focuses on the idea of the bondage of family and natives in the interests of household survival and the reduction of natives’ ability to control their own lives in the interests of British Survival (Wandor 183).

Clive acts as caretaker of his wife and children, a large family of other British colonials and the country’s native population. He strongly adheres to his ideals of a faithful wife, a devoted servant, a silent daughter and a manly son. Edward should behave manly and is strictly forbidden to play with Victoria’s doll. Joshua, as Clive’s boy, is devoted to him: he is “a jewel [...] you’d hardly notice that the fellow’s black” (Churchill I.i.254). Victoria is a silent and dumb female child as stereotype of what female and child ought to be. Clive mentions his royalty to the grand narrative of his family in the statement:

Clive: Through our father we love our Queen and our God, Edward  
... The family protects us from that, you protect me from that ...  
(I.iii. 276-277)

The institution of marriage is referred to repeatedly in the first act and the subordination of women, children, gays and lesbians, and black natives are brought to the fore. As a result of such narrative, Harry’s homosexuality and Ellen’s desire for Betty is ignored; Clive forces them into an unwanted marriage and takes them in the grand narrative of family and the society. They must adjust themselves with family norms and values. In his wedding speech, Harry declares his reasons for marriage:

Harry: My dear friends – what can I say – the empire – the family –  
the married state to which I have always aspired – your shining example  
of domestic bliss ... (I.v. 287)

The marriage between Harry and Ellen is an indication of the victory of Clive’s grand narrative. He states in his speech that “Dangers are past. Our enemies are killed [...] All murmuring of discontent is stilled” (I.v.288). But as Lyotard believes the great threat of such grand narratives is their potential to destroy their own selves, Clive’s words and the value of his world are destroyed by Joshua’s rising of his gun to shoot Clive, while Edward looks on without warning his father. Therefore, Clive as the very epitome of the grand narrative of his family and imperialism is destroyed by his own seeds. In the next section, the fragmentation of this unity will be considered.

Lyotard strongly clings to the fact that the grand narratives are politically problematic and claims that the best means to resist the globalization is increasing the fragmentation of language games. He argues that if the ranges of different language games extend within the society, that society can become more open and pluralist (Malpas, *Lyotard* 30).

In the second act of the play, the family has more liberated lifestyles with no central control; “it is looser, shifts between park and the domestic, even has a rouge ghost who fits nowhere, except that he represents a token

reference to Ireland, almost the last piece of Britain's colonial empire" (Wandor 184). There is no link at all between macro-politics and the personal, no overarching political system, no ideology and no dominance social values within which the characters live. It can be seen a number of people finding ways to follow their own desires (184). The women and the homosexuals have more individual freedom. Instead of the Victorian moral of the first act, a kind of decentralized structure can be observed. (Godiwala 15). The second act reveals the uncertainties and changes of society and individuals, in the context of greater freedom. Marriage is not considered as an ultimate objective for relationships, and heterosexuality is not the obligation of the society. The characters are in the context of a plurality of desires and of individual choices in their life and relationships. Churchill converts the limited house of the first act into the free space of a park.

Betty, a middle-aged woman with the ability of gaining independence, announces that she is leaving Clive. Edward and Victoria are grown up: Victoria and Martin, a married couple, have a small and absent son, Tommy. Edward's womanly behavior is the source of some difficulties in his affairs with Gerry. The Characters are free from the bondages of the grand narrative of family. Clive's words "we are not in this country to enjoy ourselves" (Churchill I.iv.280) in the first act are in the sharp contrast with the pursuit of pleasure predominates in the second act, suggesting that the characters are in the process of freeing themselves from Clive's grand narrative. Variety of possibilities in the characters, and the shattering of sexual taboos are against the monopolized society of Clive (Godiwala 17).

The characters of the second act consequently describe themselves in some unconventional behavior and behave against the norms of old society. Victoria replies to Lin's proposal for sex, "I don't know what Martin would say. Does it count as adultery with a woman?" (Churchill II.ii.296) Lin's remark, "you'd enjoy it" (II.ii.296), suggests that moral codes have now yielded to personal pleasure. Such free social situation leads Edward to identify his inclination to being a 'lesbian' and consequently he moves in with Victoria and Lin. This three-way relationship, which is simultaneously homosexual, heterosexual and incestuous, shatters the grand narrative of the first act and creates a new and little narrative (Whitaker 32). Living in varied sexual narratives gives a social and individual freedom to Gerry so that he can speak of his homosexual relations with a stranger in a train compartment and Betty can express her masturbation experience, and accordingly they are beyond the restrictions of the grand narrative in the first act.

Churchill explains the little narratives of the second act: "The first act, like the society it shows, is male dominated and firmly structured. In the second act, more energy comes from the women and the gays. The uncertainties and changes of society, and a more feminine and less authoritarian feeling, are reflected in the looser structure of the act" (Churchill, *Plays* 246). Hence, the second act is filled with free and little narratives which are heterogeneous events of narration and resist incorporation into meta narratives. Lyotard insists that communicative consensus is impossible because this always involves the translation of little narratives into a meta narrative or discourse (Malpas, *The Postmodern* 37). Churchill tries to destroy the grand narrative of the first act and to create different language games where no universal yardstick can be used to arbitrate. She gives of the freedom of speech to her characters and expands little narratives. But what is the result of such liberty of language and variety of little narratives?

In the act, Victoria and Lin both have children who are grown up in the plurality of language games. They live in the absence of one system and narration and this absence and privation lead them to aggression. Cathy, the aggressive daughter of a lesbian, is a representation of culturally diverse narratives. She wears a pink dress and carries a rifle. A kind of uncertainty and the absence of defined factors can be observed when Lin tells Cathy it is time to go home and to go to bed:

Cathy: I'm not going to bed now.  
 Lin: Not now but early.  
 Cathy: How early?  
 Lin: Not late.  
 Cathy: How not late?  
 Lin: Early.  
 Cathy: How early?  
 Lin: Not late. (Churchill II.ii. 306)

Lack of stable parameters and limitless freedom of little narratives convert Cathy to a destructive child who learn to fight with others. She plays with guns and her playmates are boys and her favorite toys are war toys. Indeed, she is trapped in an uncomfortable situation forced her to violence. Although Cathy loves war toys, she also loves pretty dress: she refuses to wear jeans to school because her friends tease her about being a boy. A sense of horror and terror in such society can be seen through Cathy and her actions.



Consequently, Churchill criticizes such variety of little grand narratives by using Cathy as the source of anxiety and uncertainty. Churchill states that,

Cathy is played by a man, partly as a simple reversal of Edward being played by a woman, partly because the size and presence of a man on stage seemed appropriate to the emotional force of young children, and partly, as with Edward, to show more clearly the issues involved in learning what is considered correct behavior for a girl. (Churchill, *Plays* 246)

“Churchill has presented the pain and confusion of gender ambiguity and radical socio-sexual change across a range of subject positions, including class, sexual, racial and generational differences” (Aston 29). So, it can be said that she, like Lyotard, criticizes the totality of her society in the first act and opens new little narratives in the second act; Nevertheless, neither of these societies is her utopia.

### 3. CONCLUSION

In the present article, a diversity of oppressed and victimized voices is revealed in several parts of Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* and *Cloud Nine*. These suppressed voices in the grand narratives of the society are investigated in the light of the ideas of the postmodern philosopher and thinker Jean- Francois Lyotard particularly by reference to his philosophical concepts of sublime and grand/little narrative. Like Lyotard, Churchill questions the validity of grand narrative surrounding the suppressed and marginalized groups and warns that current society needs something more than a deconstructed narration. She sticks to the fact that adjusting all rules according to a grand narrative and an ideology of the society will destroy the validity of that community.

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