

The Collapse of Heterosexism and Phallogocentrism in Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine*

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Abstract

Caryl Churchill (1938-) is one of the most illustrious contemporary British playwrights whose theatrical productions are world-widely acclaimed. Churchill's theatrical innovations, her explorations with new forms, her double commitment to the causes of both socialism and feminism are among the reasons for which Churchill has been transatlantically awarded and acclaimed. In *Cloud Nine* (1978), that is going to be dealt with in the present study, what is intended to be undertaken is the analysis of the play on the basis of the Butlerian key concept of gender performativity in order to designate Caryl Churchill's anti-heterosexist and anti-phallogocentric outlook. According to Judith Butler, who is regarded to be an eminent poststructuralist theorist, gender identity is not an interior essence of the subject. By considering gender as something fabricated, and thus performative, Butler calls into question the basis of Western civilization, which is totally phallogocentric and heterosexist. Butler's performativity of gender identity, which reveals the baselessness of whatever Western Civilization centers on, is also something we can perceive in Churchill's *Cloud Nine*.

Key words: Caryl Churchill; Judith Butler; Gender identity; Gender performativity; Phallogocentrism; Heterosexism; Binary oppositions

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INTRODUCTION

In the present study, what is going to be dealt with is the exploration of Butler's concept of "gender performativity" in Caryl Churchill's award-winning play *Cloud Nine* (1978). By introducing her theorizations about "gender performativity", Butler challenges the foundations of not only the heterosexuality and phallogocentrism but also the binaristic frame of thinking. Caryl Churchill also acts accordingly and illustrates her opposition to the long-cherished and long-perpetuated concepts of femininity and masculinity in the dominant discourse of heterosexuality through her characterization and her innovative theatricalism especially her cross-acting and cross-dressing techniques. Churchill's highly-acclaimed play abounds in characters who do not show any conformity to the age-old and long-rooted standards considered to be appropriate for women and men in the dominant discourse of patriarchy, which is fundamentally heterosexist. Through the portrayal of her dissident characters, Churchill demonstrates not only the actualization of Butler's theory of "gender performativity" but also the fictitiousness and mythicity of the dominant discourse of "compulsory heterosexuality".

In order to detect these elements in Churchill's *Cloud Nine*, first: we will explicate such concepts as "gender performativity", heterosexuality, and phallogocentrism; then, we will deal with the exploration of the selected play in order to underline the key presented concepts in each part.

GENDER PERFORMATIVITY

Unlike what essentialists assume and unlike the popular belief in the existence of natural and innate differences between the categories of men and women, Butler considers identities as constructed within language and discourse. In the first chapter of her seminal work *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler states 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 (p.3). In other words, these “acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality” (Butler, 1990, p. 139). It is through this process of continual repetition and the exclusion and ostracization of the deviant subjects that the illusion of a fixed and stable identity is promoted, sustained, internalized and believed. Indeed, as Butler states, the performativity of gender implies that gender “has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality” (Butler, p. 136). The institution of gender is thus “socially approved and politically regulated rather than dictated by some kind of internal nature” (Jagger, 2008, p. 27).

In *Cloud Nine* (1978), such concepts as “femininity” and “masculinity”, which have long been cherished in the binaristic frame of thinking, are called into question through characterization and what is witnessed is the acknowledgment of Butler’s theory of “gender performativity”.

In this play, for example, we have the character of Edward who displays feminine attributes despite his masculine biological sex and his father’s incessant indoctrinations to appropriate manliness, a fact that indicates 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” (Butler, 1993, p. 231). The efforts Clive makes “to teach his son to grow up to be a man” appear to be futile since Edward defies the conventional codes of manliness he is forced to adopt and instead embraces feminine attributes. Despite his father’s efforts to inculcate manliness in him and despite his biology, Edward is frequently seen playing with his sister’s doll and shows feminine predispositions. Even when Edward grows up and has a male partner, his illustrating feminine traits and his efforts to make Gerry, his sexual partner, play the role of the husband mirrors a heterosexual couple:

Edward: I’ve got some fish for dinner. I thought I’d make a cheese sauce.

Gerry: I won’t be in.

Edward: Where are you going?

Gerry: for a start I’m going to sauna. Then I’ll see.

Edward: All right. What time will you be back? We’ll eat then.

Gerry: You’re getting like a wife.

Edward: I don’t mind that (Churchill, 1996, p. 306).

Being annoyed by Edward’s femininity, Gerry reminds Edward that they are not a heterosexual couple:

Gerry: Well I’m divorcing you.

Edward: I wouldn’t want to keep a man who wants his freedom

Gerry: Eddy, do stop playing the injured wife, it’s not funny.

Edward: I’m not playing. It’s true.

Gerry: I am not the husband so you can’t be the wife (Churchill, p. 307).

Edward is interested in feminine activities like cooking and knitting and likes to play the role of Gerry’s wife: “I like doing the cooking. I like being fucked” (Churchill, p. 306). Edward’s proclivity to such feminine traits and activities and his eschewal from the masculine ones is enough evidence testifying to not only the performativity of gender identity but also the refutation of the necessary relationship considered to be existing between sex and desire. Since Edward is biologically masculine, he is expected to display masculine attributes and to desire women, but the reverse turns out to be true. Neither does he show any masculinity, nor does he desire women and that is why he is driven into the realm of “unintelligibility” and becomes unrecognizable according to the established codes of heterosexuality.

Victoria, Edward’s sister, and Lin are other characters significant in the verification of Butler’s concept of “gender performativity”. Once being heterosexual and desiring men, Victoria and Lin get acquainted with each other and decide to live together as homosexual partners. The discontinuities and vacillations these characters show in their sexual propensity highlights Butler’s injunction that gender is not “dictated by some kind of internal nature” (Jagger, 2008, p. 27), and it is not an inherent essence.

Cathy, Lin’s daughter, who is frequently urged by her mother to internalize male attributes such as violence and aggressiveness, is another character remarkable in this regard. When Cathy is bored, Lin gets her “to paint a car crash and blood everywhere” (Churchill, 1996, p. 289). She persuades her daughter to play with her gun and shoot her friends: “Don’t hit him, Cathy, kill him. Point the gun, kiou, kiou, kiou. That’s the way” (Churchill, p. 291). Furthermore, she hinders Cathy from wearing frocks and persuades her to wear jeans, while Cathy is interested in wearing frocks. Lin’s treatment with her daughter and her continuous persuasion of Cathy to appropriate masculine traits and to shun femininity is an indication of this fact that gender identity is not an inherent essence, but it is a fabrication that gains its integrity through reiteration; and this reiteration is what Lin insists and relies on in bringing up her daughter.

Cathy’s counterpart is the teenage Edward in the first act. Edward deviates from the established norms in regard to gender propriety and appropriates feminine traits in spite of his father’s constant instillations and endeavors “to teach his son to grow up to be a man”. In opposition to Cathy, who has always been indoctrinated by her mother to appropriate masculinity and has been able (of course to some degree) to adopt the masculine traits, Edward in the first act is incessantly and fruitlessly urged and inculcated by his parents to adopt masculinity and shun femininity. These incoherences and instabilities in the portrayal of the above-mentioned characters bring us to this conclusion that gender has “no ontological status apart from the

various acts which constitute its reality” (Jagger, 2008, p. 136) and thus it is performative.

COMPULSORY HETEROSEXUALITY

The term “compulsory heterosexuality”, first utilized by Adrienne Rich in her famous essay “The Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Existence”(1980) describes “a system whereby women’s sexual orientation towards men is considered to be innate, rather than a preference selected from among a range of different options”(Gamble, 2006, p.173). Rich uses the term “compulsory heterosexuality” to indicate the Western society’s admonition and abomination against all homosexual desires and acts.

In accordance with what Adrienne Rich had stated in her famous essay, Judith Butler also asserts that heterosexuality is not natural and inherent; it is a myth at patriarchy’s disposal in order to perpetuate its dominance and to secure the fulfillment of men’s desire.

Through her genealogical investigation into the formation of the subject, Butler designates that such identity categories as “man” and “woman” are in fact “the effects of institutions, practices, [and] discourses” (Butler, 1990, p. xxix). According to Butler:

The institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire. The act of differentiating the two oppositional moments of the binary results in a consolidation of each term, the respective internal coherence of sex, gender, and desire(Butler, 1990, pp.30-31).

Therefore, gender is introduced as “a kind of enforced cultural performance, compelled by compulsory heterosexuality, and that, as such, it is performative” (Jagger, 2008, p. 20). The fictitiousness of heterosexuality and heteronormativity is unveiled “by discontinuities in lesbian, gay, bisexual and heterosexual contexts, in which gender does not follow from sex, and desire and sexuality do not seem to follow from gender” (Jagger, p. 4).

By portraying a wide spectrum of gender identities, including gay and lesbian identities, Churchill emphasizes 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 and troubles and denaturalizes “the gender categories that support gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality” (Butler, 1990, p. xxviii).

Among the dissident characters in the play, we can refer to Edward, Victoria and Lin.

As discussed earlier, Edward, Clive and Betty’s son, turns out to be a homosexual despite his masculine biology and despite the constant policing of his behavior on the part of his father and also the society. According to the standards of the heterosexual discourse, a person

who is biologically masculine, must desire women, but Edward, by being a homosexual, desires Gerry, his male partner. Edward’s attachment and desire, directed towards Gerry, his homosexual partner, is adequate evidence confirming Butler’s defiance to the “heterosexualization of desire”.

Victoria, Edward’s sister, and Lin also disturb the heterosexual matrix of desire. In spite of being women and despite the heterosexual society’s expectations from them to display proclivity to the persons of the opposite sex, Victoria and Lin, Victoria’s friend, who has divorced from her husband because of her homosexuality, are sexually drawn together and commence a relationship as homosexual partners.

The existence of such characters as Victoria, Lin, and Edward, whose sexual desires are directed towards the persons of the same sex not the opposite sex, demonstrates the possibility of the emergence of gender identities that deviate from the heterosexual indoctrinations and mandates. These dissident identities dismantle the heterosexual society’s normative standards and illustrate their fictitiousness.

PHALLOGOCENTRISM

It is a term first coined by Jacques Derrida as the condensation of “phallogocentrism” and “logocentrism” (Rayne & Barbera, 2010, p. 529). Phallogocentrism is defined as “the patriarchal dominance of sexuality and the legal system” (Leitch, 2001, p. 2490). According to *the Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms*, logocentrism “is bound up in the drive to find stability, presence and meaning in objective concepts” while phallogocentrism “acknowledges the masculine orientation both of this and of systems that privilege (the concept of) phallus as the signifying source of power” (Childs & Fowler, 2006, p.171).

Butler mentions her aim in *Gender Trouble* (1990) as “to center on-and decenter-such defining institutions: phallogocentrism and compulsory heterosexuality” (Butler, 1990, p. xxix). The reason for her efforts to decenter and deconstruct such institutions as heterosexuality and phallogocentrism is the fact that she considers those institutions responsible for the naturalization and hierarchization of such concepts as femininity and masculinity. Churchill also tries to decenter those aforementioned institutions in her widely-acclaimed and award-winning play *Cloud Nine* (1978). The strategies Churchill employs to achieve her purpose are her theatrical techniques such as the utilization of non-linear plot structure; and her defiance to the age-old heterosexual standards (discussed in the previous parts) by calling into question the long-established identity categories such as feminine and masculine and proving the baselessness of those concepts.

Cloud Nine (1978), developed in a Joint Stock workshop, is a two-act play, of which the first act is set in

colonial Africa during the reign of Queen Victoria and the second act of which occurs in the twentieth century Britain at the time of Sexual Liberation Movement. Churchill's juxtaposition of the Victorian time with the contemporary Britain results from her discovery during the workshop period that those participating the workshop felt "they had inherited Victorian traditions and ways of thinking about sexuality which they struggled to overcome or transform" (Aston & Reinelt, 2000 p. 182). Therefore, Churchill sets the first act in Victorian Africa and the second in the 1979 Britain. Between the two acts of the play, historical time goes forward for 100 years, while the characters become only 25 years older in order for the Churchill to achieve her purpose of making a parallel between racial and sexual oppression. As Amelia Kritzer asserts, by rejecting a linear structure, Churchill intends to promote "non-patriarchal subjectivity" (Kritzer, 1991, p. 45).

The second parameter through which Churchill shakes the foundations of phallogocentrism is the portrayal of characters that destabilize the traditional gender demarcations and gender categories such as feminine and masculine. Churchill does this by illustrating Butler's theory of performativity of gender identity in her characterization.

The foundations of phallogocentrism, based on incessant endeavors in order to find stability and meaning, are again challenged by Churchill in *Cloud Nine*. The portrayal of the fluidity of gender identity and the instability of such terms as masculine and feminine, suggested through Churchill's extensive utilization of cross-dressing and theatrical transvestism, are among the strategies that assail and defame phallogocentrism. It is through this theatrical convention that "the notion of an original or primary gender identity is often parodied within the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch-femme identities" (Butler, 1990, p. 187). Churchill benefits from such a theatrical convention in the portrayal of some of her characters like Betty, Edward, Cathy and Joshua.

Betty, Clive's wife, is played by a man because Betty is the incarnation of whatever the male-dominated society expects women to be:

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 (Churchill, 1996, p.251).

Churchill utilizes this theatrical technique in the case of Betty for several reasons. First, Churchill has Betty played by a man in order to show that Betty's gender, which is represented through the male performer, is the effect and result of the dominant ideology and the mandatory discourse of heterosexuality. If Betty had been brought up under the reign of a different ideology, she would have been constituted differently. Second, the performativity of gender and Butler's conviction that gender does not

necessarily follow from sex is vigorously underpinned through Churchill's utilization of a male actor to play the role of Betty. Betty is biologically female, but her gender, which is performed by a male performer, is demonstrated as masculine; the indirect and oppositional relationship between Betty's biology (sex) and her gender (her social and cultural construction) reveals the illusory heterosexual assumptions pertaining to the supposed relationship between sex and gender and reaffirms Butler's injunction that "heterosexual normativity ought *not* to order gender, and that such ordering ought to be opposed" (1990, p. xiii) and Churchill's strategy to oppose heteronormativity is her cross-acting technique through which Churchill impedes heteronormativity to discipline and order gender according to its standards and norms. Third, to follow Butler's idea and to challenge and oppose the dominant discourse of heterosexuality, Churchill calls into question the category of woman and drives Betty into the realm of unintelligibility. According to Butler woman is "a term in process", which is a confirmation of Simone de Beauvoir's claim that one is not born, but rather *becomes* a woman. The category of "woman" as "a term in process" is legitimized and passed as real through "a sustained set of acts" and reiteration which are imposed upon the individual by the agents of patriarchy who are Betty's mother and husband.

To denaturalize and destabilize gender and to uproot the pervasive assumptions about natural or presumptive heterosexuality Churchill makes Edward played by a woman and in this way blurs the distinctions between femininity and masculinity. Edward's anatomy is masculine, while his gender, which is performed by a female actress, appears to be feminine. This discrepancy between the outward appearance and the inward essence is indicative of the cultural and social construction of gender and deceptiveness and unreality of appearance. On the other hand, Clive's attempts to force Edward to appropriate the traditional male behavior and to enter male circle are ridiculed and parodied by the playwright for Clive's efforts are directed toward Edward, who is played by a woman. Clive tries to incorporate his son into male community and to dissociate him from the territory of women, while on the stage it appears that he is striving to force a woman to be manly, to accept masculinity and to disengage herself from the female territory she belongs to. As witnessed throughout the play, thanks to the utilization of drag which "fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity" (Butler, 1990, p. 186), Clive's efforts are parodied and since Clive is regarded to be the embodiment of the heterosexist discourse, the whole system of heterosexuality is parodied and ridiculed.

The four-year-old Cathy, Lin's daughter, who is played by a grown-up male actor, is another remarkable character through whom Churchill pokes fun at certain attitudes

regarded to be appropriate for a girl and challenges the heterosexual binary frame within which individuals have to move. Although Cathy is biologically female, she is played by a grown-up male performer because she is the production of an unconventional mother who has striven hard to make her daughter appropriate masculine traits such as aggressiveness and violence. Throughout the second act, Cathy sings songs which are replete with offensive words; it is in this regard that Cathy's songs are quite different from the songs children normally sing:

Cathy: Yum yum bubblegum.
Stick it up to your mother's bum.
When it's brown
Put it down
Yum yum bubblegum (Churchill, 1996, p. 289).

Instead of singing songs that are filled with innocence and beauty, she is indulged in singing offensive songs that abound in images from the male realm:

Cathy: Batman and Robin
Had a batmobile
Robin done a fart
Paralyzed the wheel.
The wheel couldn't take it.
The engine fell apart,
All because of Robin
And his supersonic fart (Churchill, p.298).

As we see, by intentionally reversing the binary oppositions, Churchill wants to manifest the emptiness and absurdity of such terms as not only feminine and masculine but also the polarized attributes ascribed to femininity and masculinity. She wants to indicate the "artificial binary relation between the sexes, as well as an artificial internal coherence within each term of that binary" (Butler, 1990, p. 26). By so doing, she challenges all the historically maintained norms in the dominant discourse of heterosexuality and also phallogocentrism's fictitiousness and mythicity.

CONCLUSION

In Churchill's *Cloud Nine*, what Churchill tries to convey is the artificiality and constructedness of such terms as "feminine" and "masculine" within the dominant discourse of heterosexuality and to highlight the emptiness that entails the binary frame of thinking maintained and nurtured in the "compulsory heterosexuality". In fact, what Churchill suggests in this drama is a vivid illustration of Butler's key concept of "gender performativity". Thanks to her own theatrical expertise, Churchill employs not only theatrical transvestism and cross-acting technique but also characterization in order to concretize and substantiate Butler's conviction that gender is not an inherent essence; it is the product of the dominant ideology and is socially and culturally constructed. By not only illustrating the constructedness and performativity of gender identity and challenging such concepts as femininity and masculinity in her characterization of a wide spectrum of identities but also her utilization of cross-acting technique, Churchill assails the foundations of heterosexuality and phallogocentrism.

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