

Aspects of second-wave feminism in top girls



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Second-wave feminism was incredibly significant in shaping women's rights. Women were fighting for their right to be equals with men, as they were sick of being stuck in the house, being made to raise a family; while their husbands got to have jobs and be the sole breadwinners in the family. For once, women were openly talking about and trying to understand the core of their oppression, so that they could do something about it (Osborne). In Caryl Churchill's play *Top Girls*, she attempted to touch on some of the bigger issues that women faced during this time. She used a double and sometimes triple casting strategy in her play to represent that these issues had not only been a problem for women in the modern world, but for most women throughout history. Some of the most significant problems for women during second-wave feminism that Churchill described were: reproductive rights, women not supporting women, and the constant battle between the "traditional" woman and the "progressive" woman.

Reproductive rights were one of the most pressing issues of second-wave feminism, which was made very apparent by Churchill in this play. Many of the characters faced problems based around reproductive rights. As a general example, several of the characters from different points in history mentioned their experiences with reproductive rights during Act I Scene I. Both Nijo and Pope Joan were characterized as having not been entirely maternal women, as would have been expected of them during their lives. Nijo was forced to have children, forced to give up a child, and had trouble bonding with the children that she was allowed to keep and raise. Pope Joan became pregnant with a child that she was not particularly interested in having, and when she gave birth to it, she was stoned to death for doing so

(Churchill 1149). To cite a more specific example, the main character Marlene was faced with a similar situation. She became pregnant with a daughter she did not want and chose to give her to her sister Joyce to raise. As the play drew to a close, the plot revealed that Joyce had always resented Marlene for making this decision, even though it was the only way she could have a child. She felt that she had shirked off her duties as a woman by giving up her daughter and felt jealous because she was unable to have her own child (Churchill 1186). Marlene knew that she was making the best decision at the time for her child, because she knew that she wanted to have a more career-oriented lifestyle than a family-oriented one.

In keeping with her character, Marlene also revealed that she had two abortions after giving birth to her daughter Angie, which was one of the major reproductive rights that second-wave feminism was fighting for: “the legalisation of abortion was a major issue for the feminist movement. Many... campaigned for abortion on demand both as a means of eradicating the often tragic results of back street abortions and to give women the right to choose what happened to their bodies” (Osborne). People maintained that women should never want to give up their children, let alone abort one, but Marlene’s character fought against all these expectations, in keeping with the second-wave feminist movement. This was her right to choose; but such a choice came with a cost, as Marlene was cast out by those close to her. She was a woman, and based on this fact alone, she should have wanted to keep her child no matter what. However, being a woman herself, and knowing the difficulties Marlene had to face because of her choices, Joyce should have tried to be more supportive of her sister’s decision.

Joyce's lack of support for her sister and her choices was representative of another big issue faced by second-wave feminists: women not supporting women. There were so many women during this time who thought that they were above the problem of female oppression, but in reality, they were a part of the problem themselves. For example, in Act I Scene II, Marlene has an exchange with a client named Jeanine. She is looking for a new job, but she also hopes to have a family someday. Marlene explains to this woman that if she wants to get a job, she had better not mention that she is getting married or that she may want to have children (Churchill 1157-1158). Since Marlene had been so successful in her career by not having gotten married or having children, she was trying to pass these values off onto her clients, because she felt that was the only way they would be able to have strong careers as well. Just as Marlene did not understand why Jeanine would want to have a career and a family, her sister Joyce did not understand why she would choose a career over having a family. Marlene, also, did not understand why Joyce would rather raise a child than be out there having a career and living her own life.

During Act II Scene II, Marlene and Joyce had an argument about exactly this. They went back and forth with one another about why the other was living their life unfulfilled, and their individual characters really shone through. Joyce could not understand why Marlene would abandon her child and her family just for some job. She was characterized as being much more traditional and less strong willed than Marlene. Marlene got angry with Joyce, and shot back that she could never understand why Joyce would ever stay with a man who she clearly did not love, and wondered why she would be so

supportive of their father, who was so suppressive of their mother: “ I knew when I was thirteen, out of their house, out of them, never let that happen to me” (Churchill 1189). She saw how unhappy her parents were and knew she did not want to live her life that way, so she decided not to have a family to avoid it. Joyce could never understand this, and the play ended with the two of them still at odds on the issue. According to Victoria Bazin, Churchill did this on purpose, to show the severity of the women not supporting women issue: “ Churchill portrays sisterhood as a site of conflict and tension rather than unity and solidarity” (Bazin 119). Churchill was trying to point out that the issue of women not supporting women, or internal misogyny, could affect even the most special relationships. Sisterhood is typically painted as a sacred bond that can never be broken, but the reality is, that even this can be destroyed by patriarchal ideologies.

The issue of women not supporting women was exacerbated by another issue that was addressed during second-wave feminism, which was women being made to choose between being “ traditional” or “ progressive”. Those who were more traditionally oriented were those who chose to stay home and raise a big family, and those who were more progressive were those who would forgo a big family in order to pursue a career. The more traditional women expected a man to take care of them, while progressive women were able to provide for themselves. In *Top Girls*, Marlene and her coworker’s wife, Mrs. Kidd, are a prime example of this. This represents a major point of conflict, because Mrs. Kidd was so incredibly traditional, and Marlene was so progressive and forward thinking. Not only did this display a conflict between these two women as individuals, but between all women that identified with

either group during the time of second-wave feminism. In the plot of the play at the point where Marlene and Mrs. Kidd met, Marlene had just gotten a management job at her employment agency over Mrs. Kidd's husband. Even though it was not up to her to change her lifestyle around for this man, that was what Mrs. Kidd expected of Marlene. Because her husband was having such a hard time with this transition of power, and with working underneath a woman, he had been acting depressed and listless at home. Instead of telling her husband to swallow his pride and deal with the situation, she barged into Marlene's office asking her to step down from the management position. She expected Marlene to change her life around to make her husband feel better about himself: " I put him first every inch of the way. And now what do I get? You women this, you women that. It's not my fault. You're going to have to be very careful how you handle him. He's very hurt" (Churchill 1173). Because her husband was beaten out for a job by a woman, he began blaming all women for his issues, and bellyaching about anything related to women in general. Marlene and Mrs. Kidd had conflicting views on how to handle the situation, because they belonged to different " groups" of women.

Three of the biggest issues that women faced during the time of second-wave feminism were reproductive rights, women not supporting women, and " progressive" women versus " traditional" women. Caryl Churchill's play *Top Girls* deals with all these issues throughout the entirety of the plot. Marlene, the main character, was the most progressive character in the play, and she faced all three of these issues. Churchill was trying to show that even though

women's rights had come a very long way already, that it still had a very long way to go.

Works Cited

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