

Character, sexual  
identity and the anti-  
play: how caryl  
churchill achieves  
cohere...



In *Cloud Nine*, playwright Caryl Churchill examines questions of gender identity, sexuality and individual freedom as they exist within two traditional, oppressive ideological paradigms: colonial imperialism and masculine hegemony. By juxtaposing these worlds of political and sexual dominance, Churchill draws a parallel between the paralysis exacted by both frameworks upon the development and expression of unique, authentic personhood. Churchill dramatizes her argument in startling fashion by challenging the touchstones of theatrical convention. Specifically, she defies usual methods of depiction, for some of the main characters in *Cloud Nine* are portrayed by actors who do not, in any physical or obvious way, resemble those characters. When violating spectator/reader expectation so drastically, the playwright runs the risk of alienating her audience. Because Churchill distorts and uproots the standards of dramatic characterization in such a bold way, the staging of *Cloud Nine* can potentially border on the ludicrous or gimmicky. So thrown is the audience, that members might start to disengage from the activity of the play and dismiss its theatrical experimentation as too blatant to be regarded seriously, too overdone to be clever or provocative. However, if such an impression of *Cloud Nine* is registered, I believe this is a failing not of the play but of an audience conditioned to assign fixed attributes to characters (or to drama generically) in order to render them intelligible. *Cloud Nine* is not interested in offering satisfaction in this rather prosaic manner, or of indulging its audience in this simple, customary process of understanding. In challenging her audiences to re-imagine what a “play” can look and sound like, Churchill simultaneously challenges them to re-imagine the traditional ideologies she wishes to consider. Therefore,

<https://assignbuster.com/character-sexual-identity-and-the-anti-play-how-caryl-churchill-achieves-coherence-through-fragmentation-and-inversion-of-gender-roles-in-cloud-nine/>

coherence in *Cloud Nine*, if not achieved through a collective recognition of “form” or “character,” results paradoxically from its very lack of surface cohesion. It is through her style of fragmentation, redefinition and inversion of gender roles that Churchill can carefully examine her subject and construct a powerful polemic, her case for feminism. The manner in which I believe Churchill arrives at her greater, cohesive statement (through a layering of seemingly disjointed elements) is multi-fold. On the most immediate level, Churchill is attempting to deconstruct the concept of “gender,” divorce it from an erroneously assumed organic origin or justification (a. k. a. “sex”), in order to argue that gender is neither “essential” nor “biological.” Rather, it is a social construct reflecting, and sustained by, a greater ideological framework. Therefore, Churchill must avoid treating her characters as autonomous, fully-realized independent “persons,” and represent them instead as vessels for the articulation of accepted social-sexual mores. She accomplishes this representation and lays the groundwork for her primary artistic and political argument, in the first act of her play. Act One of *Cloud Nine* takes place both literally and figuratively in the male imperialist milieu: set in a British colony in Africa during the Victorian era (colonialism), and featuring main characters whose gender is fixed but true sexual identity censored (masculine hegemony). In this first act, Churchill engages her distinct dramatic approach, her fragmented “gender-play,” in order to portray her characters’ sexual confusion. Betty, the wife of the primary patriarchal figure, Clive, is played by a man. Edward, Clive’s son who exhibits a significant—and thus unacceptable by patriarchal standards—degree of effeminate behavior, is played by a woman. In addition to the

patent (anti-)characterization choices, the dialogue in Act One further attests to the notion that freedom of personal expression is stifled within a male-dominated social context. Specifically, the dialogue in this act reads/sounds highly contrived and controlled, as if filtered through the eyes, ears and lips of patriarchal forces (i. e. Clive). Absent from the subjugated characters, as a mark of their “ slave” status, is a clear connection between speaker and content of speech. For example, Ellen, Edward’s governess, is one of the first sexually bold and progressive characters we encounter. She harbors, and attempts to express, romantic feelings for Betty. When she tries to profess this love, the figure of “ Betty-as-man”/” Betty-as-Clive” seems completely ignorant to both Ellen’s innuendo and her more overt actions. In Scene Two of the first act, Ellen very deliberately, without hesitation or ambiguity, kisses Betty. But Betty simply bypasses this startling occurrence; she neither questions nor directly addresses the potential meaning behind the kiss. Instead, like a conditioned subject, Betty returns to the script of the patriarchy, discussing her adulterous—but more normative—feelings for Harry (Clive’s friend, and also a symbol of masculine hegemony). She says to Ellen, “ Everyone will hate me, but it’s worth it for Harry...Harry says we shouldn’t go away. But he worships me.” Ellen then attempts to place herself in the “ role” occupied by Harry, to stand as a lover for Betty, by replicating the form of his speech: “ I worship you Betty,” she mimics. However, Betty cannot intuit the depth of feeling behind these lines, and mistakes Ellen’s words as merely an assertion of friendship. Later in the act, to Ellen’s explicit admission that she loves Betty and would rather die than leave her, Betty rationalizes: “ You don’t feel what you think you do. It’s the loneliness here

and the climate is very confusing. Come and have breakfast, Ellen dear, and I'll forget about. Granted, I am reluctant to even personify Betty in this way, or attribute to her "form" any instance of self-guided thought or action. To do so confers onto Betty a kind of humanity or distinct individuality her lack of personal sexual awareness precludes. It is inevitable that Ellen will never speak or engage honestly with Betty, for the latter is not a genuine, free-thinking and organically-feeling "person." She is the product of ideology, and the puppeteer pulling the strings behind her every move—the patriarchy—is undeniably omnipresent. Betty and similar subjugated characters are disconnected from their authentic sexual identities, as evidenced (and emphasized) by Churchill's deconstructed style and cross-gendered casting. In Act Two, Caryl Churchill continues her deliberate theatrical experimentation by further manipulating the physical form of her characters and tampering with her audience's expectation for consistency. Specifically, in this second act, she shifts established roles, instructing that they be portrayed by actors of the same sex (e. g. Betty is played by a woman and an adult-Edward by a male actor). By making these changes, and extending her degree of stylistic fragmentation, Churchill suggests that her formerly-oppressed figures have escaped the identity-defining fetters of the patriarchy. Characters now achieve a fuller reconciliation between mind and body, between words and feeling, as marked by a more honest expression of sexual preferences. Individual persuasions are embraced and possessed to a greater extent. For example, Act Two features the new character of Lin, an open lesbian who bluntly articulates her same-sex feelings for Victoria. She and Victoria hold an exchange in Scene Two where the two women, rather

<https://assignbuster.com/character-sexual-identity-and-the-anti-play-how-caryl-churchill-achieves-coherence-through-fragmentation-and-inversion-of-gender-roles-in-cloud-nine/>

than their respective, manufactured “types,” engage in active debate. Lin’s personality seems to confound Victoria, who at one point complains, “You’re so inconsistent, Lin.” This line nicely demonstrates the differences in the worlds Churchill captures in the separate halves of her play. Firstly, this piece of dialogue reveals that Lin is permitted the luxury of a mercurial nature in Act Two, which itself is the marker of a complex, non-fixed identity. Secondly, the arousal of emotion and frustration Victoria conveys would not have been possible in Act One, where the opinions of main characters were safely and strictly “colored within the lines” of the social context.

Additionally, in Act Two, Churchill bestows upon her more forthright homosexual characters strength of conviction and dominance of voice, in this way rewarding their honesty and hinting that theirs is the healthier sexual alternative. For example, there are moments in this second half of *Cloud Nine* where Victoria expresses her lesbian sentiments, thereby conveying liberation of thought, recognition of sexual identity, and transcendence over the paralysis of the patriarchal mire. She asks of Lin, with a kind of insecurity that testifies to the sincerity of her words, “Would you love me if I went on a climbing expedition in the Andes mountains?... Would you love me if my teeth fell out?... Would you love me if I loved ten other people?” However, she also vacillates, afflicted with uncertainty. Even though she hopes that Lin will love her through these different scenarios, Victoria rejects Lin’s invitation to come live with her. Lin, on the other hand, remains unfazed and responds, “Christ, don’t then. I’m not asking because I need to live with someone. I’d enjoy it, that’s all, we’d both enjoy it.” This lack of pretense reflects authenticity of character. Because she does not

compromise her position, her desires, in the face of Victoria's criticism and doubt, Lin prevails as the stronger, more self-actualized female character. However, to fully understand how Churchill skillfully arrives at the grand coherence of her work through a careful fragmentation of style, one must consider the fact that Victoria expresses any amount of reluctance to honor her true sexual desires. Compared to the confident voice and fully-aware, unapologetic figure of Lin, Victoria seems weak and even a little false. This is because she, unlike Lin, remains focused or interested in assuming a role of some kind, and consequently invokes the conformist expectations of the status quo. For example, earlier in Scene Two, Lin very simply and brazenly asks Victoria, "Will you have sex with me?" To this request, Victoria ambivalently responds, "I don't know what Martin [her husband] would say. Does it count as adultery with a woman?" Her thoughts continue to be tied to, and conditioned by, the patriarchy. Rather than focus on her needs, interests and desires as aroused by Lin, Victoria is preoccupied with regard for her husband. She is more conflicted about the threat she might pose to the stability of their typical husband/wife dynamic than she is concerned about honoring her feelings for Lin. Victoria is not alone in presenting this most interesting paradox, between averring a sexual identity that challenges tradition, yet seeming to want to belong, or find her proper place, within that very same theoretical framework. Gerry, Edward's partner, also clings to convention while simultaneously purporting to reject it. Feeling suffocated and no longer desirous of Edward, Gerry lashes out critically at him: "You're getting like the wife...stop it...stop playing the injured wife, it's not funny... I'm not the husband, so you can't be the wife. In these lines, Gerry is

<https://assignbuster.com/character-sexual-identity-and-the-anti-play-how-caryl-churchill-achieves-coherence-through-fragmentation-and-inversion-of-gender-roles-in-cloud-nine/>

performing, hoping to convince not only Edward, but also himself, of a contempt for traditional sexual paradigms that is fundamentally fraudulent. By so vehemently expressing his dislike of these old-fashioned concepts, he in fact appears to subscribe to the standard more so than the object of his attack (Edward). Why the apparent contradiction? Why does Churchill bother reversing her initial cross-gendered casting, in order to vividly illustrate the dangers of male dominance, if she is only going to continue to depict some characters in the “better” world of Act Two as adhering to patriarchal tradition? Is she undermining her own style choices – for, if not journeying towards some greater, unifying purpose, does not the heightened fragmentation of the play remain relegated to the arena of pure contrivance? Perhaps – except for that the argument Churchill wishes to construct in *Cloud Nine* surpasses simple oppositional comparison. Churchill is not content simply proposing feminism as a preferable framework on the basis that it contradicts patriarchal thinking. After all, the most radical and free characters in *Cloud Nine* are the ones who do not conform to a structure, or play by a codified set of rules. Lin certainly falls into this category, as does the adult Edward of Act Two. Compared to Gerry, Edward, with his mellow, subdued and decidedly “un-dramatic” responses to his lover’s criticism, is the stronger and wiser of the two men. According to his own admission, he earnestly wants to act the wife (“I don’t mind that,” he asserts) and indulge the related domestic responsibilities. For example, he would very much like to knit for Gerry. He usually prepares dinner, but would not object to Gerry having a turn; Gerry is just a subpar cook: “You can if you like [make dinner],” he assures Gerry. “You’re just no good at it, that’s all.” Edward’s



focus is much more pragmatic and realistic; his words attend to his true needs and desires. However, he does not regard these wishes or activities (such as knitting and cooking) as mechanisms of a greater social schema. They are simply his personal preferences. By expressing himself in a “traditional” manner, Edward is not perpetuating a patriarchal framework the way Gerry mistakenly assumes. Like Lin, Edward is merely heeding the mandates of his heart. “Everyone’s always tried to stop me being feminine,” Edward protests, and then affirms, “I’d rather be a woman.” In other words, Edward is not content simply being an overtly effeminate or gay man. Before he can fully express his sexual identity, Churchill suggests that Edward must completely purge himself of his exterior definition (his outward appearance as a “man”) and assume (or perform) an entirely different gender. This is the deeper, more provocative point Churchill has been chasing over the course of her play, and the most compelling and effective way in which her style of fragmentation coheres to frame her conclusion. Through her systematic deconstruction of form and character, Churchill successfully separates the social notion of “gender” from the biological determination of “sex.” She therefore dramatizes how gender roles are essentially vehicles of control, assigned by a patriarchal context as a means of sustaining its oppressive ideology. In recasting Act Two with actors who more closely match the gender of their “personas,” Churchill suggests that her characters are free to explore and honor their true identities. And it is precisely because the audience now expects these figures to demonstrate autonomy of thought, that the persistence of characters such as Victoria and Gerry to define themselves using neat terms and narrowly-conceived “roles,” seems

antiquated, incongruous and inappropriate. It is against this backdrop of ostensible paradox and audience confusion that Churchill can piece together her ultimate message: it is not the manifestation of ideology, but the adherence to an ideology in and of itself, that presents a problem.

Regardless of its complexion, whether patriarchal or feminist, radical or reactionary, unless one challenges the very infrastructure of paradigm, one is fated to perpetuate a stale (and inherently repressive) power dynamic. Because Victoria and Gerry continue to subscribe to a limited theoretical framework, they are not truly “ free,” authentic individuals. They must completely re-imagine the parameters by which they interpret their sexual identity, for the ultimate goal cannot be the discovery or adoption of some kind of fixed “ role.” As evidenced by characters such as Lin and adult-Edward, the greatest freedom and sense of personal identity is attained when one simply acts to benefit one’s own self-interests. On the opposite side of freedom, or at least the kind of personal freedom this play is pushing its figures towards, lie a number of “-isms”: feminism, anti-colonialism, egalitarianism, etc. The unwillingness of Caryl Churchill to represent character as a static entity in *Cloud Nine* is essentially a way of conceiving of these “-isms” so that they themselves do not become static. In order for a theoretical framework to remain fresh and relevant, and avoid devolving into an oppressive “ standard,” it must be flexible enough to attend to the changing attitudes of the greater culture it serves. Churchill mimics this flexibility, this malleability of structure and frenetic energy of forward-movement, through her distinct stylistic approach. Her refusal to settle for stasis and standardization in the thematic construction and delivery of her

drama is the grand, cohesive endeavor of the play. Through her rebellion against dramatic convention and the startling fragmentation of form this artistic experiment entails, Caryl Churchill argues convincingly for the promise of her characters' sexual liberation outside the confines of traditional ideology.