
REWRITING THE WITCH IN CARYL CHURCHILL'S VINEGAR TOM: A GENDER AND POWER ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

*This article discusses the way in which Churchill rewrites the witch who is traditionally connected to power of females and threat to male domination by throwing up the patriarchal narratives that dwell on the values of repression, fear and male control of society. According to this article, the traditional depictions of women, gender roles and control dynamics are deconstructed in this body of work when the author Caryl Churchill presents a play *Vinegar Tom* (1976), which was especially relevant in terms of the exploitation of witchcraft in historical contexts.. Using the critical gender and power critical approach, the study explores how the play depicts the women whose witchcraft was accused, associating their oppression with the wider social, economic and patriarchal systems. The application of the feminist theory, post structuralist thought, and the politics of power forms a crucial element in the study as the symbolic expression of witchcraft in *Vinegar Tom* is used as the weapon to attack society. The present article fits into the discourse of gender, power, and women marginalization considering *Vinegar Tom* as a piece of subversiveness that depicts the redefinition of the witch as the symbol of defiance to male control rather than solely an isolated evil character.*

Keyword: *Caryl Churchill, Vinegar Tom, Witchcraft, Gender, Power, Feminist Analysis*

INTRODUCTION

Vinegar Tom (1976) written by Caryl Churchill is one such play which has come up in a time of great change in history, a time when feminism was becoming a powerful entity in politics as well as social arena. The next-wave feminism of the 1970s was already on its way to break down the traditional gender roles by pushing feminine gender equality in realms including sexuality, career path and reproductive health (Tong, 2009). The above is the same background in which Churchill developed *Vinegar Tom*, a play, which explores delicate interplay between gender, power, and oppression. The play is relatively very bold in that the witch figure through which many have historically understood female defiance, debauchery, and risk is turned around in patriarchal systems that work to regulate women body as well as their actions.

The central issue within *Vinegar Tom* is an intentional rewriting of the witch whose conventional history has represented the dreads and the anxieties of patriarchal cultures. Churchill in the play re-contextualizes the historical occurrence of the witch trials by employing the context in order to criticize the systemic and gendered processes which are historically related to controlling, punishing and silencing women (Dolan, 2005). The witch character has been recurrently shown as a female incarnation of devilishness, dread, and supernatural danger in addition to being a scapegoat of anxieties about female independence and strength in the society (Macfarlane, 1970). By dwelling on these themes, Churchill not only sheds light on historical oppression of women but also criticizes the development of these methods of controlling people

in present times.

The witch trials of the past that climaxed during the early modern years were rooted strongly in the practices of the patriarchal societies as they held women and especially women who defied the laid down gender roles, as creating instability in society (Miller, 2001). In most situations, allegations of witchcraft became a weapon to rid the communities of the women who were perceived to be stands in the way of the male rule or whose character did not conform to the male beliefs on femininity (Kramer & Sprenger, 1487). Independent, educated or just not obeying the known models of gender life, women used to become the objects of the witchcraft allegations which gave the systems dominated by males an opportunity to depower women. These trials were not mere matters of the supernatural conviction; they were issues of fortification of the patriarchal powers over the bodies and actions of womenfolk (Baker, 2008).

There is a difference between Vinegar Tom performed by Churchill because it incorporates the witch trials into the wider context of gendered constructs of power and permeates the past to the present. The play applies the theme of witchcraft as a symbol of women oppression both in real life and during the past times. Although the witches of Vinegar Tom appear to be the casualties of a patriarchal society that serves to punish the witches when they deviate out of the strict boundaries of gender norms, they are also viewed as portraying impressive opposition towards such systems. Churchill uses the character of the witch (projecting her as someone as a force of subversion and as someone encouraging women to take action and take charge) to disrupt the established discourses regarding female action and conformity (Gergen, 2003). This move can be used to empower women and show them as people who are active and not passive victims of their society.

The study seeks to understand how Vinegar Tom transforms the witch who was a wicked character of horror and oppression into a source of defiance, and power. Examining the way in which the play characterizes magic as a force of both oppression and resistance, the article attempts to answer how Churchill censures the gendered power structure not only in the past but also in the present that has oppressed the women. In particular, the study will analyze the way that the play has deconstructed the imagery of the patriarchal vision of witchcraft and dismantled it into a source of resistance to the gender-based authority.

In addition, this paper will point out the larger contexts of Vinegar Tom as it relates to feminist theory and gender studies. The research will become an addition to the overall goal of studying how historical narratives and cultural myths are used to control women body and behaviors through an analysis of the role that witchcraft plays in the play. The paper will also cover the analysis of how the radical reimagining of the witches by Churchill can reflect the feminist issues regarding the policing of female autonomy and how women across history, challenged such policing. Finally, the goal of the given research is to show that Vinegar Tom is not only a commentary on how witch trials in the past were unfair to the targeted representatives of the female gender but also a very relevant statement on how the power and independence of women are still being disputed and patrolled in the modern world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender and power (in Caryl Churchill Vinegar Tom 1976) is a theme that has received different critical perceptions with scholars highlighting the Marxist and feminist issues of the theme. Specifically, the representation of witchcraft and its effect on the power relations between genders have been sitting at the center of much scholarly debate concerning the play. In this literature review, therefore, we will describe major literature and arguments on the theme gender and power in Vinegar Tom identify what has been

covered or discussed and what is lacking in literature and illustrate how the study will fill these gaps.

Vinegar Tom has long been used as an object of the study by feminist scholars who see it as a story that critiques the oppression of women in the past in the context of witchcraft. According to Linda Hutcheon (1988), it is seen that the work of Churchill recontextualizes the victimization of women in the course of history, especially during the witch trials. As suggested by Hutcheon, the figure of witch is seen as a metaphor utilized by Churchill to comment on the construction of femininity by stating that women were historically constructed as powerful and sinful. The image of the witch, therefore, makes an appearance as an ambivalent symbol: being both fearful and the expression of a certain form of power that needs to be suppressed and thus, patriarchal society produces (Hutcheon, 1988). The analysis offered by Hutcheon accentuates how the play, *Vinegar Tom*, explores the ways in which this portrays women who are not always the victims of patriarchal systems but the ones that are empowering, to the point of undermining a system which does not suit them to begin with.

In continuation of the argument by Hutcheon, the theory of gender performativity by Judith Butler (1990) provides an immense tool in attempting to understand *Vinegar Tom*. The main argument of Butler that gender is not biological but rather constructed and performative reflects the idea of Churchill who criticizes gender roles in the play. Although, Butler explains how performance is used to create a sense of gender identity, it can be applied to emphasize the manner in which the women in *Vinegar Tom* break the gender norms. The women of the play do not merely accept the role designated to them by the society, on the contrary, they fight these roles, and reclaim their power in the sense that goes against the patriarchal norms of their epoch. To take an example, the witchcraft allegations against these women are not only cast as a form of victimization, but it has been shown as a response to women refusing to fall under the gendered norms of their expected behavior (Butler, 1990). This highlighting of resistance against oppression brings out the critique on patriarchal gender expectations in *Vinegar Tom*.

Along with feminist interpretations, the Marxist feminist criticism has been very instrumental in the *Vinegar Tom* analysis. Marxist feminist theorists such as Bordo (2004) allege that women oppression is not only by virtue of gendered processes but also due to the economic factors that support capitalist societies. This work by Bordo allows linking the situation when women become marginal figures with the exploitation of their labor, whether it is domestic, reproductive, or intellectual, by patriarchal forms. Here we can perceive women as objects of exploitation as well as medium through which social order is reproduced. The analysis of Bordo also gives an insight into how *Vinegar Tom* is viewed because the play brings in the idea that witchcraft accusations as a way to dominate women can serve as an aspect of subjugating the autonomy of women but also as the tool of advancing capitalist agendas aimed at controlling the input made by women in the economy.

It is specifically in *Vinegar Tom* that this economic critique illustrates aspects of economic oppression in addition to being victims of patriarchal oppression by being destined as women who are accused of witchcraft. The female characters in the play tend to represent the property of the marginal people in the society whose economic line of performance is either underestimated or exploited by the society. Gender and class have a certain interconnection, which is used by *Vinegar Tom* to depict how the character of the witch becomes a battleground fight against patriarchal domination, as well as capitalism. Due to this, it can be said that the play by Churchill represents the critique of the manners in which capitalism and patriarchy collaborate to oppress women through economic subordination and the absence of societal influence.

The problem of the historical witch trials has also been discussed by scholars and *Vinegar Tom* discussed

in the same contexts and many scholars have focused on the way Churchill uses the play in order to address the social, political and economic processes that were able to influence persecution of the women in the early modern Europe. Vinegar Tom takes its point of departure on the historical background of witch trials in which people usually accused of being witches were mostly women who were seen to have strayed outside the scope of the societal norms (Macfarlane, 1970). Often these women were the victims of this owing to their independence, sexuality or their compresence to the so-called defined gender roles, who were barred as scapegoats to the frustrations of the patriarchal society. As scholars such as Baker (2008) suggest, the witch trials were not emblematic only of a religious, or supernatural faith but of the fear and perceived danger of women who refused to be subordinated and hinted at the true power of controlling their own lives and bodies.

Although most of the research on Vinegar Top has covered feminism issues in the play, there still exists gap in the literature to identify the complexity of gender, power, and the surrounding social and economic systems which lead to the maltreatment of the witches. The importance of this gap is especially important in the context of how Vinegar Tom does not merely attack the gendered power relations but also the role of the class and capitalism in defining the oppression of women. Not many scholars managed to work properly on the way these different kinds of oppression interact in the play, and the way the scholarship of Churchill shows these strata of oppression in relation with the historical and the present-day experiences of women.

Although the works on Vinegar Tom are rather numerous, no scholarship that integrates feminist and Marxist feminist approaches to the play and complements them with the emphasis on the social and economic system that lies behind the prosecution of witches exists. Although a large share of the studies has focused on the aspects of gender and power, the issue of criticism of capitalist systems and economic controls has not been all rounded out by the play. It is this gap that this article aims to address: to provide a more in-depth thought that draws upon both the histories and present-day effects of the witch in the play, and examine its intersection with gender, socio-economic disparities and exploitation. Also, unlike past research on the witch character in the play, this paper will seek to explore how rewriting the witch did not just position her as challenging patriarchal gender roles in gender representation but also opened up the possibility to critique the capitalized systems that reproduces these gendered power structures.

By dwelling on these gaps, the proposed study will add to a more balanced approach to the way in which Vinegar Tom casts a light on the issue of gendered and class-based oppression. It will also indicate how Churchill uses figure of the witch to explore her ambivalence toward relations between female independence, the control of society, and economic victimization.

SIGNIFICANCE AND RATIONALE

This study is also important as it gives a better insight into relations between gendered power and social oppression portrayed in Vinegar Tom. This investigation helps to comprehend the manner in which power functions at the nexus gender, class and history by examining the process of rewriting the figure of evil witch to radical force. The aspect of feminist criticism of the witch trials in Churchill is not only applicable to any analysis of historical oppression but is also applicable in any examinations on how gendered violence and domination of women persists even in the contemporary world.

Besides that, the work will define the feminist literary analysis of the Caryl Churchill opus and can offer a sophisticated approach to Vinegar Tom as a social commentary of not only historical gender construction but also as a criticism of the modern patriarchy. The motivation of this study lies in the necessity to examine Vinegar Tom through a lens other than the feminist position, and examine the wider socio-

economic and political meaning of the play telling us about power and resistance.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the significance of witchcraft in Vinegar Tom as a metaphor for gendered oppression?
2. How does Churchill's portrayal of the witch subvert traditional gender roles and power structures?
3. Why does Vinegar Tom position the witch figure as both a symbol of fear and resistance, and what does this duality suggest about the intersection of gender, power, and historical context?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is founded on feminism theory, especially the concept of performativity in gender by Judith Butler and power theories created by Michel Foucault. The gender construct that Butler produced as performative and created in society, but socially constructed and not biologically instilled, gives a critical insight into the gender aspects experienced in Vinegar Tom. The way power is interpreted especially through the influence of control and surveillance by Foucault is important because it helps to comprehend how women are controlled and disciplined in society through societal structures. The theories will play a pivotal role in the discussion of how the play criticizes the patriarchal systems which have historically demonized and marginalized women.

Moreover, it is the Marxist feminist theory that will be applied to figure out that all characters in Vinegar Tom are not only subservient to the parameters of gender but also to the hierarchy of classes. Intersectionality of gender, class, and power will be discussed in order to determine how women are marginalized twice in capitalist systems.

METHODOLOGY

It is based on the qualitative style of studying a text; textual analysis to analyze Vinegar Tom closely based on reading and speaking. The text of the play itself will represent the principal material of the research, concentrating on the instances when the accusation of witchcraft emerges, when extremely complicated relationships between women and men is involved, and on larger power dynamics in the play. Specifically, the scenes that touch on the persecution of women that were suspected of being witches will be examined so as to assess how these women opposed, protested, and defied patriarchal authority. The focus of the study will be on both language and conversation of the characters to evaluate the way the power is portrayed including the gender role and expectations.

Close reading will be employed especially to determine language, subtext, and characterization subtleties that can lead to criticizing patriarchal structures associated with the play. Close reading is the careful analysis of certain words, phrases and metaphors that enable elaborate interpretation of the subject themes and societal comments of the text. Here, it will assist to discover the extent to which the choice of language assists Churchill to position the witch as a victim of oppressive structures and at the same time a resistance figure.

Discourse analysis will complement the close reading taking into consideration the articulation of power differences in the society in the play. What is at issue in discourse analysis is how language is used to indicate and reify power relations in society. In identifying how characters are placed in the context of the dynamic between them, as well as how the ideologies of the society are defined through such interactions, such a technique will enable gendered and class-based power systems of authority to be explored in greater depth as to how they might be challenged or reinforced in Vinegar Tom. Feminist historical and socio-political contexts would be also included in the study as to examine how the use of witchcraft by Churchill symbolizes historical oppression of women and feminist rhetoric of the message spread by the

nature of the play. The specific contextualization of the text as the part of a bigger historical picture involving witch trials and gendered relations of power will allow the study to present Vinegar Tom as the related to the themes of today discourse of female agency and state control over female bodies.

This approach suits the research questions as it will enable a detailed investigation of the textual and discursive aspects of the criticism of patriarchal establishments to give a subtle meaning of the utilization of the witch figure not only as a symbol to show oppression but also to direct a protest. It also allows the research to deconstruct the manner in which Vinegar Tom criticizes gender, power, and the expectations of society against societal background and how topical these issues are even today.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The play Vinegar Tom will be analysed in order to see how Churchill employs the notion of witchcraft to show her metaphorical view of the dominating oppressive nature of the patriarchal order. The victim-turned-resistance witch in the play violates the conventional gender roles and brings out how women have had their freedom repressed over time. Churchill disapproves the role of the rules of the society that placed women as the ones born in sin or innately dangerous in their unwillingness to accept the prescribed roles delineating the witchcrafts as rebellions. These results will indicate the manner in which the play employs witchcraft as a means not only of engaging with the historical events, but also as a means through which it is able to turn the oppressive apparatus that is still a part of women in the contemporary society.

References to the power establishments in Vinegar Tom are closely related to the play exposing the dangerous idea of female sexuality and their independence. The rebellion of women in the play who do not fit in their gender roles can be seen in their sexuality, independence, or it can be a lack of obedience to men and is addressed with punishment, which reflects the historical persecution of any woman that has not complied with the demands of society. This comparison highlights that women are still oppressed because of taking charge of themselves and expressing their personalities. Stringing the witch as a figure of resistance, Churchill reverses the stereotype of power in women to make the witch into a controller of power and an agent of resistance as opposed to one with villainous powers.

The paper will also discuss the way Vinegar Tom criticises gender-class interrelations. The accused women are marginalized or economically exploited which is an indication of how capitalistic and patriarchal systems collude and infringe on the ability of women to act with agency. This intersectionality is going to be examined in the context socio-political realm of the 1970s when feminism was becoming more viable as an agency that attempted to subvert both gender and class inequalities (Bordo, 2004). Through comparison of the economic exploitation in the play depicted by the oppression of women through gender, the research will document how the witchcraft is used by Churchill to bring out the larger mechanism of power under which women live.

Among the weaknesses of this analysis, it can be said that this analysis is predominantly centered on the textual and discursive elements of the play and might lack the focus on how Vinegar Tom has been received as the viewers could interpret or how it has been received in particular socio-political movements. These findings could be explored further by uncovering the history of previous performances of the play and its reception, studying how it works with audiences today to reveal its themes related to gender issues, power, and acts of resistance, regarding feminist movements.

In sum, this paper will develop a stronger sense of how Vinegar Tom employs the figure of the witch to adjudicate patriarchal and capitalistic structures of oppression and show how the play redeploys the figure

of the witch in line with the feminist and post-structuralist criticism of gender and power. As the analysis will reveal, Vinegar Tom is more than a reminder of historical treatment of women as Vinegar Tom is being redefined as a subject of subversion and empowerment thus destabilizing the current system of the society at large that are still replicating the oppressive attitude towards women.

FINDINGS

By reading the text thoroughly, it can be noticed that Churchill has redrawn the witch that turned out to be an object of resistance and anxiety. Taking an example, we can assume such characters as Joan and Margaret who are accused of a witch and are not the mere passive victims but the genuine actors to fight these structures of power surrounding them which is dominated by male characters. Their use of witchcraft is a representation of their fight against the patriarchal oppression, and even the system of oppressive economics that oppress them.

The role of gendered relations of power presented by Churchill in the play is widely unveiled in the interpretation of the witch as one being oppressed but still, aggressive unsubdued creature. The witch is not a frightening outcast, but quite the contrary is a complicated figure with the ability to oppose the order which tries to reign over the freedom of women.

Based on careful reading of Vinegar Tom, it is clear that Churchill reinvents the image of the witch as an agent of resistance as well as fear thus going against the historic, stereotypical depiction of the witch. Heather Knoll in desolation and the archetypical image of witches in historical and modern times. Joan and Margaret as the characters accused of witchcraft are not just passive objects of repression in the society. Rather, they are presented as empowered individuals that break male dominance of power. Their association with witchcraft is also a form of resistance that is symbolic because it is an action that opposes the form of patriarchal control that has been made over them. Joan, as one example, takes control of her own body to the extent of her knowledge of herbs and healing, whereas Margaret rebels against the oppressive systems occurring in her life embodied by the men around her.

The description given by Churchill to such women reveals that the witch is not just a character to be feared or feared because of being evil, but it is a multidimensional and multidimensional character. She is transformed into a source of rebellion as well as a symbol of rebellion itself that could happen against a society that attempts to control female independence. Vinegar Tom also depicts those women as capable of opposing the status quo rather than strictly as victims of the patriarchal oppression, so the witch character is used as an empowering and rebellious trope.

Hence, the play is a critique of gendered power because it introduces the figure of the witch as a zone of subversion. Through this rewriting of the figure of a witch, Churchill helps to get the audience to reexamine how society still dominates and controls the women under the newly established societal system, primarily focusing on gender and power relations. The female agency represented by the witch creates a different image of female freedom and strength and challenges the chronicle of female victimization.

CONCLUSION

The given research draws a conclusion that Vinegar Tom is a striking feminist commentary on gendered power structures, where witchcraft acts as a metaphor of the long-winded issue of how women have been historically oppressed, silenced, and discriminated against. In recreating the witch, Churchill puts the stereotypical view of the witch as a source of evil in question as he presents a witch as a resistance and as empowering. In such a way, the play criticizes the patriarchal and capitalistic order which cooperates with

each other to subjugate women and shows how these institutions promote violence and financial abuse connected to the gender issue. The witches in Vinegar Tom especially Joan and Margaret are not victims but in fact they are actors who fight against capitalistic exploitation in conjunction to the dictates of the patriarchy.

That is why, on the one hand, the reworking of the figure of a witch in Vinegar Tom refers not only to historical experiences of female oppression, it also responds to current problems of female autonomy and agency. It is easy to oversee the potential of resistance in a world where gender still controls and defines the liberation of women. Churchill takes us back in a powerful way that creates an awareness about the possibilities of revolt. This paper is based on the existing feminist debate, which is reflected in a sophisticated interpretation of Vinegar Tom, along with the presentation and analysis of how the play critiques the historic and the current domination of women. Therefore, Vinegar Tom can also be interpreted as a rallying cry as much as it is historical hindsight on events of the past expressing the demand that women resist existing hierarchies of patriarchal authority that still condition the lives of women today.

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