

Abstract

**Women in Modern British Drama: A Study of Selected Plays
of John Osborne, Arnold Wesker, Doris Lessing and Caryl
Churchill**

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ABSTRACT

There has always been a deep-rooted relationship between gender and theatre. 'Gender' is a crucial issue in any play, as important as the class, race, geographical location, and its action. It affects the focus of the play, its narrative location, and its action. It enables us to make sense of the ways in which public/private worlds, personal/political issues are represented on stage.

Though women played a leading role in many early mimes, yet most folk performances and church-sanctioned dramatic activity was exclusively male. Women were excluded as performers from official religious drama, Greek and the British stage until relatively recently (officially 1660). This is a direct outcome of social and political power being primarily in the hands of men and the taboos associated with women appearing in public, outside the confines of a family. The presence of women in theatre is linked with their position in society as a whole and that has considerably changed since the seventeenth century.

This study however, concentrates on Modern Drama and analyzes the place of women in four leading post war British Playwrights-John Osborne, Arnold Wesker, Doris Lessing and Caryl Churchill. The plays analyzed show a pattern of development and change in terms of the place assigned to their women. The thesis also examines whether women are central to the action or marginalized, how much freedom they enjoy, how well are they able to define their individuality and what say they have in matters of vital importance. The emphasis therefore has been on 'content' rather than 'form'. 'Content' here refers to choice of subject matter, the playwright's point of view as reflected through an analysis of play's dominant meaning. Two male and two female playwrights were taken up so that a comparative study could be done. The approach was gender-based critique.

The thesis has been divided into five chapters. Chapter 1

“Place of Women in Drama” traces the history of women in Drama. Chapter II “Osborne and the Marginalizes Woman” focuses on the place of woman within the traditional marriage system which offers her no scope for growth. Chapter III “Wesker and the Woman in a Socio-Political Strife” analyzes to see how much space has been given to woman in the socialist fight of equality. Chapter IV “Lessing and the New Woman” analyzes how women are treated even when patriarchy in the guise of husbands is not there. Chapter V “Churchill and the Absolute Reversal” concentrates on women who incorporate all the patriarchal values.

John Osborne’s play, *Look Back in Anger* evoked diverse responses from critics and Osborne’s protagonist Jimmy Porter epitomized the angry and the rebellious nature of the youth of the times. Interestingly in all the varied responses to the play, too much attention was paid to Jimmy’s anger and as a result Alison’s stance was more or less lost in the din. If viewed from this angle, the central dynamics of action is the gender battle with all the attacks virtually under the belt and one way.

Alison represents the traditional woman. Here the power of masculine domination in gender formation is evident. Alison has moulded herself according to her husband’s needs and effaced her identity completely. But she is still not absorbed and remains the ‘other’. Jimmy is a raging pugnacious bore. But patriarchy allows him to stand on a higher pedestal. In such a sexist society the female half of the populace is dominated and oppressed by the male. This play reveals that aspect of traditional marriage, where the wife is never treated as an equal partner. Patriarchy has always been associated with force. Women who violate patriarchal taboos have always been punished severely. Rape, wife beating, trading and enslaving women, child marriage and prostitution are some of the devices. Alison’s return is a case in point. She returns to the husband- a poor, lost, suffering woman and worst of all begs forgiveness.

Jimmy is seen as a rebel and therefore gets all the attention, but then so is Alison. She has revolted against her parents to marry a person from lower strata of society. But since the narrated psyche at the centre is structurally male, we do not follow Alison off stage. The woman here is completely marginalized.

Arnold Wesker's *Trilogy* moves a step forward. The woman here is neither all that silent nor marginalized. In *Chicken Soup with Barley*, Sarah rather appears to be dominating, has a voice for her opinions and is at the helm of affairs. She is also exuberantly active and throbbing with energy. Not ready to be confined, she is an active party worker. But the ending leaves one baffled. Almost everyone raises questioning fingers at her. Her unflinching faith is mocked at and she is shown to be an ignorant fool.

In *Roots* the woman discovers herself by finding her own voice. The final triumphant statement comes from the stage directions. *As Beatie stands alone, articulate at last, the curtain falls.* But here too interaction is again lacking.

Doris Lessing's plays *Each His Own Wilderness* and *Play with a Tiger* are different as they come from a woman's pen. The women characterized here are so called free women as they do not have husbands to cater to. But if there are no husbands, then the sons take up the job of pestering, abusing and questioning. Towards the end one realizes that fulfillment of a woman's individuality is not possible while staying within such a family setup.

The fourth playwright, Caryl Churchill's main contribution is to further the cause of feminists and broaden traditional views of gender roles. Through her plays *Owners* and *Top Girls* she was successful in highlighting the arbitrariness of gender

roles by displaying how they are formed through the imposition of patriarchal values.

Interestingly the strategy that Churchill uses to manifest the arbitrary notion of gender roles is cross casting, which challenges the assumptions that gender definitions are natural ramifications of physical difference.

Thus in the four playwrights analyzed one finds different types of women. Alison, the absolutely docile, subservient wife, is a dumb recipient; Sarah, Beatie and Anna are relatively more vocal; Myra and Milly more free, but are still bound to their sons and the extreme example is of Marion and Marlene who by being ruthless and cruel have become surrogate men.

In the light of this study, as has been shown, women characters are either trapped in patriarchal structure or in some cases as in Churchill they pretend to be liberated, but in fact are not. It has also been shown that it becomes the worst kind of oppression when one starts imitating the oppressor. What is needed on the other hand is the erasure of power division and replacement of slavery, brutality and callousness with equality, sweetness love and concern.