



**SETTING THE PAST IN DIALOGUE WITH THE PRESENT:
CARYL CHURCHILL'S *LIGHT SHINING IN BUCKINGHAMSHIRE***



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ABSTRACT

The dream of a utopian future abused by people holding the top positions in the power hierarchy is one of the main concerns of Churchill's plays. In reading them, we encounter a harsh criticism against today's national and transnational capitalist patriarchal economies, which can be said to be defining today's power dynamics. The oppression and discrimination against people who hold lower positions in society and injustice prevailing among different social ranks are contemporary issues Churchill rediscovers and reinterprets through the millenarian dream in the English Civil war. However, it is the disenfranchised poor public or soldiers that desperately believe in the need of change but become disillusioned finally. Religion and strict moral regulations limit the oppressed people's power to act. It is the owning or propertied classes that do not get any harm from War and have the potency to act and change.

KEYWORDS

Revolution, English Civil War, oppression, discrimination

RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction

“The play’s title, *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, comes from the title of a Digger pamphlet of 1649. Diggers were the most radical of the sects that emerged following the Civil war. Their radicalism stemmed from their desire for a fundamental restructuring of property rights on land. Inspired by Digger writings, Churchill represents the events of the late 1640s as a watershed struggle over the meaning of property and the rights that accrue to ownership” (Howard 38). In this play Churchill depicts the state of England in the seventeenth century at the time of Civil war. Though seemingly it is a play about history or the historical realities of the time, it depicts us a world in which people are desperately in need of a change that will eradicate inequality. Though the play seems to rest upon a historical point in past, it deliberately shows us the ongoing reasons for ranting even in today’s Britain.

Using Brecht’s alienation technique, Caryl Churchill demonstrates one of the conditions people have undergone throughout history in the play. As Baştan states, the main purpose of this technique is to defamiliarize something commonly known and lead people to see the possibility of change (1380). Churchill creates an awareness of the fictionality of the work, or in other words she creates a distance between the play and the spectator and leads the spectator to re-think issues that define our identities and positions in the contemporary society and if possible to restructure them. Fitzsimmons summarizes this Brechtian aspect of *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* and highlights its timelessness and ability to communicate with present thus:

In fact the play’s history is rooted wholly in a collective consciousness which is its protagonist and hero. This is neither a group of specified individuals moving together or even a defined community experiencing the raising of armies or the aftermath of civil war, but an interweaving of historical and fictional persons appearing and disappearing together and independently, through the middle of seventeenth century, seeking parallel roads to freedom, paths occasionally crossing (if not cohesive) conclusions. Churchill works against their identification: ‘there is no need for the audience to know each time which character they are seeing’. (28-29)

She uses the past with reference to the political conditions of her own time. In fact, she addresses the issues of welfare-state and its failures in the face of rising capitalism after WWII. Besides, she investigates how the issue of individual freedom, ownership and social stratification has been problematized and why these have not been able to be overcome.

Besides establishing several points of contact with our contemporary world as regards matters such as how vagrants are oppressed, perhaps the scene where “a butcher stands cleaver in hand, bellowing his refusal to serve a meat-gorged customer”(Fitzsummons 29) is a vivid detail depicting the gap among the people of the same society.

However, there is another aspect Churchill emphasizes: religion. Religion functions as the opiate of people who have been deprived of their basic economic and individuation rights. After the off-stage killing of Levellers, Caryl Churchill brings a question to our minds when a group of Ranters full of spiritual devotion believe in the rebirth or return of Christ and therefore they will be able to be saved. The question is how religion functions as an instrument to depoliticize the masses and allow those in power to reach their goals. Unfortunately, people can differentiate between the real value of religion and its being used as an instrument only after the disillusionment comes.

Caryl Churchill’s *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (1978) documents a time when the left wing of the English civil war (Levellers, Diggers, and Ranters) dared believe they could, by sowing carrots on common lands, “turn the world upside down” and spur the millennial reign of God. In the penultimate scene, a cast of displaced men and women gather in impromptu critique and confession. They share bits of food and drink, and for as long as their communion transpires, “that which is of God” appears immanent among them: in their bodies, in their deeds and failures, and in the motions of time. (Bouchard 97)

In Churchill’s canon there are “arrangements of nature, ‘man’ and property” (Aston 165) which she handles within a materialist criticism of the society. There is the feudal world at the very beginning of the play and people were oppressed and made not to act for the sake of change by being reminded of the original sin. There was the strictly established hierarchy and violence is at its uppermost level, people dying of hunger and children left without parents.

Yet, no unrest may remain silent forever. It began to be heard that Levellers would undertake the task of realizing the revolution and therefore granting equal rights to everybody. The play then centers around the conflicts among Cromwell, army officers and Levellers, who were claimed to bring about change to the society. One of the most striking points attacked by Churchill is the fact that the oppressors or the ones on the stage of history are incapable of coming to terms with one another in spite of the common people’s desire to be governed democratically. Perhaps this is one of the main issues that establish the contemporariness of the play. It is also so much close to our day in that it deals with the question how the

oppressed people or the common people get affected by the ones in control of the body politic.

For the sake of stability and compromise, people in the play desired change and dreamt of a New Jerusalem. Quoting from Churchill's introduction to the play "Soldiers fought the king in the belief that Christ would come and establish heaven on earth"(179), which Godiwala also supports by saying "The belief in the coming of a savior is a self-sustaining drug which offered hope and respite from the numbing realities of people's lives"(63). What was established instead was an authoritarian parliament, the massacre of the Irish, the development of capitalism" (Churchill 179). The "utopian" New Jerusalem closed its doors to women and no change really existed between the old and the new. Moreover, what the oppressed people opposed when they set out for revolution got even more rigidified in the end. Instead of granting these oppressed groups their rights, the unfulfilled revolution perpetuated the vicious strata in the society. Perhaps this is why Churchill left the play open-ended, to imply that history is circular, not linear.

If the revolt within the Revolution had succeeded, it would have radically changed England's political course, perhaps ultimately legalizing communal property, disestablishing the church and disavowing the protestant ethic, as well as instituting a far more extensive legal and political democracy. By contrast, the Revolution that took root established the sacred rights of property (with the abolition of feudal tenures), gave political power to the propertied (through sovereignty of Parliament and common law), and 'removed all impediments to the triumph of the ideology of the men of property– the protestant ethic'. These changes ensured a new focus on capital and prepared the way for England to become the first industrialized great power. (Luckhurst 59)

Churchill reinterprets history in this play. History is not past or over. It is something that we constantly witness and must react to or try to change. There is the idea of change and the disappointment following it. "The simple 'Cavaliers and Roundheads' history taught at school hides the complexity of the aims and conflicts of those to the left of Parliament. We are told of a step forward to today's democracy but not of a revolution that did not happen; we are told of Charles and Cromwell but not of the thousands of men and women who tried to change their lives" (Churchill 179). She recreates a leftist history as opposed to the Cromwellian one, and is interested in "the ways in which privatization of commons contributed to today's status quo" (Clement 53). Therefore it can be said that Churchill is rewriting another history to create space for those whose voices were unheard then and now. This way she as the rewriter

dialogizes with the past and confronts both past and present to explore other possible spaces to let the oppressed speak.

The play depicts how class hegemony governs all the dynamics in the society. The poor people are constrained by law, religion, politics and social rules. People's lives are dependent upon the place they hold in the society. The king's authority is questioned. However, the dream of an egalitarian society in which class distinctions are eliminated is nothing more than a utopian dream. There is an inevitable economic determinism and if a person does not have property, then he neither has a self nor space to articulate his opinion.

The first scene opens with a reading from Isaiah saying "Fear, and the pit, and the snare upon thee, O inhabitant of the earth"(191). Churchill's intention to open the first scene with such a reading is to indicate that religion has been abused in oppressive societies so as to keep the common people under control. Religion both acts as a utopian space to deceive people and also as a threat. Cobbe is a good example as to how committing a sin, even unknowingly, is a threat to their existence: "Forgive my sins of the night and already this new day. Oh, prevent me today from all the sins I will note- action, word, thought or faint motion less than any of these-or commit unknowing despite my strict guard set"(191).

These people, devoid of even basic human rights, are made to believe in fantasies such as the coming of Christ to save them from their misery and they will be awarded with heaven if they show patience for their miseries.

Vicar: How's the baby today? Any better?

Servant: No sir.

Vicar: Worse.

Servant: Sir.

Vicar: God tries you severely in your children. It must have been a comfort this morning to have the Bishop himself encourage you to suffer. 'Be afflicted and mourn and weep'. That's the way to heaven.

Servant: Sir.

[He pours more wine]

Vicar: And if [the child] is not spared, we must submit. We all have to suffer in this life. [He drinks.](192-3)

The Vicar somehow tends to tranquilize the servant by trying to make him believe that God determines whether the child will live or die, therefore the family should feel no pain if the child dies. There is another marginalized figure, Brotherton who is doubly disenfranchised because of being poor and a woman. The 2ND JP declares "Margaret Brotherton, we find you

guilty of vagrancy and sentence you to be stripped to the waist and beaten to the bounds of this parish...(194). In the introduction to the play, Churchill quotes from a Digger pamphlet that leads people to reflect on. The quote goes as “You great Curmudgeons, you hang a man for stealing, when you yourselves have stolen from your brethren all land and creatures (181). Upon this unfairness against Brotherton, Star begins to talk in a religious manner and hoping that Christ will come when Antichrist is defeated: “Life is hard, brothers, and how will it get better? I tell you, life in Babylon is hard and Babylon must be destroyed...Because then will come the kingdom of Jerusalem”(194-5).

The servant, Brotherton and Cobbe are all people that are imprisoned in a web of unbreakable rigidities and they have downtrodden identities. Their will to go beyond the existing social order is perhaps ironically given through Star’s invitation to join the rebellion as the soldiers of Christ:

“...And who are the saints? You are. The poor people of this country. When Christ came, did he come to the rich? No. he came to the poor. He is coming to you again...You are despised now. But the gentlemen who look down on you will soon find that the inhabitants of Jerusalem are commonwealth man...You are nobody here. You have nothing. But the moment you join the army you will have everything. You will be as important as anybody in England. You will be Christ’s Saints”(195).

As opposed to Brotherton, Wife and Cobbe and Claxton there is another female figure who stands as the rational thinker but silenced because she comes against the established dogmas of patriarchy. Through Hoskins who is an idealized feminist rebel against male codes of behavior, Churchill brings into light the learned helplessness of women. While the Wife believes that “women can’t preach” and they “bear children in pain” because of sin and they are “shameful” because they have blood”(204), Hoskins defies her by telling that all what she said was wrong. While the wife believes children die because of sins, Hoskins can trace the real causes of their inability to lead a life as it should be. Contrary to other women who have adopted the view that all evil that befalls upon them is due to their sins and their gender, she is a radical individualist who even can justify stealing to be able to survive.

Conclusion

Light Shining in Buckinghamshire is a lens created by Churchill for modern readers through which we can understand the driving forces beneath the capitalist and patriarchal world order. Writing the play in a dialectical fashion, she narrates (though she maintains that the play does not consist of a unitary single story) episodes from the beginning, during and aftermath periods of the revolution. Her focus is surely not to rewrite a historical play or a play that

carries traces of history. Rather, she animates the dead voices in history and makes them speak to today's world, in which economy determines everything and the poor are made to sleep through the promise of heaven and the belief that God preordained them to be so. In the staging of the play, by constantly changing actors to perform the roles, she strengthens the timelessness of the play because the spectator, instead of focusing on the character, reflects on how power, gender relations, social classes and the desire to own commodity mold history, society and the future. Churchill unfolds what history has withheld from us and sets it in dialogue with us, with present and with itself.

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