

Vinegar Tom: Women's Oppression through Patriarchal- Capitalist Dominations

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Abstract

Oppression appears in different forms such as the oppressive forces of capitalism on working class people, the oppressive forces of patriarchy that is, of men towards women, and the oppressive forces of women over other women. The aim of this paper is to investigate the oppressive forces of capitalism on working and middle class women and the oppressive forces of patriarchy including both men and women over these two kind of classes in the society of Caryl Churchill's *Vinegar Tom* (1976). Caryl Churchill has explored such issues in her works mainly pertaining to the position of women in male-dominated societies. Indeed, some of her works utilize various plot structures to harness support for the improvement of the position of women in society while some attempt illustrate women's vain struggle against oppressive patriarchal agents.

The main concerns of the play are the empowerment of the upper class patriarchal agents as well as the repression of women which is everlasting in the societies ruled by patriarchs. Here, Churchill's mission is to make an attempt to dismantle the patriarchal ideas which has made women's repression commonplace.

Keywords: Women's oppression, Stereotypical witches, Patriarchy, Capitalism, Different class levels

"A society is patriarchal to the degree that it promotes male privilege by being male dominated, male identified, and male centred. It is also organized around an obsession with control and involves as one of its key aspects the oppression of women."

Allan G Johnson: *Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy*. (2005)

1. Introduction

Oppression appears in different forms such as the oppressive forces of capitalism on working class people, the oppressive forces of patriarchy that is, of men towards women, and the oppressive forces of women over other women.

Caryl Churchill has explored such issues in her works mainly pertaining to the position of women in male-dominated societies. Indeed, some of her works utilize various plot structures to harness support for the improvement of the position of women in society while some attempt illustrate women's vain struggle against oppressive patriarchal agents.

One of the plays in which Churchill focuses on women's oppression is *Vinegar Tom* (1976). In this regard, I aim to explore the issue of women's oppression by analysing patriarchal-capitalist dominations of middle and the lower class women. To this end, I will attempt to establish class that act support the oppression of women (Ramazanoglu 103) and how the women characters in the play challenge social norms with particular reference to the construction of gender identities which lead them to be labelled as deviants and in this context as witches by patriarchal agents.

Society is defined in different gender and class relations in such a way that there is an interconnection among both issues. This interaction among these interconnections in any given historical period is based on both patriarchal and capitalist dominations. One form of Patriarchal-capitalist domination is when their agents subordinate and oppress marginalized communities including women (both working and middle classes) in such societies. Different feminist authors and feminist critics intended on using literary texts and literary criticism to describe and to examine social and political structures in relation to these marginalized groups in greater details. A study of the way Caryl Churchill presents the intersection between gender and class oppression to demonstrate various

oppressions of marginalized groups including working and middle class women require the application of a feminist reading derived from patriarchal studies and class differences. The approach to feminism in this study is from the perspective of the problems of subordinate groups. So these works can be viewed as various dilemmas in the societies of the plays. In this sense, there are many methods and theories proposed by different feminists. However, in this study I only deal with those problems that represent patriarchal and capitalist aspects which are guidelines and the main points of *Vinegar Tom*.

The play, as Churchill states, is “a play about witches with no witches in it; a play not about evil, hysteria and possessions by the devil” (*Plays One* 130). She adds that *Vinegar Tom* is a play that explores “poverty, humiliation and prejudice, and how the women accused of witchcraft saw themselves” (*Plays One* 130).

It is pertinent, therefore, to first provide a definition of witches in England during the earlier centuries and then to compare it with the perspective that is offered by Churchill. During the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries in countries like England and Scotland the kings and the Christian Church would punish the people who were believed to be evil witches and those who vended their souls to the devil by hanging or burning them at stakes.

According to Wallace Notestein (2003) in *The History of Witchcraft in England From 1558 to 1718*, the word “witchcraft” is defined as “one who used spells and charms, who was assisted by evil spirits to accomplish certain ends” (2). Also in the same book Henry C. Lea (2003) defines “witch” as a woman who “has abandoned Christianity, has renounced her baptism, has worshiped Satan as her God, has surrendered herself to him, body and soul, and exists only to be his instrument in working the evil to her fellow creatures which he cannot accomplish without a human agent” (Lea in Notestein 4). As such, those people who did not accept the truth of God and who did harm to the others were considered as witches.

Historical documents cite that it was during the period of Elizabeth I in the sixteenth century when the persecution of witches began in England. Various acts were, thus, legislated to sentence those found guilty of witchery or sorcery are sentenced to death.

Since then, the theme of witch hunting has become a desired subject for literary writers through different eras. One of the writers who dealt with this theme is Nathaniel Hawthorne who explored this theme in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and *Young Goodman Brown* (1835). Arthur Miller also used this subject as a central theme in his 1950 play, *The Crucible*. Churchill's *Vinegar Tom* is also set in this period of witch persecution and witch trials which can also be symbolically read as patriarchy's and capitalism's attempt to sacrifice women.

As Churchill mentioned in the introduction to *Vinegar Tom*, she wanted to “write a play about witches but not the real ones.” Having read different books on witches, she constructed her characters based on real historical witches which capitalizes on the audience's knowledge and understanding of witches. For example, she depicts Joan, the first notable witch in the play, as a poor old woman with a big cat. Joan's name was based on the names of the real witches in history such as Joan Williford and Joan Cardien who were convicted of witchcraft and executed in the sixteenth century (C. L'Estrange Ewen). However, Joan whose appearance is that of a witch is not a real witch. Another character, Ellen, who belongs to the lower socio- economic class is also accused of being a witch and sentenced to death although what she does is far from witchcraft. “I've done nothing... it's healing, not harm. There's no devil in it” (Churchill, 1985, 170).

As pointed out earlier, generally the witches from the previous centuries would do harm and mischief to people's lives, but Churchill's witches are the ones who are being harmed by people of their community. In this sense, Churchill situates the accusations of witchcraft by these “witches” in the context of their socio-economic problems.

Vinegar Tom was exclusively written for Monstrous Regiment, a theatre company that was established to produce plays based on socialist feminist issues. It also allocated roles for women. This company is a feminist theatre company known for its concentration on women's issues and feminist plays. Wandor asserts that “through collaborations with the Monstrous Regiment, Churchill began to show evidence of radical thinking about relationship between men and women” (57).

As the Monstrous Regiment company decided to produce plays about witchcraft, they had asked Churchill to read some books about witches and witchery like *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (1970) by Alan Macfarlane and also to attend the rehearsal of *Scum*, “the previous work of Monstrous Regiment which focused on the 1871 Paris commune through the experiences of Parisian washer women” (Kritzer, 1991, 87).

Thus, having been inspired by these two sources and with greater knowledge garnered from reading more books on witches, Churchill began to study, in greater detail, the socio-economic constructions that underprivileged women had to confront with. She began to visualize a close connection between these “real women” and the witches of

before (Kritzer 1991). Churchill wrote twenty- one short episodes and chose the seventeenth century as the setting of the play in which she concentrated on the socio-economic discriminations and patriarchal oppression which marginalized and victimized underprivileged women as witches. She also showed how Christianity and society at that time dealt with them.

2. Methodology

In the analysis section, I concentrate on two theories: theories on gender and class. The patriarchal and capitalist issues of western critics such as Sylvia Walby, Jane C. Ollenburger and Hellen A. Moor, Deniz Kandiyoti, and Allan G Johnson will be used to demonstrate the intertwining patriarchy with capitalism in the analysis of the play. I consider the theoretical terms derived from the selected feminisms of this study with their applicability on analyzing the text.

According to Johnson (2005) the term Patriarchy is defined as the source of women's oppression and gender inequalities in which men, as a group, dominate women as another group. This patriarchal domination results in subordinating women. He also believes that patriarchy also refers to the domination of men over subordinated communities in a society dominated by men. According to Radical feminists men, patriarchy and all things associated with men and masculinity are problems for women. Within a patriarchal society, issues involving men and masculinity are given priority rather than issues concerning women and femininity and hence, women are constantly disadvantaged and victimized, compared to men (Ramazanoglu (1986), Rowland and Klein (1990)). However, patriarchy denotes to the domination of women towards other women too. (Ramazanoglu (1986). Accordingly, I deal with women's oppression through patriarchal relations in *Vinegar Tom*. In this sense, I try to demonstrate gender empowerment through class struggles and concentrate the oppression of men over women and the oppression of women over other women.

3. Patriarchy and Capitalism in *Vinegar Tom*

Vinegar Tom is the story of a small English society in the seventeenth- century with a working class community of women "in which economic disparities combine with random misfortune to produce a witch hunt" (Kritzer, 1991, 87). A place where even a guiltless act can be interpreted as a fault and a simple curse expressed during an angry mood and quarrel can be regarded as an evil spell (Shahnazari, 2000, 77).

The play explores the relationships of the poor lower class women in a small enclosed society under patriarchy and class differences during witch- hunting. The victimization of these women who have been tortured by patriarchal agents is the main concern of the play. These oppressed women are socially and economically marginalized as they do not live according to the conventions and the norms of their society. Their disobediences include enjoying sex without the need of a husband; being old, poor and alone; using the right of abortion; helping other women by healing them; and disobeying parents. These unconventional behaviours result in their being accused of witches leading to their persecution. (Shahnazari, 2000, 77)

Churchill attempts to criticize the repression of women's rights by showing how they have been made scapegoats and are accorded subjugated social roles then and now in *Vinegar Tom*. The two important and mutual systems of domination and oppressive forces of the seventeenth century and the present time are patriarchy and capitalism which will be elaborated in this chapter. As Silvia Walby (1992) asserts,

The concept of [the] theory of patriarchy is essential to capture the depth, pervasiveness and interconnected of different aspects of women's subordination and can be developed in such a way as to take account of the different forms of gender inequality over time, class, and ethnic group (2).

These assertions highlight the intersections and close connections among patriarchy, class and gender. This will be additionally investigated in this chapter. The term "stereotype" will be used intentionally to emphasize the fact that these witches are not real but are marked as witches by the representatives of patriarchy and capitalism.

4. The stereotypical witches

The women in *Vinegar Tom* are described as those who are on the margins of society, accused of being witches, whose faults are poverty and unconventionality. Indeed, as Churchill asserts, accusing women of being witches "existed in the minds of its persecutors" (Churchill, 1985,129). These women are the weakest members of the community and they include an old beggar widow, a single mother who has rejected the moral orders of the society and who has not restricted herself to one sexual partner, a mother who miscarries, a midwife and an unmarried rebellious girl. These women are doubly oppressed as they are silenced not only by patriarchy but also by their poverty.

Alice, one of the characters and a “potential witch” retaliates and distinguishes her and other women around her from witches by asking some questions about a witch who had just been hung from an unnamed Man who she had sex with at the road side. She wanted to know whether “the spirits flew out” like “black bats” (Churchill) of the woman accused of being a witch. She continues by saying “I’ve heard plenty tales of witches and I’ve heard some called witch, there’s one in the next village some say and others say not, but she’s nothing to see. Did she fly at night on a stick? Did you see her flying?” (Churchill, 1985,136)

Alice’s retaliation is significant as she debunks the stereotype of a witch. Women accused of witchery in that society are “normal” women who do not fly on a broom stick at night nor cast a spell on unsuspecting men. Essentially, Alice is trying to demonstrate that these women are considered “witches” because they are seen as “deviant”. They have challenged accepted societal and patriarchal norms. Because of this deviant behaviour, like witches, they have to be incarcerated and persecuted because societal norms appear to have been cast in stone and thus, no one should defy them.

On a symbolic level, we can see this as a form of oppressive act on the working class by the bourgeoisie. As such, the working class women are the ones who are stereotyped as witches in this play.

Alias Solomon in “Witches, Ranters and the Middle Class: The Plays of Caryl Churchill” (1981) asserts that “*Vinegar Tom* concerns the violent expulsion from a repressed society of women who will not conform to acceptable social patterns. Hence, the women who do not fit into the expected female roles are the ones declared as witches. They are condemned to torture and hanging because of their rejection of the society’s values through their lower class life style, and their acknowledged sexuality” (Solomon 51).

The following sub-section will discuss the witches in the play who mirrors the above claims.

4.1 *The Sexually liberated Alice*

Alice is a mother who is known as a prostitute among the community members as she rejects accepted sexual norms and the stereotyped role of a woman. She is from the lower social class and admits the fact that she enjoys sex. As Susan tells her “no one’s going to marry you because they know you here. That’s why you say you don’t want to be married because no one’s going to ask you round here, because they know you” (Churchill,1985, 147). Her lack of respect for the morals as well as the financial problems she has makes her a prostitute. She has an illegitimate child and spends her time with any man she takes pleasure in. In this sense, she likes to have sex with men but she does not desire to get married.

However, in a strict community which is ruled by the patriarchal authorities, she does not feel satisfied. In the opening scene of the play she shocks everyone in by openly declaring that “anytime I’m happy someone says it’s a sin” (Churchill,1985, 136). So, she is unable to escape from, but condemns, the society’s stereotypical and conventional expectations of womanhood. In return, she is condemned by the community for believing so.

In the closing scene, when Alice is jailed, she makes a desperate, but vain attempt to let out her anger by saying, “I’m not a witch. But I wish I was. If I could live I’d be a witch now after what they’ve done... Oh, if I could meet with the devil now I’d give him anything if he’d give me power. There’s no way for us except by the devil. If I only did have magic, I’d make them feel it” (Churchill,1985, 175). This is the only scene that depicts her as being empowered and has some form of control over her own life.

4.2 *Poor, old Joan*

Another woman who was accused of being a witch is Joan Noakes, Alice’s poor and old mother. When she asks, “Who wants an old woman?” (Churchill,1985, 141), she is depicted as an outcast in the community because in the capitalist society she lives in; women like her who are poor are incarcerated. Time and again, we have been shown cases of women, divorced, widowed, or the elderly who are subjugated and oppressed because of their poverty. Essentially, the alienable members of community consist of such women who occupy the lower socio- economic status of the society. Indeed, this clearly demonstrates the

feminization of poverty as this situation describes the specific economic vulnerability of women who are the sole support of themselves... the subordinate economic position of women... that rebounds throughout the life cycle:... loss of economic support when divorced or widowed, and poverty among elderly women with sporadic or low-wage earning histories” (Ollenburger and Moor 100).

In this regard, Joan is, indeed, the symbol of all the vulnerabilities mentioned by Ollenburger and Moor. She is an old marginalized woman who does not have any supporter. She is also on the edge of poverty in the capitalist society she lives in. This vulnerability and economic pressures that she faces leads to a lack of the basic necessities of life such as food, shelter and clothing. Thus, she becomes a scurrilous and scrappy old woman who curses

Margery and Jack, her middle class neighbours who do not help her and accuse her, instead, of being a witch and alert the witch finders.

However, ironically, it seems that at last when she is not able to convince the witch finders that she is not a witch, Joan is neither depressed nor annoyed for being called a witch and sentenced to death. Instead, she embraces the idea as it releases her from subjugation and powerlessness in that patriarchal-capitalist society.

4.3 Susan, the failed mother

Susan, another female character in the play, is a poor housewife, the mother of three children who has had several miscarriages. She constantly gets pregnant and is also accused of being a witch because of the abortion she has had. According to social and religious codes, Susan has been condemned as having gone against nature by challenging the society understands of motherhood. The community tries to make her feel guilty about what she has done as reflected in the claims made by Packer (a male character): “you went to this good witch, and you destroyed the child in your womb by witchcraft” (Churchill,1985, 167).

By bringing up the issue of abortion, Churchill is, in fact, trying to champion women’s rights to abort a foetus because they have a right to save their own body from harm. Indeed, this provides Churchill the opportunity to criticize the anti-abortionist patriarchal authorities who ignore the rights of abortion.

However, sadly enough, it is the oppressing force that seems successful to coerce Susan into confessing that “I was a witch and never knew it... I didn’t know that I was so wicked” (Churchill,1985, 174). Susan succumbs to the male-imposed ideas of wickedness. She believes that she was a bad mother and therefore, accepts the church’s accusation that she is a witch.

Susan is also the cause of Alice’s death as she accuses her of being a witch to the witch finders. She tells Packer, “she [Alice] took me to the cunning woman [Ellen] and they made me take a foul potion to destroy the baby in my womb... and she made a puppet... but that was my baby girl, and the next day she was sick... and dies” (Churchill,1985, 167).

She blames Ellen and Alice for making her consume Ellen’s herbal potion and condemns them of witchery which also results in their death. Nevertheless, in her final talk with Alice, she expresses, “if we’re hanged, we’re saved...I was a witch and never knew it. I killed my babies. I never mean it... I repent...” (Churchill,1985, 174-75). She, thus, accepts her own and her fellow-sufferers’ guilt and expresses regret for carrying out the abortion. In this regard, Janelle Reinelt asserts “Churchill shows how women can remain unconscious of their oppression and can victimize themselves and others” (Reinelt qtd. in Fitzsimmons 33).

4.4 Ellen, the healer

Ellen is the working class midwife, the empowered woman who acts as advisor and who would give the herbal potion to others to get them out of trouble. She is a typical classic woman “who earns her own living outside of the monetary system and worked outside the sanctioned medical/male establishment” (Reinelt qtd. in Fitzsimmons 32).

Ellen is accused of being a witch or devil’s agent who helps other women to escape from their miserable situations. As a result, she is also sent to the gallows. Ellen’s accusation foregrounds society’s attitude: the society does not accept her as a single woman working “outside of the monetary system” (Reinelt qtd. in Fitzsimmons, 32). Other than that, she also challenges the existing socio-economic problems of her time by asking for gifts rather than money for her services. She also offers to help Betty out by making a love potion for her. Being concerned about Betty, she advises her, “do you want a potion to make you love the man?” (Churchill,1985, 156).

Reflecting on the economic problems in her life, Ellen advises Betty not to be alone and to get married. She says, “You get married, Betty, that’s safest... left alone for what? To be like me? There’s no doctor going to save me from being called a witch. Your best chance of being left alone is marry a rich man” (Churchill,1985, 169).

Although she helps Susan abort her child, it is Susan who has made her own choice. Generally, Ellen is not a real witch who brings harm to people’s lives. However, at the end of the play she is powerless and cannot defend herself in the face of patriarchal agents.

All of these women are the victims of patriarchy and capitalism and are tortured, humiliated, and finally are indicted to death. They are not actually witches like the witches of the earlier centuries because they do not do harm people, but they are the ones who get harmed just because they do not conform to patriarchal conventions and assume the traditional roles of women.

4.5 *The rebellious and hysteric Betty*

Betty is an upper- middle class girl and a landowner's daughter who does not accept her parents' wish to get married to a man that her parents have chosen. In scene two, she escapes from the confines of her household to Jack's and Margery's house, the upstart middle class couple, and tells them that "I'm not let go where I like... They lock me up. I said I won't marry him so they lock me up" (Churchill,1985, 139-140). Instead of sympathizing with Betty, Jack and Margery coax her into fulfilling her parents' wishes. In Betty's case, her parents and the doctor who diagnoses her as a hysteric patient are the agents of patriarchy. The doctor claims "Hysteria is woman's weakness...cause behaviour quite contrary to the patient's real feelings... you will soon be well enough to be married" (Churchill,1985, 149). In scene six, where she is tied to a chair to be bled by the doctor for her "irrational behaviour", she asks herself:

Why am I tied? Tied to be bled. Why am I bled? Because I was screaming. Why was I screaming? Because I'm bad. Why was I bad? Because I was happy. Why was I happy? Because I ran out by myself and got away from them and- why was I screaming? Because I'm bad. Why am I bad? Because I'm tied. Why am I tied? Because I'm happy. Why was I happy? Because I was screaming. (*Plays One* 149)

These questions and answers reveal Betty's inclination to rebel against her parents' wishes and show her demand for freedom in the sense of her marital status. Here, the power of the doctor as the patriarchal agent is clearly revealed. He labels Betty as a hysterical patient and he uses his treatment as a tool to torture her to accept the forced marriage. Hence, we can see that both the family and the doctor are oppressing her.

Elin Diamond in *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theatre*(1997) enumerates the signs of hysteria as "depression, withdrawal, bouts of uncontrollable laughter and crying, muscular tics, shortness of breath, attacks of blindness, cutaneous anesthesia ... as hysteria is called "moral weakness of women"" (9-10).

Thus, the reason why the physicians recommended bleeding because they considered hysteria as "a deficiency of blood which impeded mental functioning and thus moral development" (Diamond, 1997, 9). Quite to the contrary, none of the above mentioned signs are seen in Betty. Nevertheless, she undertakes the treatment procedure in order to be convinced to accept her parents' proposal.

Betty's situation compared to the other women accused of witchcraft in the play is much better as claimed by Kritzer (1991) who asserts: "Betty's usefulness as the glue in an economic alliance protects her from accusations of witchcraft although the cruel medical treatment and forced marriage present her with inexorably grim prospects" (92).

However, these oppressors save Betty's life when she resigns herself to patriarchy as she is frightened of being accused as a witch at the end of the play. She agrees to her father's decision and escapes from a possible horrifying situation. In doing so, she says "I'm frightened to come anymore. They'll say I'm a witch... they say because I screamed that was the devil in me. And when I ran out of the house they say where was I going if not to meet other witches...He [doctor] says I'm his patient so I can't be a witch (Churchill,1985,169) to Ellen. Although Betty finds Ellen as her healer and her place as a place for escaping and hiding from her father's "prison", the dreadful social situation makes her believe in the doctor and in the process she is seen to succumb to the powers of patriarchy.

5. **Oppressive forces in men- women relationships**

As indicated in the earlier part of this chapter, the oppressive forces which affect the relationships between men and women, leading to women's oppression are patriarchy and capitalism.

Alan Johnson (2005) states that "the oppression of women happens because men want and like to dominate women and act out their hostility towards them. There is poverty and class oppression because people in the upper classes are greedy, heartless, and cruel" (28).

However, my main purpose in criticizing patriarchy in this study is to expose the gender inequalities that exist in situations where both men and women can act as patriarchal agents who oppress women. In this regard, I will also attempt to connect such oppression to the issue of class inequalities by dissecting the differences in the lower and middle classes. In this respect, it is the upper class, of course, which benefits the most. As Charlotte Bunch in *Passionate Politics: Feminist Theory in Action* (1987) declares:

Middle class people are taught to think that we are better, and we act out that "superiority" and self-righteousness daily in a thousand ways. If you're on top of someone, the society tells you that you are better. It gives you access to its privileges and security, and it works both to keep you on top and to keep you thinking that you deserve to be there. It tells you over and over that the middle class way is the right

way and teaches you how to keep that way on top- to control people and situations for your benefit. (Bunch qtd. in Weedon 138)

In the capitalist setting of the play in which the middle class people feel superior over the lower class, they accuse the lower class women of being thieves (for example, Margery accused Joan of being a thief). However, they ignore the socio-economic problems faced by the lower class. Gender and class inequality and, discrimination leads to the oppression of women who are helpless in defending themselves. Apart from this, Churchill also goes further by depicting patriarchal and capitalist forces as evils that label lower class women as witches, but not as economically disempowered beings who need assistance.

Although Churchill does not directly ‘uphold’ her women characters, she compels the audience to take sides with the oppressed women through her depiction of their problems. For example, when the audience is shown the corpses of the hanged women at the end of the play, she is attempting to highlight “the extent of Christian teaching against women and see the connections between medieval attitudes to witches and continuing attitudes to women in general” (Churchill, Introduction to *Vinegar Tom*).

In my opinion, *Vinegar Tom* alludes to the issue of punishment of witches during medieval times when the church tortures and hangs the witches in order to deter others. Moreover, in the medieval ages, it was believed that “witches had pacted with Satan, the Lord of Darkness, and they were opposed to God and His Church” (Basista qtd. in Necemer 5), “and because of this, the Church had no alternative but to progress with enacting stronger edicts by which it would be able to arrest, try, convict witches as heretics, and then punish them as offenders of the faith” (Necemer 5).

As a whole, as a feminist writer, Churchill in *Vinegar Tom* deals effectively with issues such as gender inequalities, subordination of lower class women, poverty, sexuality, the right of abortion, and women’s hysteria to criticize patriarchal-capitalist supremacies. The next section will showcase how the capitalist and patriarchal agents, who call themselves Christian authorities in this context, oppress economically burdened women such as witches in *Vinegar Tom*.

5.1 *Oppressive forces of men towards women*

Men’s dominance over women stems from their feeling of superiority. This sense of superiority can be discussed from two perspectives: patriarchy and class. In this section, I will focus on these two aspects in a sense that the patriarchal and capitalist males practice oppression over the middle and working class women. The men can use their male superiority and their privileged class in order to exclude and subjugate lower and middle class women. As Beverley Skeggs in *Formations of Class and Gender* (1997) points out “the exclusion occurs because the women do not have access to economic recourses... to be anything other than working class” (74).

5.1.1 Unnamed Man, the symbol of the Devil

There are a number of male oppressors in this play. One of them is an unnamed man who introduces himself as “I’m the devil. Man in black (Churchill,1985, 135). He is the one who had sex with Alice at the roadside at night. Alice does not know him and his name; however, she asks him to marry her while he rejects her cruelly:

Alice: Will you take me with you to London, to Scotland? Nothing happens here.

Man: Take you with me?

Alice: Please I'd be no trouble...

Man: A whore? Take a whore with me?

Alice: I'm not that.

Man: What are you then? What name would you put to yourself? You're not a wife or a widow. You're not a virgin. Tell me a name for what you are. (Churchill,1985,137)

In order to have sexual relations, women should get married. However, if they still engage in sexual acts they will be punished. Here, Alice is taken as a “whore” because she has sex and does not think of these actions as sin: “so you think that was no sin we did? (Churchill,1985,135) Hence, she had to pay for her sexual engagement by being hanged by the patriarchal authorities.

Bell Hooks in her outstanding book *Feminist theory: from margin to centre* (2000) says that “feminist thinkers . . . believed that assertion of the primacy of sexuality would be a liberatory gesture. They urged women to initiate sexual advances, to enjoy sex, to experiment with new relationships, to be sexually free” (148).

However, in *Vinegar Tom*, this kind of sexuality is depicted as an exploitation of Alice. Although Alice enjoys sex, it is portrayed as a “sexual assault” (Ollenburger) for her, which is evident when she tells Susan: “I hate my body”

(Churchill, 1985, 146). This also supports the claim that in a patriarchal and capitalist society, poor working class women are often made the “scapegoats” (Churchill, Introduction to *Vinegar Tom*). Hence, although it is Alice who is sexually abused: “I been hurt by men” (Churchill, 1985, 135), she is the one who is blamed and persecuted.

5.1.2 Jack, the Symbolic Snake of Sin

Another example of this kind of oppression is evident in Jack’s oppression of Alice. Jack who is the symbol of both patriarchy and capitalism in the play wanted to seduce Alice by giving her two apples as he knows that she is a poor, lower-class woman. However, she refuses him. Giving apples to Alice reminds us of the story of Eve and the Forbidden Fruit (Rowe, 2003). In order to tempt Eve, Satan in the shape of a snake appeared to her and indeed seduced her by offering her The Apple, the Forbidden Fruit. Eve accepted the offer so that she could become an immortal. Here, Jack, the symbol of The Snake, offers Alice apples and asks her for a sexual relationship. Indeed, here it is obvious that it is Jack who harms Alice and we see the consequence of this harm later when he accuses Alice of a witch that is, someone who has harmed him. Later on, this claim results in Alice’s death when Jack introduces her to the witch hunters. Although Alice is sure that she is not a witch and waiting for her turn to be hanged, she is strong enough not to surrender herself to the dreadful situation.

Jack, the oppressor, also exerts his influence on Alice’s mother, Joan, in different ways. For example, he tells the witch finders that Joan has cursed him: “Lift your hand to me... may it drop off. Then next day it went stiff” (Churchill, 1985, 157). He manages to oppress Joan by holding her responsible for all his miseries in life. To give an example, when Jack is assailed by misfortune and his wife and their properties perish, he first appears to be associating this disaster to the sins he committed before. He says, “Other people sin and aren’t punished so much as we are... it’s my sin those calves shaking and stinking and swelling up their bellies in there” (Churchill, 1985, 152). However, later on, with the help of his wife, he manages to escape from feeling guilty by agreeing with the idea of witchery. Jack wants to shift the burden of his sins to someone else and he finds Joan a good case. So, he accuses her of spinning the dark and ugly images around her to oppress her. He attempts to introduce Joan as a dangerous being and the cause of all the disasters that had occurred in his life. He wanted to prove that “the working class are poor, deprived, depriving, dangerous and degraded” (Skeggs 76).

5.1.3 Packer, the unjust accuser

Packer, the witch-finder, is another patriarchal-capitalist oppressor of women who establishes and organizes the denunciation of women. He captures women suspected of witchery around the country and hangs them. In doing so, he gains double benefits: not only does he earn some money, but he also positions himself as the envoy of patriarchy who subjugates women.

He investigates the four women characters to find traces of the Devil in them. However, in spite of being unsuccessful, he still accuses them of witchery. By taking advantage of peoples’ superstitious beliefs, Packer tends to ascribe himself to God in order to gain people’s trust.

He examines Joan, pricks her, injures her and makes her suffer as she screams, “Ah, ah, you’re hurting, let go, damn you” (*Plays One* 166), but he insists that she is a witch. He blames Susan for her abortion and makes her accept that this action is from the devil and his agents, the witches. Punishing Ellen, he declares that “these cunning women are worst of all” (Churchill, 1985, 167) and hangs her. When he examines Alice cruelly and could not find any sign of the devil in Alice’s body he tries to make her confess of being a witch. Nevertheless, to his dismay, Alice denies the accusation.

5.2 Oppressive forces of women on other women

Churchill also explores the position of women and their social roles in a patriarchal-capitalist society in this play. The study of women’s dilemmas and their difficulties is significant in this play as it not only focuses our attention to women’s situation in relation to men, but also to other women in the society.

Basically, in a patriarchal-capitalist hierarchy, women who suffer economically are more vulnerable to oppression and marginalization. Although the men in the play are powerful and discriminate and torture both lower and middle class women, there are also some women who are portrayed as oppressors and label other women “witches”.

As Allan G. Johnson (2005) maintains, “Patriarchy is not simply another way of saying “men.” Patriarchy is a kind of society, and a society is more than a collection of people. As such, “patriarchy” doesn’t refer to... collection of men, but to a kind of society in which men and women participate. By itself this poses enough problems without the added burden of equating an entire society with a group of people” (5). Since patriarchy is a kind of society consisting of both men and women, one can also expect the possibility of women representing patriarchy, as well.

So, in the case in *Vinegar Tom*, we can see that there are also some women who tend to subjugate the middle and the lower class women.

5.2.1 Margery, the Upstart Middle Class Oppressor

The first representative of patriarchy and capitalism is Margery, a middle class farmer, land owner, and a married woman who has a dairy and works in it. Although she is wealthier than some other women in her state, Margery is frustrated with her dull chores especially when Jack, her husband tells her “You’re a lazy woman, you know that? Times are bad enough. The little black calf don’t look well” (Churchill,1985,145).

These examples of Jack’s behaviour towards his wife remind us of Deniz Kandiyoti’s “women under classic patriarchy” in which “women’s subordination and their economic dependence on men” (1991, 109) are the main causes of their oppressive state. Margery is economically dependent on her husband as he is the head of the family and superior to her. As a result, she is often oppressed by her husband. However, ironically, they both agree and collaborate in other matters, for example accusing other women of being witches.

Margery and her husband, Jack, have some property and they try to protect them from the lower-class rustics in the community. She, too, accuses Alice’s old mother, Joan of being a witch. As also mentioned by Danelle Rowe in *Power and oppression: a study of materialism and gender in selected drama of Caryl Churchill* (2003). Margery is a capitalist oppressor. She is the one who humiliates working class women plays a very important role in convincing Jack that Joan is a witch who has cursed them and their cattle. Margery belongs to the dominant class, while Joan, the working-class woman, who has neither land nor the basic necessities of life, is the subordinate class. Joan is then indicted as a witch by Margery who impeached her of using witchcraft rather than granting the poor old woman’s request for food and other essential supplies (Rowe 2003). Margery tells Jack, “Mother Noakes come begging and borrowing. She still got my big bowl I give her some eggs in that time she was poorly... I have been a good neighbour to that woman years out of mind and no return” (Churchill,1985,145).

As also mentioned by Rowe, When Joan asks Margery “I wonder could you lend me a little yeast?” (Churchill,1985,143) illustrates the fact that Joan is economically dependent on the middle class people. This is also evident in the following lines: “A little small crumb of yeast and God will bless you for kindness to your poor old neighbour... lend me a little yeast like a good woman... you’ll die without a friend in this parish when if you gave yeast to your good neighbours everyone would bless you...”(Churchill,1985,144).

However, Margery behaves like patriarchal and capitalist agents fails in her duty to help other women and expels Joan from her house. As such, Joan curses her by saying, “Damn your butter to hell... Devil take you and your man and your fields and your cows and your butter and your yeast and your beer and your bread and your cider and your cold face...” (Churchill,1985,144). In other words, Joan challenges the economic and social hierarchies by her insolence to her economically higher-up neighbour.

Basically, Margery is a capitalist middle class oppressor who accuses Joan as a lower class witch and oppresses her. As posited by Charlotte Bunch in *Passionate Politics: Feminist Theory in Action* (1987), “class in our society is not only an economic system that determines everyone’s place, but also patterns of behaviour that go with and reflect one’s status. When middle class women carry these attitudes and ways of behaving into the movement, it oppresses working class women” (Bunch qtd in Weedon 138).

As the play develops, Jack and Margery lose their cattle. Hence, the couple tries to find someone to put the blame on. Margery suggests this is caused by a witch. She tells her husband “If we’re bewitched, Jack, that explains all” (Churchill,1985,152). Then, they turn Joan over to the witch hunters, accusing her of being a witch. Here Margery plays the role of a bourgeois who explodes Joan as a proletariat with economic failures. In scene nineteen at the time of Joan’s hanging, Margery satisfied with the punishment thanks God.

Margery foolishly imputes the evil action of killing the inferior, lower class women to God and thanks Him for helping her destroying the witches. Her prayer combines both capitalism and Christian concepts. She also points to Betty’s rescue from being accused of witchery. Although Betty was in the danger of being accused as a witch, she is freed from this indictment by accepting the arranged marriage by her father. Even if Betty is oppressed by the force of patriarchy, she as a middle class one is in a better and safer situation compared to the lower class ones.

5.2.2 Goody, the money lover Oppressor

Along with Packer, the male witch finder, Goody, his female assistant and one of the Church authorities tortures the witches and participates in and benefits from the patriarchal-economic structure of the society. She plays the role of an oppressor who oppresses Alice, her mother Joan, Ellen and Susan who are all supposed to be witches. She condemns women as witches and hangs them. According to Godiwala (2003), “the sheer power the witch hunters possess by virtue of their gender makes for a world filled with horror for women who are old, poor, weak

and defenceless”(55). In this regard, Goody who oppresses other women is a representative of both her gender (as she impersonates men in torturing women) and her sex (as she persecutes her own sex). Although she examines Joan and cannot find any Devil marks in her, she accuses her to be a witch. She also confirms Alice is a witch and forces her to plead guilty of witchery by saying “you’d better confess, my dear, for he’ll have you watched night and day and there’s nothing makes a body so wretched as not sleeping (Churchill,1985,171). She knows that Alice is not a witch but tells Packer that “She is witch” for her own benefit.

From another perspective, Goody is eagerness in hunting the witches can be associated with capitalism. She hunts witches in order to gain more money (Rowe, 2003). The more witches she finds, the more money she gains. This idea places her aptly within the system of capitalism. So, in this regard, the lower and middle class women in this play are shown as victims of both patriarchy and capitalism. Goody who benefits from patriarchy and capitalism practices tells Packer, “You’re a considerate man, Mr. Packer. We earn our money” (Churchill,1985,171).

It must also be noted that Goody confirms her possible resemblances to the powerless women she mistreats. For instance, she mentions the fact that if she does not work, she could be also like the working class women. However, she thinks that she has defeated her oppressed site as a woman by identifying herself with Packer, a man and symbol of patriarchy.

Bunch criticizes such tendencies by asserting that “class divisions and behaviour come from male-dominated society, and it is absurd for us to perpetuate them. If middle class women remain tied to male class values and behaviour, we cripple our growth and hinder the development of a movement that can free all women” (Bunch qtd in Weedon 138).

In sum, both Goody and Margery, the two women oppressors discussed in the above two sections can be seen as appropriating power from the patriarchal order of society and betraying other women and in doing so are seen to benefit economically.

5.2.3 Kramer and Sprenger, supporters of the Oppressors

Other than Margery and Goody, there are also two other characters in the play who conform to patriarchal norms and oppress the women: Kramer and Sprenger. They are played by two women who are professors of theology, who make an inquiry towards women and are the authors of a book on witch-hunts called *Malleus Maleficarum* (the Hammer of the Witches). In their book, they present misogynistic ideas and show their hatred toward women by fighting against witchcraft.

The above draws our attention to Churchill’s attempt to draw on extremist religious ideas by assigning the role of oppressors to experts of theology. In this sense, they also give a prayer of thanks to God, “blessed be the Most High, which has so far preserved the male sex from so great a crime” (Churchill,1985,178).

This is also supported by Geraldine Cousin who infers: “according to the authors of the book, there are more female than male witches because women are more credulous, impressionable and dishonest than men, and they also have feebler intellects” (Cousin, 37).

In my opinion, by having women to also play the roles of witch-hunters Churchill successfully highlights that patriarchy and oppression are not solely male domains. In other words, women can also practise patriarchy and oppress other women. Indeed, *Vinegar Tom* demonstrates the marginal and vulnerable position of women as a result of both women and men’s roles as patriarchal elements. Basically, Churchill is trying to deconstruct the whole accepted understanding of what it means to be a man. This leads us to the notion of gender construction whereby gender is not a real notion but a socially constructed one.

Concentrating on the socioeconomic and Christian notions embedded in the play, Lisa Merrill (1988) asserts that “women’s autonomous desires are seen as punishable offences because they are committed without official sanctions” (82). This is seen in the acts of all the four women who attempt to act in an autonomous manner, either sexually or economically but are cruelly driven out of the society.

6. Conclusion

The main concerns of the play are the empowerment of the upper class patriarchal agents as well as the repression of women which is everlasting in the societies ruled by patriarchs. Here, Churchill’s mission is to make an attempt to dismantle the patriarchal ideas which has made women’s repression commonplace.

In addition, the play reveals the relationships between economic situation and gender oppression. The power and injustice practiced by both patriarchy and capitalism are seen in relation to four working-class and one middle-class women in the play. Women’s oppression is represented via the acts of torture and hanging. Some of them (Joan and Ellen) are economically lower while some others (Alice and Susan) are sexually repressed. Margery, the

first oppressor recognizes and introduces the stereotypical witches and Goody; the second oppressor catches and hangs them. Kramer and Sprenger, the two other women oppressors confirm this action by saying, "All witchcraft/comes from carnal lust/ which is in woman/ insatiable" (Churchill,1985, 178).

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