

Beyond Feminism: Damaged Motherhood in Caryl Churchill's The Skriker

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ABSTRACT : *Over the last three decades, theatrical performance has become the prevailing metaphor for discourse on gender and sexuality. Feminist theatre in Britain in the 1970s has re-radicalized the commonplace theatrical norms of stagecraft in order to subvert prevalent power structures. Contemporary women playwrights like Caryl Churchill deliberately explored areas of experiences that the stage traditionally ignored. She felt the requirement of a potential public sphere within which the experiences of women could be focused distinctly, opening up new areas of concern. She has created a theatre for women, a space where they can encounter their own selves. Churchill's play "The Skriker" (1994) is not a source of fantastic entertainment, rather a venture to introduce the audience to the mythic dystopic world, a brave new world haunted by unhappy and fearful fairies, bogies, warped brownies, kelpies and so on. The Skriker has developed a self-reflexive mode of questioning the legitimating procedures within feminism itself in a manner which tends to associate the multiple concepts of 'woman's identity' with postmodernism. Churchill's The Skriker (hereafter TS) does not deal with the prevalent theme of economic liberty of women; rather makes women aware of the future towards which they are approaching. The postmodern strategies of disruption of traditional myths and reconstruction of new identities have inspired Churchill to portray the picture of the distorted and fragmented world of women, a world having both social and psychological relevance. While revealing the impact of postmodernism on British feminist theatre, Churchill favours the dissolution of traditional aesthetics of theatre. The fairyland atmosphere in the play is not an escape into the world of romantic fantasies, but a venture to a veritable hell from where there is no escape. Churchill's theatrical techniques defamiliarize the convention of illusion-making by the manipulation of sign-systems, thereby unfixing the peripheries of the real and the unreal. This play violates the traditional norms of illusion and reality, consequently giving birth to an 'unreal reality', which paradoxically is more real than the real. Such a performance provides a space for the perpetual deferment of conclusive meaning, creating a fluidity of traditional boundaries in the realm of theatre.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Theatre is an ephemeral sign-system that creates a space for social interaction. It is a dynamic and powerful medium that represents social struggles and the possibilities of social change. Ironically enough, women have been marginalized from the theatrical scenario as their experiences are not considered to be an integral part of socio-political struggles. But the social changes and feminist movements in the 1970s have developed into critical discourses that have affected every aspect of life and society. Being influenced by such issues, British theatre became a forum for exploring women's position by raising the consciousness of the people about social, political and cultural issues. Over the last three decades, theatrical performance has become the prevailing metaphor for discourse on gender and sexuality. Feminist theatre in Britain in the 1970s has re-radicalized the commonplace theatrical norms of stagecraft in order to subvert prevalent power structures. Contemporary women playwrights like Caryl Churchill deliberately explored areas of experiences that the stage traditionally ignored. She felt the requirement of a potential public sphere within which the experiences of women could be focused distinctly, opening up new areas of concern. She has created a theatre for women, a space where they can encounter their own selves. Her plays do not deal with the conventional issue of equality or economic liberty of women, they rather question the kind of liberty that women have achieved within the patriarchal domain. Their careeristic achievements at the cost of motherhood and maternal instincts are nothing but inverted male chauvinism that leads to the oppression of their own sex. Churchill's play *The Skriker* (1994) is not a source of fantastic entertainment, rather a venture to introduce the audience to the mythic dystopic world, a brave new world haunted by unhappy and fearful fairies, bogies, warped brownies, kelpies and so on. *The Skriker* has developed a self-reflexive mode of questioning the legitimating procedures within feminism itself in a manner which tends to associate the multiple concepts of 'woman's identity' with postmodernism. Challenging the limited boundaries of traditional drama, as well as the theatrical space, such a play incorporates dance, music, nursery rhymes, distorted utterances and other technical innovations, thereby extending the horizon of time and space where the process of signification opens up unexplored areas of experiences.

Churchill's *The Skriker* (hereafter *TS*) does not deal with the prevalent theme of economic liberty of women; rather makes women aware of the future towards which they are approaching. The postmodern strategies of disruption of traditional myths and reconstruction of new identities have inspired Churchill to portray the picture of the distorted and fragmented world of women, a world having both social and psychological relevance. The postmodern aesthetics treats the subject as myth and the conventional grand narratives as redundant illusions. "Like Feminism, Postmodernism (in theoretical and artistic modes), has been engaged in a re-examination of the Enlightenment concepts of subjectivity as autonomous self-determination; the human individual as defined without reference to history, traditional values, God, nation. Both have assaulted aesthetic or philosophical notions of identity as pure autonomous essence" (Waugh 208). Questioning traditional aesthetics and ideological structures is one of the preoccupations of postmodernism and feminist theatre. Following such critical trends, Churchill's play raises a series of questions instead of providing concrete solution to the problematic issues treated in the play. The audience is baffled and shocked by such a performance and is instigated to get critically involved in the stage performance. In following such a process Churchill thinks in line with Theodor Adorno who says: "[a]rt is not a matter of pointing up alternatives but rather a resisting, solely through artistic form, the course of the world, which continues to hold a pistol to the heads of human beings" (80). While revealing the impact of postmodernism on British feminist theatre, Churchill favours the dissolution of traditional aesthetics of theatre. The fairyland atmosphere in the play is not an escape into the world of romantic fantasies, but a venture to a veritable hell from where there is no escape. Churchill's theatrical techniques defamiliarize the convention of illusion-making by the manipulation of sign-systems, thereby unfixing the peripheries of the real and the unreal. This play violates the traditional norms of illusion and reality, consequently giving birth to an 'unreal reality', which paradoxically is more real than the real. Such a performance provides a space for the perpetual deferment of conclusive meaning, creating a fluidity of traditional boundaries in the realm of theatre.

The word 'Skriker' in North England dialect means a person who cries¹. In Churchill's play the strange mythic supranatural 'Skriker' is represented as damaged as the earth, trying to lure young women to a veritable hell, with the promise of fulfilling their heart's desire. This Mephistophelean character tempting young women to a bleak destination is a wicked spirit, chameleon-like, that can metamorphose into various deceptive guises. The central character in the play, the Skriker, has been described as "a shapeshifter and death portent, ancient and damaged" (Churchill 243). The play transports the audience to the phantasmagoric 'underworld', a place that has been ordained for modern women. *TS* portrays Churchill's most unsettling indictment of an incurably diseased world. The play has a complex structure of some apparently disjointed but actually interconnected episodes of everyday reality. At the same time, the play is a distortion of the 'real' by the fairy logic, which reveals the uncertainties and angst of the individual in the postmodern world. The blurring of boundaries signifies the instability of time and space in the fragmented lives of the individuals. Candice Amich in the essay "Bringing the Global Home: The Commitment of Caryl Churchill's *The Skriker*", provides a new approach to the play. She says:

Caryl Churchill's play *The Skriker* explores the ravages and intoxications of globalization. Through the shape-shifting figure of the Skriker, who commands space and time in a manner that recalls the fluidity of multinational capital, Churchill examines the relationship between time-space compression and the fragmented subjectivities of two women, Josie and Lily. As the Skriker invades their bodies, instantaneously transporting them through space and time, the simultaneously pleasurable and terrifying breakdown of interiority that accompanies temporal and spatial dislocation in our era of late capitalism is simulated onstage (394).

Such visions of temporal and spatial dislocation and the terror associated with it are encapsulated in the disjointed and broken language of the Skriker. The fluidity of capital is semiotically encapsulated in Lily's act of vomiting coins after her encounter with the Skriker. The female body of the unemployed mother is reproducing coins. Lily feels sick and disturbed as she cannot stop this vomiting. She fails to speak while her body produces a flow of money, the lack of which made her suffer before. Thus, the female body, functioning as a theatrical sign is transformed to a money-making machine. Through this theatrical code Churchill makes a vehement attack on the madness of capitalism that has penetrated deep into the lives of women. On the other hand, this act also links female language with capitalism. As language itself is contaminated by global capitalism, Churchill is trying to make women conscious of their use of 'language' and 'body' as weapons to disrupt phallogocentrism. The Skriker is not only a representation of destructive capitalism, but also a symbol of inner vacuity, inescapable loneliness and desperation that pervade the lives of modern women. The play juxtaposes two eras -- the ancient mythological world and the contemporary modern world.

Both these worlds are pictured as horrific, shocking and damaged, -- the 'underside' of which thriving only on material greed and self-interest. The play begins with the abrupt ranting monologue of the Skriker in the underworld. Then the scene shifts to the modern world where the schizophrenic Josie is found in the mental hospital for her abnormal act of killing her baby daughter. Josie's madness perhaps exemplifies the entrapment of modern women steeped in the materialistic society from where deliverance is an impossibility. Moreover, such a heinous, abnormal act may have been prompted by the unconscious instinctive drives of a mother only to prevent her child from enduring the terrific and nightmarish future awaiting her in the contemporary world. On the other hand, Josie's friend Lily is pregnant and has escaped from home. Throughout the play, the Skriker shapeshifts through a number of disguises, trying to tempt the two ladies to the underworld, and in the process expresses her loneliness, vacuity and unfulfilment. The Skriker endowed with supernatural powers is mostly concerned to get hold of Lily's baby, who represents the new generation of progressive women. The Skriker herself may be a microcosmic representation of the distorted image of women at the present time, a phase when everything undergoes immense change. After much conversation with Josie and Lily, the Skriker succeeds in transporting Josie to the underworld. There she encounters mythological folkloric characters like Yallery Brown, Nellie Longarms, Jenny Greenteeth, the Kelpie, Rawheadandbloodybones, Black Annis, Black Dog, hags and other supernatural characters. Some of them have claws and hideous appearances. The boundaries of space, time and reality interfuse and interpenetrate in both the worlds. Josie is tempted by the banquet of the spirits which finally turns out to be nightmarish. The Skriker is the fairy queen in hell; dressed gorgeously, she offers Josie a glass of red wine. Being lured by material superflousness, Josie drinks it in spite of warnings from the unidentified GIRL who says:

Don't eat. It's twigs and beetles and a dead body.
Don't eat or you'll never get back.... (270).

Josie thus submits herself before the Skriker. Like Marlowe's Doctor Faustus she sells herself to the Skriker only to be dislocated from the existing world into the horrible future. The banquet that appears to be a gorgeous feast is in reality a feast of twigs, leaves, beetles, dead body, blood and dirty water. Like Eve, who plucked the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden, Josie too is lured by the materialist temptations of the Skriker, thereby getting herself imprisoned in the underworld. After such disillusionment and horrifying experiences in the underworld, Josie is brought back to the real world. To Josie it is years that she has been in hell, though she returns to the present locale just a few seconds later. Finally, it is Lily who ventures to the underworld with the prospect of returning soon. But she finds herself trapped in the future, encountering her ghastly granddaughter in the 'real' world, a metaphoric hell from where there is hardly any prospect of return. To encapsulate the tragic predicament of women within the limited span of a play, Churchill successfully employs myths and folklores to demystify what is said or accepted and what remains unspoken or repressed in the representations of traditional theatrical performance. The 'myth' associated with the Skriker is not simply a reference to classical mythology, or to fairy stories ending with assurances of living 'happily everafter'. In line with Roland Barthes's concept of 'myth', it can be said that myths signify the complex system of images and conventions framed by the society to perpetuate and authenticate its own meaning. Roland Barthes in his *Mythologies* (1972) and *Elements of Semiology* (1967) deals with the concept of myth. Myths are symbolic of the accumulated knowledge of the society, the ideologies operating within the social framework. Myths provide interpretative archetypes for deciphering the meaning of the world where we inhabit with a view to exploring the present through the past. Terence Hawkes says:

However, myth is peculiar in that it invariable functions as a second-order semiotic system constructed on the basis of a semiotic chain which exists before it. That which had the status of a *sign* (i.e. the 'associative total' of signifier and signified) in the first system becomes a mere *signifier* in the second (107).

Roland Barthes has called 'myths' metalanguage because it is a second-order language used to interpret the first-order language. Terence Hawkes further says "There is also a reverse situation in which the sign of a prior signifier-signified relationship becomes the signified of a further one. In this case, the second-order system becomes a metalanguage in respect of the semiosis which it studies" (109-110). Myth is a process of signification in which we find the pattern of the signifier, the signified and the sign. Barthes postulates:

But myth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a second-order semiological system. That which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second. We must here recall that the materials of mythical speech (the language itself, photography, painting, posters, rituals, objects, etc),

however different at the start, are reduced to a pure signifying function as soon as they are caught by myth (*Mythologies* 114).

In performing a signifying function myth “hides nothing and flaunts nothing: it distorts; myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion” (Barthes, *Mythologies* 129). Myth distorts reality and naturalizes it, thereby transforming history into nature. Barthes even argues that the ‘orders of signification’ called denotation and connotation combine to produce ideology in the form of myth, which has been described as a third order of signification. Denotation means the use of language to mean what it says. But connotation is the literary use of language that means something different from what is said.

. . . the first system is then the plane of *denotation* and the second system. . . the plane of *connotation*. We shall therefore say that a connoted system is a system whose plane of expression is itself constituted by a signifying system: the common cases of connotation will of course consist of complex systems of which language forms the first system (this is, for instance, the case with literature). (Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* 89-90).

Connotation, producing higher order of signification, generates new meanings. Myths, functioning as signifying system, operate through codes and serve the ideological function of naturalization, thereby revealing the subtext in the process of signification. In *TS*, fairy logic and myth contribute to the signifying process. The play goes against the traditional domestic stories brightened by good fairies to bring about a magical happy-ever-after ending, and instead, gives way to a nightmarish world of chaotic disorder. The play is on one level a contradictory variation of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* with the feeling of disharmony between the natural and the supernatural. The juxtaposition of the fairy logic and supernatural characters and the speaking human characters in the contemporary world blurs the gap between the real and the unreal. The mythical figures who haunt the play are those evil spirits who are supposed to victimize and torture children: Rawhead and bloodybones, is a terrifying nursery goblin who frightens children by dragging them into marlpits or locks them in dark lockers; Kelpie is another superhuman creature, half man and half horse; Jennie Geenteeth, and Nellie Longarms are water monsters who drown children into ponds; and Black Annis, a goblin who eats animals and young children. The horrifying dead child who sings of her mother, who killed her and baked her in a pie to be eaten by the family, metaphorically alludes to Josie’s act of murdering her baby daughter. In this play blood-seeking fairies come out of British folklore and up from the underworld to quench their blood-thirst and to destroy the stable order.

Such a fairyland shatters the veil of illusion regarding the construction of traditional myths, thereby disrupting the accepted normal codes of conduct by ‘laying bare’ the underlying void, terror and vacuity in the contemporary world of women. The audience is introduced to a real world devoid of all illusions. On the other hand, the Skriker’s obsession to get hold of Lily’s baby reveals her desperate hankerings for motherhood that has been denied to her. The Skriker too desires to be recognised and valued as she tries to exert forcefully her supernatural powers to trap women. The complex fluidity in the character of Skriker is evident in the various disguises that she assumes. She takes the shape of helpless unfortunate beings like an old woman asking for affection, a young motherless child, and even inanimate objects. She even becomes the part of a sofa on which Josie and Lily sit, implying their entrapment and submission to the all-controlling power of the Skriker. Through her magic, the Skriker commodifies Lily’s body. The body gains the power to produce wealth but fails to sustain and nourish a progressive progeny. Again, on the contrary, such shapeshifting may be a devious device to entangle victims in her deceptive network of worldly temptation. Her ability to shapeshift and to appear and disappear is a sign of her power and at the same time, hints at her unfulfilment and inner barrenness. This dichotomy between appearance and disappearance indicates the interconnections between the two worlds -- the contemporary and the mythological. The result is the denaturalization of everyday reality moulded through distortion of history and contemporary events. The appearance of the Skriker and her activities, the depiction of the other characters are signifying codes that acquire the dimension of ‘myth’. In *TS* ‘myth’ functions as a sign that denaturalizes the operation of the social codes which are assumed to be natural. It reveals the invisible operations of the ideological forces by decoding them. Roland Barthes in *Mythologies*, elaborates his view of signification or hypostatization to analyse the working of ideologies as cultural forms. Myth can be a signifier of a level of connotative signifieds. Critical examination of the play from such a perspective will in turn open up new connotations suggesting the necessity for social change. The Skriker myth signifies that the modern world is chaotic and damaged though it appears to be progressive. “In a sense *TS* extends the possibilities of the death-space by letting Churchill bring back her own familiars: Lily, the pregnant innocent woman (*Owners*), Josie, the baby-killer (*A Mouthful of Birds*), random encounters in the park (*Cloud Nine*)” (Diamond 99).

Josie and Lily, representatives of the deprived class, are in no way better than Joyce or Angie in *Top Girls*, as their final predicament is not only bleak but horrific and shocking. They are advancing towards a poisoned and damaged space caused by war, drought, AIDS, toxic waste, in which 'nature', which has always been a comfort to people as long as they exist is not available any more. Women like the mother-earth, have become spiritually sterile, no longer endowed with the power of nourishment and nurture, but rather destructive in their attitudes. The play opens with the psycho-neurotic Josie, a mother who has killed her baby instead of caring and looking after it. The Skriker too, assuming the guise of a motherless child, expresses her helplessness and need of affection and care for life-sustenance. Finally, the play ends with the grotesque image of Lily's future generation in hell as she is abruptly snatched away from her "rock a bye baby gone to the treetop"(290) and pushed into the damaged era. Lily's visible maternal body and her experience of pregnancy are symbolically distorted in her ultimate experience in the underworld:

JOSIE: What happened to me is like that. As big as that is to you. I promise.

LILY: But it happened in no time at all.

JOSIE: Yes. But where I was it was years (277).

Through such cross-talks and overlapping dialogues, Churchill shocks the audience. The picture of damaged motherhood as signified throughout the play brings out the anxieties of women in the 1990s, a phase when women are at greatest risk, while heading for a bleak future of their own making. Failing to connect socially, women remain alienated from each other and absorbed in their own world of self-interest and material gain.

TS is an exploration of the interfusion of illusion and reality. Churchill's theatre encodes the postmodern interplay of the imagined and the real through cinematic operations of sign-systems where we encounter demons and mortals coexisting almost casually in the contemporary world. The world of art that Churchill has created shows the exchange of sign-commodities in a simulated domain. In a sense, *TS* traces the history of women in relation to the social and political sphere, focusing on the equivocal nature of 'reality' and the inequalities of social status. Churchill ventures to cross the boundaries of conventional realistic or naturalistic drama, to acquaint the spectators with the image of their lives distorted by rapid commercialization. The illusory, make-believe theatrical setting of the play is not entertaining, but shocking. The prevailing commodification of human lives and the social inequalities are generated not only by gender discriminations, but also from within the world of women themselves.

As a postmodern play, *TS* relates closely to Baudrillard's idea of the 'disappearance of the real'. Baudrillard is concerned with a postmodern world of simulacra² irresistibly hyperrealizing itself. "Baudrillard opens the way for the reductionist vision of postmodernity contained in his most recent writings where the real implodes and disappears in the ideology or hyperreality of the image"(Gottdiener 50). Baudrillard developed Roland Barthes's idea about the higher order sign functions -- the 'myths'. For Baudrillard media has so pervaded our everyday life with the ideological myths of advanced capitalism that reality itself does not exist. We are all trapped in a hyperreality which is defined as a universe of images. According to Baudrillard, we have passed from the real to the hyperreal and our understanding of reality comes from a culture based on images. Like Lyotard, Baudrillard observes that we have entered a new postmodern era of simulations governed by information and signs and a new cybernetic technology. "According to Baudrillard signs no longer correspond to, or mask, their 'real-life' referent but replace it in a world of autonomous 'floating signifiers'; there has been an implosion of image and reality'. This implosion[...], leads 'into the simulated non-space of hyperreality'. The 'real' is now defined in terms of the media in which it moves" (Selden 205). The demarcation between simulation and reality implodes, and along with this collapse, the very experience of the real world disappears. With simulation there are models of a real without origin or reality; a hyperreal. The hyperreal denotes the generation of a world without a real origin.

... the word 'hyperreal' is used to signify more real than real, where the real has been produced by the model. Hyperreality is the state where distinctions between objects and their representations are dissolved, and one is left only with simulacra (Barry 26-27).

The 'real' becomes *hyper* (i.e. more) so that there remains no way left to return to the previous state of less real than the *hyper*. The 'real' implies an origin, continuity and rationality. Therefore its disappearance is a distortion of the world order. Every image operates as a second or higher-order sign function of mythical proportions. In this context Suzanne Moore has elaborated the concept of 'hyper-representation' and anxiety in her commentary on advertising in the British media in the late 1980s. She analyses the postmodern as follows:

a time when signs—both visual and linguistic—are no longer monogamous with what they refer to in the ‘real’ world. They have instead started to copulate madly with each other, producing potential meaning everywhere. In this ‘loss of the real’, these illegitimate meanings are no longer anchored by the morality of one-to-one representation, float off to produce endless simulations, images of images, fakes of fakes—the past is there to be reinvented because surface reveals not depth, just more surface (qtd.in Aston 88).

Thus postmodernism is a culture of hyper-representation where objects lose their authenticity and become indefinitely reproducible and representable as commodities. In “The Murder of the Real”, Baudrillard says that the murder of the real is not symbolic, but an extermination. He further explains it as follows:

Here it is both literal and more metaphorical. “Ex-terminis”: it means that all things (and all beings as well) pass beyond their own end, beyond their own finality, where there is no reality anymore, nor any reason for being, nor any determination. Extermination means that nothing is left, no trace, not even a corpse. The Real has purely and simply disappeared. In our virtual world, the question of the Real, of the referent, of the subject and its object, can no longer be posed. (Baudrillard, *The Vital Illusion* 61-62).

Reality is disappearing not because of its *crisis*, but of its *excess* (emphasis mine). It is a paradoxical state of too much reality. We are going beyond the problematic of alienation and lack, not knowing exactly what is taking place. In this puzzling situation, we are never exactly real for one another, not even real to ourselves. In *TS* what one can identify is the presence of an anxiety of “the loss of the real, the loss of identity and culture in the artifice of the postmodern western world” (Aston 88). The world of *TS* is a representation of an unreal realm where magic, fear, violence and damage coexist with a recognizable world of everyday. Such coexistence generates an image of a world without any real origin. Fairy tales have turned nightmarish and the Skriker is more endowed with supernatural powers than an ordinary human being. The grotesque image of the Skriker from hell and her encounter with the earthly women show the fusion of the reality and fantasy. The space and time frame that Churchill exposes is beyond the real, rational world. Churchill breaks the sequential pattern of time, space and reality by juxtaposing the underworld existence with the present life of contemporary women. The presence of the other superhuman or subhuman characters also contributes to the creation of an unreal reality. Trapped by the Skriker, Josie is taken to the underworld and tempted by the evil spirits to the banquet of dirty things. The banquet has been described as follows:

It looks wonderful except that it is all glamour and here and there it’s not working—some of the food is twigs, leaves, beetles, some of the clothes are rags, some of the beautiful people have a claw hand or hideous face. But the first impression is that of a palace. SKRIKER is a fairy queen, dressed grandiosely, with lapses (268-269).

The grand feast appears to be a fantastic venture, but, is frightening as Josie gets imprisoned in the underworld for limitless span of time, while to Lily she never left the room. She thus appears to be a victim of schizophrenia to her friend, Lily. Ultimately it is Lily who is lured to the underworld. When she returns she is rather shocked by the image of her grotesque granddaughter generations after:

Lily appeared like a ghastly, made their hair stand on endless night, their blood run fast. ‘Am I in fairyland?’ she wondered. ‘No’, said the old crony, ‘this is the real world’ whirl whirl wh wh what is this? Lily was solid flash. If she was back on earth where on earth where was the rockabye baby gone the treetop? Lost and gone for everybody was dead years and tears ago, it was another cemetery, a black hole hundred years. Grief struck by lightning. And this old dear me was Lily’s granddaughter. What a horror storybook ending (290).

The appearance of Lily instills a sense of horror. The incomplete expression reveals that such a terrible, nightmarish experience is beyond the scope of verbal description. The breaking of syntactical order, repetition of sounds, parts of speech and punctuation, bring in association of strange experiences. It breaks down normal order of response. The reduction of words from ‘whirl’ to ‘wh’ finally leads to the formulation of the shocking question: ‘what is this?’ It reveals a search for one’s entity and reality. Ironically, such a search ends in shock and disillusionment. In this alien world what remains is ‘grief’ and that too is so intolerable as if ‘struck by lightning’. The expression ‘horror storybook ending’ connotes that reality affects us more terribly than a fantastic horror story. One cannot distinguish between the ‘real’ and the ‘unreal’ in the present dystopic world. In *TS*, there is not only a blurring of the distinction between reality and representation, but also a detachment from the reality itself. The audience is transported to the domain of hyperreality. There is the construction of a model of a real world without any original framework.

The hyperreal world that Churchill creates in the play is more real than the real, the truer than true. Illusion no longer prevails; it is truth that finds free expression. Baudrillard asserts: "Illusion is no longer possible. It has always braked the real, but now no longer holds; and we are witnesses to the unfurling of the real in a world without illusions.[. . .] This conjugation has been realized under the sign of the hyperreal, ecstatic form of the real" (*Fatal Strategies* 71). The characters in the play never know what is exactly taking place. In such a confusing state, they are neither real to others, nor to themselves. The existence of the Skriker in the present world and her encounter with the two women do not appear to be illusory; rather more real and true. This state of hyperreality baffles the audience as they remain wondering about the uncertainty of reality and the disastrous, deceptive world which women are creating for themselves. Like the Theatre of the Absurd, in this play also the audience sees characters and virtual reality in constant flux, devoid of any motivation. Martin Esslin in his *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1991) says that "Instead of being provided with a *solution*, the spectator is challenged to formulate the *questions* that he will have to ask if he wants to approach the meaning of the play" (416). The assembled image offered by the play is of a grim, absurd future awaiting woman which is not quite far off. Fantasy and reality juxtapose providing a glimpse of the frightening and dreadful world that women are about to inherit. Like Angie and Joyce in *Top Girls*, Josie and Lily are the representatives of the abandoned, schizophrenic and disempowered working-class women who are unconsciously carried off to the horror-stricken hellish future. Churchill's aim is to question the basic propositions of feminism and womanhood itself by mirroring the truth that women are regressing into a world of global chaos. Both Lily and Josie like Doctor Faustus are tempted by the Mephistophelian Skriker who ultimately drags them to hell. Neither of the two women has the scholarship or ambition like Doctor Faustus, but has to face a more bleak future from where there is no escape. The representation of these shocking and painful experiences of women disturbs the audience thoroughly. They in turn are forced to get involved intellectually and psychologically into the stage performance as such scenes challenge and expose the conventional depiction of myths and fantasy that end happily with a promising future. By disrupting the illusion of reality and constructing a hyperreal world, the audience is introduced into a world more real than the real, where real and unreal merge.

It would be relevant to point out here that the progress of technology (film, TV and advertising) has led to a loss of the distinction between reality and illusion, surface and depth. In *TS* the audience is provided with a glimpse of the postmodern world constituted by a series of projected images which blurs the difference between the real and the unreal. The Skriker disguised as an American woman asks Lily to explain the workings of television. Lily in her broken utterances tries to recapture the images bouncing off the satellite and the formation of pictures on the television screen:

LILY: catch it and this changes it back into the picture/ and it's not a solid thing, it's all dots

SKRIKER: But how for fuck's sake?

LILY: and lines if you look, I can't help it. If it's on the other side of the world they bounce it off a satellite yes I'm explaining satellite which is a thing a thing they put up in space ok, they it up I'm explaining that too and it's going round like a star, stars don't go round, like a moon but it looks like a star but moving about you sometimes see it at night, and it bounces off the satellite/ all right—(255).

The mechanical operation of the television is a sign that disguises the fact that there is no corresponding reality underneath; everything is an image, a hyper-representation and all is surface without depth. Lily's description of the mechanism of television, in a somewhat complex manner, reveals the process of the fusion of the real and the unreal. In *TS* Churchill introduces the audience to a new postmodern culture dominated by the hyperreal, where all oppositions disappear and dissolve while reappearing in simulated forms. Such culture is a site of a collapse of all boundaries and distinctions between appearance and reality and all other binaries upheld by philosophy and dominant culture. This move towards hyperreality marks an end of all finalities—history, reality, meaning and even the society itself. Churchill challenges the conventional dramatic forms making women conscious of their own material demands that captivate them, leading them finally to the path of gradual degeneration and damage.

II. NOTES

- [1] The word 'to skrike' in Northern English dialect means 'to skrike or to cry'. Collins English Dictionary--complete and unabridged © Harper Collins Publishers 2003. <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/skrike>.
- [2] Baudrillard's influential work, *Simulations* (1981 Trans. 1983) explores the depthless world of unreflecting images where truth is just another illusion. The word 'simulacra' means 'an image, representation or copy.' We now live in a world in which representations precede, and indeed create, that which they represent. Baudrillard substitutes for *representation* the notion of *simulation*.

III. WORKS CITED

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