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Theatrical Form as Subversion of Patriarchy in the Selected Postmodern Plays of Churchill and Kane



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ABSTRACT

This study explores how Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* and Sarah Kane's *Blasted* use formal strategies to subvert patriarchal ideologies in postmodern British theatre. It addresses the inadequacy of traditional linear drama in representing fragmented feminist experiences. Using a qualitative methodology, the research compares Churchill's linguistic disruptions and Kane's spatial detonations. Findings reveal that Churchill fragments singular voices via typographical notation, while Kane shatters spatial realism to expose structural violence. Ultimately, subverting patriarchy requires a structural reconfiguration of the text, stage, and audience relationship rather than just changing ideological content. By linking these methods to socio-political contexts like Thatcherism and the Bosnian war, the study concludes that broken dramatic forms are essential to accurately depict broken lives, offering a framework for future intersectional research.

Keywords: Caryl Churchill, Sarah Kane, Patriarchy, Theatrical Form, Subversion.

الشكل المسرحي لتقويض النظام الأبوي في مسرحيات ما بعد الحداثة المختارة لتشرشل وكين

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لُستخلص

تستكشف هذه الدراسة كيف تستخدم مسرحيتا Top Girls لكارييل تشرشل و Blasted لسارة كين استراتيجيات شكلية لتقويض الأيديولوجيات الأبوية في المسرح البريطاني لما بعد الحداثة. وتعالج الدراسة قصور الدراما الخطية التقليدية عن تمثيل التجارب النسوية المتشظية. وباستخدام منهجية نوعية، يقارن البحث بين الاضطرابات اللغوية عند تشرشل والتفجيرات المكانية عند كين. وتكشف النتائج أن تشرشل تفتت الصوت الواحد عبر الرموز الطباعية، بينما تحطم كين الواقعية المكانية لفصح العنف البنيوي الكامن. في النهاية، يتطلب تقويض النظام الأبوي إعادة صياغة بنيوية للعلاقة بين النص وخشبة المسرح والمتلقي بدلاً من مجرد تغيير المحتوى الأيديولوجي. ومن خلال ربط هذه الأساليب بالسياقات الاجتماعية والسياسية مثل التاتشيرية وحرب البوسنة، تخلص الدراسة إلى أن الأشكال الدرامية المحطمة ضرورية لتصوير الحي المحطمة بدقة، مما يوفر إطاراً للأبحاث التقاطعية المستقبلية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: كارييل تشرشل، سارة كين، النظام الأبوي، الشكل المسرحي، التقويض

1. Introduction: The Political Aesthetic of Form and Context

The landscape of late twentieth-century British drama was marked by a seismic shift from thematic rebellion to a profound structural interrogation. The central problem of this research lies in the inadequacy of traditional dramatic forms, specifically the "well-made play," in representing fragmented feminist experiences, as these historical forms often function as "masculine" structures that reproduce hierarchy.

This research posits that theatrical form is never neutral; it is an ideological site where patriarchal power is either maintained or systematically dismantled. Traditionally, the dramatic "frame" has mirrored a "phallogocentric" order—a linear, coherent structure governed by a singular, authoritative male gaze. As Mohammed Waleed Asaad (2025) says, postmodern feminist drama does not simply argue against patriarchy; it 'rewires the stage' that patriarchy has used to present itself as common sense, reinforcing the principle that rights 'are not granted but must be taken through ongoing struggle, passed down from generation to generation, until the goal is achieved' (p. 1175). In this context, the subversion of patriarchy requires more than just a change in content; it necessitates a radical restructuring of the dramatic medium itself.

To address this, the study focuses on two primary research questions: First, how do linguistic disruptions and overlapping dialogue techniques in *Top Girls* function as political tools? Second, to what extent does the explosion of theatrical space in *Blasted* contribute to exposing latent structural violence?

By breaking the logical progression of the "Well-made play," playwrights like Churchill and Kane do not merely tell stories of oppression; they enact a formal rebellion that destabilizes the audience's epistemic certainty. This "political aesthetic" of form suggests that when the structure of a play becomes fragmented or "exploded," the patriarchal ideologies that rely on coherence and closure are effectively undermined.

Postmodern theatre is characterized by a "rejection of grand narratives" and a move toward what Hans-Thies Lehmann (2006) calls "Postdramatic Theatre." In this framework, the hierarchy of the text is dismantled. Instead of a linear story that leads to a logical moral conclusion (a hallmark of patriarchal storytelling), postmodern drama utilizes fragmented structures, nonlinear narratives, and intertextuality. By refusing to provide a clear, "closed" ending, Churchill and Kane force the audience to sit with the discomfort of unresolved conflict. This lack of closure is a direct formal challenge to the patriarchal desire for order and containment.

1.1. Literature Review

Previous scholarship has extensively explored the individual contributions of Churchill and Kane, though rarely placing their formal methodologies in direct thematic conversation. Amelia Howe Kritzer (1991) notes that Churchill rejects Aristotelian dramaturgy, offering "fragmentation instead of wholeness, many voices instead of one." Similarly, Elaine Aston (1997) identifies Churchill's use of non-linear time as essential to "unfixing" established identities and challenging the patriarchal "male gaze". Conversely, scholarship on Sarah Kane largely focuses on spatial trauma; Aleks Sierz (2001) categorizes her work as the "theatre of extremes," where the physical reality of the body is used to confront patriarchal structural violence. While critics like Ken Urban (2001) highlight Kane's "Ethics of Catastrophe" as a mode where realism collapses, there is a lack of comparative analysis regarding how Churchill's linguistic fragmentation and Kane's spatial detonation operate as dual strategies against the exact same patriarchal framework. This study synthesizes these isolated critiques to demonstrate that both playwrights are engaged in the same structural rebellion.

1.2. Historical Context: From Thatcherism to the Bosnian Horror

The political context of the 1980s is fundamental to the radical critique found in *Top Girls*. Churchill composed the play during the height of Thatcherism, an era that championed a "neoliberal feminism" where individual advancement was predicated on women adopting a ruthless, competitive, and masculinized persona. As Bill Naismith (2008) suggests, the play functions less as a celebration of successful women and more as a challenge to the specific "type of success" celebrated by this ideology (p.55). This performance aligns with Emma Heaney (2017), who writes that "The Modernist New Woman" prioritizes a capitalist agency that mimics male patterns of dominance.

However, the transition into the 1990s brought about a more visceral geopolitical trauma. Kane's *Blasted* (1995) emerged in the shadow of the Bosnian War, a period where the illusion of the "private domestic safe-space" was shattered by the reality of systemic military rape and genocide. As Jean-François Lyotard (1984) defines this postmodern shift through an "incredulity to metanarratives," the atrocities in Bosnia proved that Europe was still plagued by primal patriarchal brutality. Therefore, Churchill critiques the economic violence of the Thatcherite project, while Kane exposes the physical annihilation of the subject in the wake of European instability. Together, these contexts demand a theatrical form that is equally disruptive and uncompromising.

2. Research Methodology and Text Selection

This study utilizes a qualitative analytical methodology centered on comparative discourse analysis and close reading of the primary texts. The methodology is fundamentally thematic rather

than strictly theoretical; it extracts the mechanisms of subversion directly from the plays' dialogue, linguistic rhythms, and stage directions to understand how form dictates meaning.

Consequently, the plays *Top Girls* (1982) and *Blasted* (1995) were purposefully selected because they represent two distinct eras of British political trauma—Thatcherite neoliberalism and the post-Cold War European conflicts—allowing for a thematic comparative analysis of how patriarchal violence evolves from the corporate boardroom to the war zone. By comparing Churchill's linguistic approach with Kane's spatial approach, the study ensures a focused, deep analysis rather than a superficial overview of postmodern drama.

3. Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*: Deconstructing the Voice and the Self

In *Top Girls*, Churchill interrogates the cost of female success within a patriarchal-capitalist framework. Her subversion of the patriarchal order is achieved through a fundamental deconstruction of the dramatic subject, moving away from a stable "liberal" feminism towards a more radical "materialist" critique. As Michalle Whitaker (2007) argues in the context of "unstable subjects," Butler's assertion is that an individual's subjectivity is not determined by their gender or sex alone, but rather stems from various intersecting traits (p. 16). By presenting a fragmented and multi-layered narrative, Churchill challenges the phallogentric requirement for a unified "Self," instead offering a subject that is constantly contested by social forces.

3.1. The "Slash" (/) as a Linguistic Rebellion

In *Top Girls*, Churchill fundamentally changes the acoustic picture of the theatre, not as a text to be read, but as a musical score to be orchestrated. By introducing the "forward slash" (/) notation, a typographical instruction indicating where precisely a second speaker must intrude upon the first, she rejects the polite and linear turn-taking which is characteristic of realistic male discourse. This technique is not simply an attempt at naturalism; it is a conscious political strategy.

In patriarchal theatre, silence is usually passive; whereas in Churchill's feminist postmodernism, silence is populated, ruptured, and colonized by competing female voices, thus creating a sonic landscape where meaning is negotiated and not dictated. Thematically, this technique questions the intersections of gender, power, and language. It is based on the assertion claimed by French-Italian socialist-feminist Luce Irigaray (1985), who shows that sexual difference is a product of language and linguistics rather than a natural, inherent fact of biology.

The most powerful application of this technique is first at the dinner party in Act One. Here, the overlapping is like a kind of "collective autobiography." The women do not always listen to each other, but their narratives weave conceptually together to create a tapestry of female experience that transcends time. For example, the dialogue between Lady Nijo and Isabella Bird is not a simple conversation but a collision of two forms of female endurance: **Isabella:** I long'd to go home, / at home to what? Houses **Nijo:** I was longing to return to ten years ago. **Isabella:** are so dismally perfect. (Churchill, 1982, p. 10)

In this special instant, the slash (/) is a suture. Isabella's inability to find "home" is visually and audibly stitched to Nijo's desire to regress to a time before her erasure. Rather than one woman's story taking precedence over the other, the overlapping produces what Sian Adiseshiah (2009) calls the "utopian transformation occurs through a collective experience" (p.81).

Furthermore, this technique is used to aggressively break down the sociolinguistic expectation of "female politeness." Traditionally, women's speech in theatre has been characterized by active listening and reticence, yet the characters of Churchill's play occupy sonic space without apology. However, the "slash" is also a demarcation mechanism. When Marlene refuses to allow Jeanine to finish her thoughts in Act Two, Marlene demonstrates that within capitalist agency, the power to speak is the power to interrupt: **Marlene:** Right Jeanine, you are Jeanine aren't you? Let's have a look. Os and As. / No As, all those Os you probably **Jeanine:** Six Os. **Marlene:** could have got an A. / Speeds, not brilliant, not too bad. **Jeanine:** I wanted to go to work. (pp. 170-171)

This linguistic rebellion is further strengthened by Churchill's use of intertextuality. By bringing together historical figures like Pope Joan, Dull Gret, and Lady Nijo, Churchill creates a "palimpsest" of female suffering. When these characters speak over one another using the "slash" (/) notation, it creates a sense of "simultaneity." This suggests that the patriarchal oppression faced by a 13th-century Japanese concubine and a 19th-century traveler is not a series of isolated historical events, but a continuous, overlapping structure. The formal chaos of the dinner scene reflects the historical chaos of women's lives, which have been systematically erased from the "linear" history books written by men.

3.2. Marlene: The Corporate Performance of Masculinity

Marlene's professional persona is a performance of patriarchal values masked as liberation. She embodies the "success" of the individual woman who has climbed the ladder by internalizing the very structures that oppress others. **Marlene:** I don't mean anything personal. I don't believe in class. Anyone can do anything if they've got what it takes. **Joyce:** And if they haven't? **Marlene:** If they're stupid or lazy or frightened, I'm not going to help them get a job, why should I? (Churchill, 1982, p. 233)

This quote highlights Marlene's total assimilation into neoliberal ideology. Her language is sharp, dismissive, and devoid of empathy, mirroring the "masculine" corporate environment she inhabits. The critique comes to a head in the final scene where the human cost of her performance is revealed in her abandoned, emotionally stunted daughter, Angie. Angie's final, haunting word, "Frightening," is a devastating indictment of the hollowness at the core of Marlene's successful performance (Churchill, 1982, p. 235).

4. Sarah Kane's *Blasted*: Detonating the Patriarchal Stage and the Body

In *Blasted* (1995), Sarah Kane presents a brutal deconstruction of patriarchal structures through a formal strategy of detonation that shatters the aesthetic safety of traditional drama. This structural blast serves as a violent rupture in the fabric of realistic drama, symbolizing the total collapse of the patriarchal order's ability to protect or contain the domestic sphere. By bringing "materiality in the form of bodies in pain" she makes a "severe indictment of ethical apathy". The writing is deliberately "unmooring psychological underpinnings" and "disturbing smooth causal narrative," deconstructing the "stable container" of a traditional home (Wixson, 2005).

4.1. Verbal Colonization and Territorialism

Kane establishes the stage as a site of colonization through Ian's language. His dialogue functions as a form of verbal rape that precedes the physical acts of violence. Ian's linguistic strategy is deeply rooted in the concept of "territorialism," where the male protagonist uses words to assert

ownership over the female body and the domestic space. **Soldier:** proving it happened. I'm here, got no choice. But you. You should be telling people. **Ian:** No one's interested. **Soldier:** You can do something, for me. **Ian:** No. **Soldier:** Course you can. **Ian:** I can't do anything. **Soldier:** Try. **Ian:** I write ... stories. That's all. Stories. This isn't a story anyone wants to hear. (Kane, 2001, pp. 47-48)

By calling his work "stories," Ian effectively acknowledges that the "neat-edged and linear sentences of realism" are a luxury of peace and cannot contain the *Blasted* reality of war. His final line functions as a meta-theatrical indictment of a society that prefers the "aesthetic safety" of conventional drama over the "bleakness of vision" provided by raw trauma.

4.2. The Structural Blast: Detonating the Domestic Walls

The central formal subversion is the literal explosion that destroys the realistic hotel set. This "structural blast" serves as a violent rupture in the fabric of realistic drama. The explosion is not merely a spectacle; it is an ontological shift that exposes the "safe" middle-class environment as a facade built upon systemic fragility.

The arrival of the Soldier in *Blasted* serves as the physical manifestation of the "structural blast." While Ian represents the domestic, "polite" violence of the middle class, the Soldier brings the "macroscopic" violence of the state into the room. Kane uses the Soldier to strip away Ian's linguistic defenses. When the **Soldier** says, "No one's interested... this isn't a story anyone wants to hear" (Kane, 2001, pp. 47-48), he is commenting on the failure of traditional narrative to account for real-world atrocity. The close reading of this scene reveals that the "patriarchal protector" (represented by Ian's bravado) is completely useless when the form of the world itself collapses. The Soldier's presence proves that the "private" room was always an illusion; the room is merely a part of the battlefield.

When the walls of the hotel room are detonated, Kane is effectively detonating the ideological separation between the "private" female domain and the "public" male theater of war. This collapse of space illustrates that the violence occurring within the domestic walls is intimately linked to the atrocities occurring in the world outside. The blast forces the audience to confront the reality that there is no "safe room" in a patriarchal society.

4.3. The Blinded Gaze and the Disintegration of the Subject

By the end of *Blasted*, the dominant Ian is blinded and reduced to primal, fragmented cries. This physical blinding represents the ultimate deconstruction of the "patriarchal gaze"—the authoritative eye that has historically sought to monitor, objectify, and control the female body. When Ian loses his sight, he loses the very tool of his dominance, undergoing a radical transformation from a sovereign subject into an abject object of pity and horror. **Ian:** I need you to stay, Cate. Won't be for long... Help me. **Cate:** (Strokes his hair.) **Ian:** Be dead soon anyway, Cate. And it hurts. — Help me to — Help me — Finish It. (Kane, 2001, p. 53)

Consequently, in the final stages of the play, the focus shifts from dialogue to the "abject body." Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject—that which "disturbs identity, system, order"—is physically enacted on stage. Ian's body becomes a site of total degradation: he is blinded, raped, and reduced to eating a dead baby. Formally, Kane moves away from "theatre as speech" to "theatre as presence." By forcing the audience to witness the physical disintegration of the male lead, she

removes the "aesthetic distance" that usually protects the viewer. This is the ultimate subversion: the patriarchal subject is not just argued against; he is physically and formally unmade until only a "fragmented cry" remains.

This disintegration into primal screams and incoherent pleas signifies the total failure of the phallogocentric logic that once sustained his power.

5. Synthesis: Comparing Formal Strategies of Subversion

The subversion of patriarchy in the works of Churchill and Kane share a common goal: the dismantling of the "stable" patriarchal subject. Churchill's approach is primarily Linguistic. She subverts the "Voice" by using techniques like the "Slash" to decentralize power, turning the stage into a democratic but disjointed space where the audience must actively construct meaning.

Kane's approach, on the other hand, is Visceral and Spatial. She subverts the "Body" and the "Room." Her resistance is not just linguistic but ontological. By destroying the physical boundaries of the stage, she targets the audience's sense of safety. While Churchill fragments the voice, Kane fragments the entire theatrical experience.

6. Research Findings and Analysis

- **Linguistic Disruption:** The use of "overlapping dialogue" and "fragmented cries" effectively neutralizes the monologic authority of the male subject.
- **Structural Detonation:** Breaking the "fourth wall" and the "domestic walls" reveals the intersectionality of private and public violence.
- **The Failure of Performativity:** Characters who attempt to perform "masculine" power (like Marlene or Ian) inevitably face a structural or emotional collapse.

7. Conclusion and Future Directions

The study concludes that theatrical form is the primary site of political struggle in postmodern drama. Caryl Churchill and Sarah Kane utilize "fragmentation" and "detonation" not as mere stylistic choices, but as essential tools to dismantle the "phallogocentric" framework of the stage. Through thematic close reading, it becomes evident that characters who attempt to perform "masculine" power inevitably face a structural or emotional collapse. The "Well-made play" is revealed to be a patriarchal construct that reinforces stability and order; therefore, subversion requires a "broken" form to represent "broken" lives.

A limitation of this study is its concentrated focus on just two playwrights, which, while allowing for deep thematic analysis, restricts the scope of how other marginalized identities interact with form. Future research should expand on these findings by exploring Intersectional Aesthetics—specifically, how race and class intersect with formal subversions in contemporary British drama. Furthermore, investigating Post-Humanist Theatre could provide valuable insights into the role of modern technology in either reinforcing or challenging the patriarchal "gaze" on the modern stage.

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