

## Laughter in Churchill's *Top Girls*: A Metaphorical Form of Expression

Madhaw Almeshaal

English department, King Saud University

Received on: 23-11-2014

Accepted on: 5-1-2016

### Abstract

The study at hand examines Caryl Lesley Churchill's talent in skillfully employing an oral yet a nonverbal mode of expression on stage. Churchill's female characters' laughter, in *Top Girls*, does not only metaphorically communicate their inner feelings and conflicts, but it also reflects universal human dilemmas and struggles. Having consulted some physiological and psychological facts about human laughter, the present study investigates Churchill's talent in using an oral yet a nonverbal mode of expression to highlight different human conflicts through analyzing these characters' type, time, and place of laughter. This article strives to decode Churchill's female characters' attempts to subtly express their bewilderment and pain not merely as women but as human beings. Issues of human identity and human universal struggles are dominant throughout the play and are metaphorically conveyed in Churchill's female characters' laughter.

**Key Words:** Non-verbal communication, oral, laughter, identity, metaphorical, human struggle.

"I consider laughter and tears to be very brilliant dialogue" Chung (2012:56)

### Introduction

One of the most striking elements in *Top Girls*, by Caryl Lesley Churchill, is the female characters' manner of communication and their forms of expression on stage. Early in the play, the viewer notices the female characters' struggle with verbal communication., to be more clear, verbal interruption, overlapping, and silence abound and are clearly signs of the struggle of Churchill's female characters with verbal expression throughout the play. In the midst of these characters' effort to verbally express their feelings, laughter appears to be a metaphorically striking form of communication. The study at hand strives to analyze how, when, where, and why these characters laugh; this reveals the playwright's talent in employing an oral but non-verbal gesture to subtly convey not only feminist and social issues but also serious essential human matters on stage.

Laughter is a universal, visual, aural, and non-verbal vocalization that metaphorically communicates a lot about Churchill's female characters' inner thoughts, dilemmas, and emotions. According to Lakin (2006: 64), non-verbal communication is:

Expressed through nonlinguistic means, often unconscious, universal, wordless message to generate meaning. The non-verbal communication fulfils meta communicative

functions and communicates about communication, clarifying both the nature of our own relationship, and/or the meaning of our verbal messages.

Researchers such as Janet Beavin Bavelas and Nicole Chovil (2006: 94) conclude that “non-verbal cues carry approximately two thirds of a message’s communicative value.” They stress the many functions of non-verbal communication such as contradicting, emphasizing, or underscoring a verbal message, regulating or controlling person- to- person interaction, substituting for or replacing verbal communication, and communicating emotions. (Ibid, 73)

The play opens with the six allegorical figures<sup>(1)</sup> assembling in a restaurant to celebrate the protagonist, Marlene’s, professional success as she gets promoted to the position of the managing director of the Top Girls company.<sup>(2)</sup> In the midst of narrating dark issues and recounting painful memories of their “rough [lives],” these characters frequently laugh long and loudly. A frequency count shows that these female characters laugh eight times in the first scene of the play alone. One feels that even though these female characters frequently try to verbally discuss their social, religious, and gender struggles, there remains a lot unexpressed verbally. In other words, though these characters talk, there is a lot of interruption, overlapping, duplicity, and frequent silences, wherein these characters’ laughter becomes a vehicle through which Churchill’s characters subtly express a lot. As they talk, Joan asks, “Do you follow?” Marlene replies, “No, but go on.” (Churchill, 1991:11) Nijo puts it succinctly when she says, “I’m not a cheerful person, Marlene. I just laugh a lot.” (Ibid:8). Nevertheless, they continue talking about their past “social accomplishments” even though “it hurt[s] to remember the past.” (Ibid: 19) They occasionally laugh as if to visually and audibly express their pain and bewilderment. In this scene, Nijo narrates her experience of being made to physically please the emperor at the age of fourteen and her fear of “losing his favor,” which will lead her “to enter holy orders.” Isabella describes having a tumor removed from her spine at one point in her life when she had pains in her bones. She shook all over, had an indefinable sense of terror, and “looked completely insane and suicidal.” (ibid: 3). These guests talk about their grief over the loss of their fathers, dead lovers, religious hypocrisy, and lost, dead, and illegitimate children as they laugh.

Though these characters laugh as they drink a toast to their “courage,” the way they “changed their lives,” and their “extraordinary achievements,” (ibid: 4) their dark laughter of doubt and bewilderment is unmistakable. Joan’s narration of her experience as a disguised pope and her wondering about whether the natural disasters that happened then were her fault are accompanied by loud laughter. Furthermore, the female guests laugh as Joan talks about rotting bodies poisoning the air and killing everyone in those regions. Moreover, they laugh as Isabella talks about barbarians who sell their baby girls for “cameras or stew.” (Ibid: 16). They also laugh as Joan and Nijo narrate their experiences giving difficult childbirths to illegitimate babies and their lost and dead children. Marlene wonders, “Oh, God, why are we all so miserable?” (Ibid: 20). The scene ends as Joan gets up sickly, Isabella proudly narrates her visit to the emperor of Morocco, and Nijo is laughing and crying at once.

Similarly, in the last scene of the play, when Marlene returns home with her sister, Joyce, after six years of absence, they talk about dark memories such as their old sick mother’s rotten life, Marlene giving

up her illegitimate daughter to her sister's adoption, her two abortions, Joyce's difficult cheap cleaning jobs, and her husband's abandonment. In the midst of these sisters' dark confessions, Marlene laughs and cries at once. They both laugh as Marlene begins to stop crying.

To be able to decode Churchill's female characters' laughter as a subtle form of expression, one has to investigate the physical and psychological effects of laughter on human beings. In other words, what happens when people laugh? In *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes (2012: 47) wrote:

The passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly: for men laugh at the follies of themselves past, when they come suddenly to remembrance except they bring with them any present dishonor.

D.H. Monro (1988:352) thinks that Hobbes is using "glory" in the sense of "vainglory" or "self-esteem." According to Hobbes, we laugh at the "misfortunes or infirmities of others, at our own past follies, provided that we are conscious of having now surmounted them, and also at unexpected successes of our own." (Ibid) Thus, using Hobbes' argument, the six allegorical female figures' laughter in the first act of the play is laughter of sudden glory where these characters laugh at each others' misfortunes, their own past follies, and their own unexpected success.

Laughter can be looked at as "a purge," since as Manfred Pfister (2002: 18) asserts, "it does to the tension in the organ what thunder does to the cloud charged with electricity and lightning . . . It discharges tension and brings release." Moreover, Bernie Siegel argues that psychological research in the field of humor and laughter has proven that in addition to its many clinical benefits such as stabilizing blood pressure, massaging inner organs, stimulating circulation, facilitating digestion, increasing oxygen supply to relieve muscle tension, and promoting an overall sense of well-being, laughter "produces similar, if not identical, responses to those associated with progressive muscular relaxation. Laughter is a widely recognized relaxation technique used to reduce muscle tension." (Siegel, 1990: 17). Siegel adds that the most remarkable effect of laughter is "the release of neuropeptides, including the beta endorphins, which act as pain reducers." (Ibid)

Laughter, according to R. Glasgow (1995: 15), can be looked at as a sign of joy and/or confusion, and it can be a way to express one's merriment and/or a means to hide one's fear and embarrassment as well. (Ibid). Glasgow writes, "Laughter may indeed meaningfully be said to represent an outburst of physical spontaneity, say, an unpremeditated rush of merriment, or a sense of sudden bewilderment. Equally, though, it may be used to stimulate ebullience or to hide embarrassment or fear." (Ibid). Churchill's female characters' occasional laughter is not laughter of joy or merriment; rather, it is laughter that underlines a high sense of puzzlement and fear. It is laughter of pain.

Moreover, Enda Junkins, a laughter psychotherapist, asserts that though laughter does not change facts and reality, it changes the way we relate to facts and allows a person to see things from "a bird's-eye view" where making horrendous misfortune seems much more bearable. She argues that this allows

people to “remember, to feel, and to explore without fearing that they will be trapped by circumstances beyond their control.” (Junkins, 2014). Laughter, Junkins asserts, provides the release of the pain layered on top in a pleasurable way. (Ibid). Laughter, she states, “peels away the pain allowing one to feel the joy beneath.” (Ibid). She adds that laughter takes care of several painful feelings and releases fear which is often “the root cause of emotional distress. [It] releases peoples’ anxiety as they laugh and decreases their discomfort, enables people to relate more fully, think more clearly, and bond with others when their fear is released through laughter.” (Ibid) Moreover, laughter, Junkins adds, releases light anger and fear; this works to release deep anger indirectly for it is “a gentle way to address anger. It is less threatening than a direct expression of anger.” (Ibid). Similarly, Nico Frijda describes laughter as “contagious” and as a way to “block aggression.” It is also “a mode of tension release,” “a detachment response,” a means to get rid of “active emotional involvement,” and “a bonding behavior.” (Frijda, 1986: 57) Thus, human laughter is, in fact, astonishing in the diversity of its implications and impacts.

To be able to analyze the philosophy of laughter, one needs to consult some theories on laughter. There are three theories that might contribute to the understanding of Churchill’s characters’ laughter. First, the superiority theory supports the idea that our laughter expresses feelings of superiority over other people or over “a former state of ourselves.” (Morreall, 1983, 168). Second, the relief theory believes that “the movements associated with emotions, then, discharge or release the built-up nervous energy . . . Laughter releases nervous energy too.” (Spencer, 1910: 303). Freud (2003: 163) asserts it is “the psychic energy that would have repressed the emotions that are being expressed as one laughs.” Similar to Freud, Herbert Spencer, in *The Physiology of Laughter*, develops a theory of laughter that is closely related to nervous energy, which argues that excitement and mental agitation produces energy that “must expand itself in some way or another.” (Ibid). He believes that “nervous excitation always tends to beget macular motion.” (Ibid) As for a physical movement, laughter can serve as “the expressive route” of various forms of nervous energy. That is, laughter “serves to release pent-up energy.” (Spencer, 1910: 5). Third, the incongruity theory argues that the cause of laughter is the perception of something incongruous, ambiguous, irrelevant, and inappropriate: “something that violates our mental patterns and expectations.” (Monro, 1988: 352)

Applying some aspects of these theories of humor enables one to decode Churchill’s female characters’ laughter. Marlene’s sense of superiority is unmistakable throughout the play and is conveyed during her conversation with her guests and the waitress during the dinner party, her interaction with her employers in her employment agency, and her conversation with her sister, Joyce. Her image of herself as a “tough bird,” who has never admitted to anybody except to her sister that she had two abortions, gave up her daughter for adoption, and abandoned her family at a young age reflects Marlene’s high sense of superiority as she depicts herself as a successful, financially independent career woman. Marlene represents “an individualistic style of feminism called ‘bourgeois feminism’ [and is] eager to assert her right to compete as ruthlessly as her fellow male capitalists.” (Aston and Diamond, 2009: 5). Marlene has a high sense of superiority over her party guests, the hard-working waitress, the pathetic sister, and the employees, the men and women in her employment agency.

Moreover, the concept of relieving repressed emotions is very applicable as Marlene and her guests expel a lot of bottled emotions of anger, shame, confusion, and aggression through their loud laughter. Laughter in the first and last scenes of the play is a form of venting of bottled emotions and nervous energy. These female characters' laughter stems from their perception of the incongruous, the absurdity of their situation as women in male-dominated societies in which they are doomed as they are unable to fully function as balanced human beings. Friedrich Nietzsche asserts that laughter "frees us from the nausea of the absurd." (Marmyzy, 2003: 38). Thus, these characters are puzzled by "the absurd" that "violates" their "mental patterns and expectations," and their laughter helps free them from its consequential "nausea." They are either ruthless women who are mainly successful in the workplace such as Marlene and her female colleagues or submissive resentful creatures like Joyce and Griselda who survive only through effacing their identity as human beings.

It is intriguing to analyze the time, the place, and the manner/type of these female characters' laughter so as to interpret it as a metaphorical form of expression. Upon tracing these female characters' laughter, one realizes that it is very hard to label the type of laughter the characters in *Top Girls* produce. These female characters laugh, in the first scene of the play, in a dreamlike, surrealist setting, in a restaurant in the early evening. Laughter in the last scene of the play takes place in a kitchen and a family living room late at night. In the first scene, during the dinner party, the "courageous" female characters are occupied with ordering food and drinks where they dine while having those dark interrupted, overlapping, fragmented, and jarred recollections. These women are ordering and eating lots of cooked food, as if to emphasize the new female's sense of identity as a professional worker and not as a caretaker, a nurturer. The excessive amount of drinking<sup>(3)</sup> where they order one bottle of wine after another, is also suggestive of these females' new adopted identities where they act like men as they attempt to numb their sense of discomfort. Similarly, in the last scene of the play, the sisters talk in poor Joyce's kitchen/living room while Marlene is drinking to numb her sense of pain in an attempt to emphasize her identity as a professional woman and not as a caretaker.

These female characters often laugh at the end of the day, in the early evening or late at night. They laugh in places related to food, eating, and cooking, in a restaurant or in a kitchen. One wonders about the correlation between eating, drinking, and laughing. Drinking and eating help intensify these characters' sense of precariousness in their new identities as independent women. Eating and drinking become a misplaced desire-bag into which these characters place their feelings of confusion and frustration. That is to say, the place of these characters' laughter relates to eating, serving food, or cooking as if to highlight these females' instinctive nurturing feelings against which they are trying to rebel through adopting a masculine role. That rebellion contributed to these characters' sense of a split identity.

It is interesting to note that no laughter takes place in the workplace or early in the day. During working hours, Marlene and her work colleagues are serious, mechanical, and ruthless as they compete to survive in the workplace. These female characters laugh with one another at the end of the day, in the early evening, or late at night. According to Gelotology (2013), the study of laughter and its effects on the

body from a psychological and a physiological perspective, laughter at night can help people sleep better. Laughter at night encourages the body to produce melatonin, a hormone released by the brain at sleep onset that is responsible for regulating sleep cycles because it decreases stress level. R.I.M. Dunbar, (1731) explains that social laughter is “correlated with an elevated pain threshold.” He suggests that it is the physical action of laughing that generates a positive effect by triggering activation of the endorphin system. Dunbar defines endorphins as:

A class of endogenous opioid peptides produced in the central nervous system that not only function as neurotransmitters but also play a crucial role in the management of pain through their analgesic properties: B. endorphin, in particular, appears to play a critical role in buffering the organism against the effects of physiological and psychological stress. (Ibid)

Thus, one can argue that Churchill’s female characters’ laughter helps reduce their sense of pain and psychological stress. Towards the end of the first act of the play, the gathered female guests are able to talk more about their painful experiences with less interruption and less overlap than in the beginning of the act. These female characters’ laughter is supposed to help reduce their physiological and psychological woes.

How do these females laugh? It is worth noting that these characters laugh and/or cry when they are among friends or family members as if they feel safer to lower their guard and express their sense of discomfort. Laughter “developed in early humans as a way of establishing, strengthening, and smoothing out our relationships.” (Finney, 1994: 145). Churchill’s characters laugh loud and long, and their group laughter sometimes is mixed with crying. Bergson (1911:64) asserts that our laughter “is always the laughter of a group.” He adds, “It is social by nature and a group phenomenon.” (Ibid). These female characters’ laughter conveys these women’s deep desire to belong and bond with others who validate their sense of alienation and bewilderment and compensate for the emotional loss they are enduring as they struggle to survive in patriarchal societies. According to Freud (2003: 143), the “burst of laughter . . . conveys a desired multiplicity both within the subject and by the connection to other people.” Through connecting with other women, Churchill’s characters are able to gather many shattered pieces of their fractured selves. Judith Kay Nelson asserts that laughter is a natural way in which humans’ attachment behavior is understood and preferred. Nelson (2012: 10) writes, “‘We all get it,’ is the clear message, but instead of nodding appreciatively or responding with a polite comment, there is, without thought, a natural arousal of each individual’s attachment system, exhibited as a burst of unplanned, nonverbal, implicitly understood attachment behavior: laughter.” The laughing and crying happens when these characters are half drunk as if they are loosening their tension and increasing their sense of social bonding.

It is stimulating to note that there are many kinds of laughter that are listed in English under the word *laugh* in the dictionary. These words include the following: the hysterical, the enjoyable, the frantic, the unstoppable, the bursting, the spontaneous, the joyful, the cynical, the emotional, the vocalized, the

non-vocalized, the giggle, the cackle, the guffaw, the chuckle, the chortle, the snicker, the choke, the titter, the bray, the howl, the horselaugh, the mock, the groan, the bellow, the hooey, the beat, and the neigh. Each type expresses some deep feelings such as enjoyment, discomfort, sadness, insecurity, and so on. Most studies and analyses of laughter focus on triggered laughter caused by jokes or some funny situations, but Churchill's characters' laughter often is not triggered by funny events or funny expressions; rather, many characters start laughing while recounting dark moments of pain and bewilderment. One can label some of Churchill's characters' laughter as paradoxical laughter, laughter of resentment, and laughter at the grotesque, to name but a few.

Paradoxical laughter is laughter "upon tragic news taken seriously by the subject, or nervous fits of giggling unaccountable to the subject himself. Such laughter can be seen as a defensive action to postpone the helplessness involved in full realization of the event and to do so by escaping from commitment to the situation involved." (Frijda, 1986: 52) "Nervous," "defensive," and "escaping" are essential keywords that characterize many female characters in *Top Girls* as they "just laugh a lot" even though they are "not cheerful." One of the intriguing facts about paradoxical laughter is that it is so "perfectly paired with pain that we even overlook the connection." (Jenkins, 2014: 2). Churchill's characters' paradoxical laughter in *Top Girls* becomes a powerful cathartic process that shows many of these characters' unconscious attempts to release their layered sense of pain, fear, and confusion. In both the opening and the closing scenes of the play, these characters start laughing while talking about bitter realities and haunting past memories and end up laughing and crying as their feelings of pain increase. Laughter, according to Henri Bergson, is a human expression that is "comparable and congenial to crying." Both are expressions that "lie on the borderline of the conscious and the meaningful on one hand, and on the unconscious and physical on the other." (Bergson, 1911: 35). This paradox of crying while laughing effectively communicates Churchill's female characters' sense of pain and disgust that is heightened by the urgent desire to vomit and pee that takes place in the first scene of the play. In fact, the whole play is based on paradox and contradiction of ideas, emotions, and actions. These characters' philosophy about their identity is contradictory and their emotions towards themselves and others are paradoxical. Churchill skillfully and symbolically communicates her characters' prevalent sense of incongruity through their paradoxical laughter.

In addition, one can describe Churchill's female characters' laughter as laughing at the grotesque, which indicates laughing at the ugly, the monstrous, and the absurd. The grotesque is something that is "comically or repulsively ugly or distorted" and/or "incongruous or inappropriate to a shocking degree." (Oxford Dictionaries, 2013). Most of the conversations in the first scene of the first act about the allegorical ladies' miserable experiences in their male-dominated societies can be described as ugly and inappropriate to a shocking degree. Therefore, these women's laughter following every dark memory can be labeled as grotesque laughter. For instance, Joan's exaggerated narration of her experience as a disguised pope, who gave birth in the street and then was stoned to death, is "comically repulsively ugly" and "inappropriate to a shocking degree." Joan says:

St Peter's to go to St. John's. I had felt a slight pain earlier, I thought it was something I'd eaten, and then it came back, and came back more often. I thought when this is over I'll go to bed. There were still long gaps when I felt perfectly all right and I didn't want to attract attention to myself and spoil the ceremony. Then I suddenly realized what it must be. I had to last out till I could get home and hide. Then something changed, my breath started to catch, I couldn't plan things properly anymore. We were in a little street that goes between St. Clement's and the Colosseum, and I just had to get off the horse and sit down for a minute. Great waves of pressure were going through my body, I heard sounds like a cow lowing, they came out of my mouth. Far away I heard people screaming, 'The Pope is ill, the Pope is dying.' And the baby just slid out onto the road. (Churchill, 1991: 18).

The ladies laugh throughout the interrupted, overlapping narration until the point at which Joan says, "They took me by the feet and dragged me out of town and stoned me to death . . . and the child died too." (Ibid: 19). They continue giggling and laughing as Joan remarks that after this incident the church introduced the "pierced" chair as two clergymen make sure that the pope is a man. Moreover, Nijo recounts her painful experiences as she talks about being raped by the ex-emperor of Japan at the age of fourteen, which grotesquely enough she has been led to view as "natural"! She is even instructed by her father, of whom she is thoroughly proud, to "serve His Majesty, be respectful." (Ibid: 3). She was further given over, by her "master" to another man while he "lay awake on the other side of the screens and listened." (Ibid: 20) She talks about the "Full Moon Ceremony," during which they "beat their women across the loins so they 'll have sons and not daughters. So the Emperor beat us all hard" and told his attendant to beat these women as well. Nijo concludes by telling her friends that she "hit his majesty with a stick till he cried and promised he would never order anyone to hit [them] again." (Ibid: 29). Soon, Joan gets up to vomit, and Griselda looks up after her while Nijo laughs and cries at once. Hence, these female characters' laughter can be described as laughter at the grotesque or grotesque laughter. James Goodwin calls this kind of the grotesque "contemporary grotesque," which is "gratuitous," "utterly ridiculous," and is "monstrous." (Goodwin, 2009: 136). For a woman not to know or feel that she is pregnant such that she gives birth in the street and then is stoned to death together with the newborn is utterly ridiculous. That is, a woman sacrificing her life, her child, and her selfhood just to "be obeyed" through deception is "gratuitous" and grotesque on the level of the woman and monstrous on the part of the patriarchal society that has pushed her to assume such a false identity. Moreover, the fact that Lady Nijo and Patient Griselda, though very submissive, have seen or have thought that their children were murdered is inappropriate to a shocking degree, which is heightened by Joan's sickness. Furthermore, Nijo's laughter mixed with crying, at this point, is obviously the laughter at the grotesque. The scene ends with no conclusion but with a great deal of disgust as Joan has no control over her grotesque body and is ready to throw up.

According to Freud, we sometimes "take pleasure in and laugh at nonsense as an activity in which we do not have to exercise rational criticism." (Freud, 2003: 125). One feels that these characters'

laughter at the “nonsense” is a result of the absence of “rational criticism” simply because it is of nonsense. Throughout the first scene, the six female characters’ laughter at very dark absurd experiences that are concluded with Nijo’s laughter and crying is an obvious indication of the temporary absence of these women’s rational criticism of things that are comically or repulsively ugly and distorted. They laugh at what Wyndham Lewis calls the absurdity and madness of life. Lewis states, “There is nothing that is animal that is not absurd. This sense of absurdity, or if you like, the madness of our life, is at the very root of every true philosophy.” (Lewis, 1990: 23). It seems that these females’ confused sense of identity as human beings, and the social and religious hypocrisy smothering them in their different patriarchal societies are absurd. The sense of absurdity and madness is communicated in Churchill’s female characters’ resentful confused laughter, which is laughter at the grotesque, the monstrous, and the ridiculous.

Moreover, one can characterize Churchill’s female characters’ laughter as laughter of resentment. *Resentment* is “an attitude which arises, often unconsciously, from aggressive feelings of being frustrated by the sense of inferiority of one’s situation or personality and frequently results in some form of self-abasement.” (Santangelo, 2003: 329). Anger, shame, and aggression are very major components of resentment within individuals that often are triggered by a sense of one’s inferiority. There is a high sense of resentment within most female characters in *Top Girls*; this is often expressed in their resentful laughter conveying their anger, shame, and aggression not only toward others but also and perhaps primarily toward themselves. For instance, though Lady Nijo and Patient Griselda are totally submissive to men, they have fallen out of favor and are rejected. Griselda got married at the age of fifteen and had ten children, and her husband, Walter, chose to prove she would always obey him by taking away her babies and later by sending her to her father’s house barefoot and with no clothes. He later ordered her to prepare for his wedding simply because nobody “except her knows how to arrange things the way he liked them.” (Churchill, 1991: 27). It then turns out he only intends to give her back her position as wife and to give her the children too. Joyce is angry at her husband for abandoning her for a younger woman whom he “does not even like,” and at her pathetic parents; she is ashamed of her poverty and failure in life, and she is aggressive at Marlene who she blames for her miscarriage and losing her only chance of having a child of her own because she had to care for Marlene’s daughter. She is bitter at her anxious self. Marlene, on the other hand, expresses her sense of resentment in her laughter as she feels that she has scarified a lot, including being with her parents and caring for her own child just to survive and be independent. These females’ heightened sense of anger, shame, and aggression is communicated in their resentful laughter as they metaphorically communicate their sense of inferiority, which usually results in an unmistakable sense of self-abasement.

If through laughing, one attempts “to hide weakness, gain acceptance, divulge one’s deepest secrets, or share anxiety with others,” (Frijda, 1986: 87) then one might wonder what the sources are of fear, pain, and anxiety that Churchill’s female characters attempt to release and/or hide through laughing. One of the possible explanations for the source of pain that these characters express through their laughter can be their struggle for a definite sense of selfhood. That is, Churchill’s female characters are obviously

suffering from an identity crisis. An identity crisis, argues M. Lawrance, occurs when one is in conflict with oneself and with others. Lawrance writes, “An identity crisis occurs when we feel a great deal of conflict about who we are as individuals, separate people, and about where we stand in relation to other people.” (Lawrance, 1987: 49). Most of Churchill’s female characters are suffering from patriarchal domination, yet they deceive themselves by rebelling against the realization of their natural reality. Through struggling to reject instinctive characteristics that are essential to their individuality, which the audience can clearly see reflected in their denial of their caring nature mainly through resisting motherhood, these females contribute a great deal to fracturing their sense of identity. For example, women’s “voluntary childlessness” and their radical rejection of motherhood, according to Melanie Notkin, results in many women’s sense of confusion and in their projection as “abnormal” and “unfeminine,” which contributes significantly to their identity crisis. These women are made to feel that their bodies exist only as “vessels” for childbirth. Notkin states,

Womanhood and motherhood come to be seen as synonymous identities and facets of experience. Thus, for women, parenting and the act of mothering are not only presented as desirable, but are in fact seen as the natural expression of their “femininity.” While motherhood has been recognized as mostly undervalued in society holding little material or social status, non-motherhood is often granted even lower prestige . . . women without the desire (voluntary), ability (involuntary) and opportunity (circumstantial) to have children, maybe seen as abnormal and unfeminine. (Notkin, 2011: 3)

It seems that a woman’s voluntary rejection of a natural instinct just to belong in a materialistic society no doubt contributes to her confused sense of self. According to Josselson’s theory of identity development in women, identity is defined not as one thing but as “a combination of roles, beliefs, and values, each of which works together to form the whole” (Josselson, 1987: 31). Josselson uses the metaphor of a tapestry to describe how each “strand” of one’s identity is “woven together in multiple layers to create the complete work.” (Ibid: 95). For instance, Marlene is competitive in the workplace and intentionally effaces her caring nature. She has voluntarily abandoned her daughter and aborted twice as a way to discard her motherhood just to succeed in the workplace. Joyce thinks that Marlene “was the most stupid for someone so clever . . . the most stupid” for getting pregnant, not going to doctor, not telling.” (Ibid: 90). Marlene has been “on the pill so long” that she thinks she is “probably sterile.” (Ibid). She is lonely, guilty, and confused. Mrs. Kidd, Howard’s wife, tells Marlene, “You’re one of these ball breakers, that’s what you are. You will end up miserable and lonely. You are not natural.” (Ibid). Marlene’s sacrifice of her motherhood and depriving her daughter from her love and care just to ruthlessly compete in a male capitalist world earns her the label “unnatural.” Marlene finds out that Angie is bad at school, and she has been in remedial class the last two years, which might have been a result of her abandonment. The image of being unnatural and her image of herself as a “high flyer” obviously contribute to Marlene’s high sense of bewilderment which is communicated through her ambiguous laughter.

Marjorie De Vault sees a woman's caring nature as an essential quality through which she gains both control and a high sense of inferiority: "provisioning as a mixed bag, one that is a potential source of influence on husbands and children through the ability to give them a valued substance-food-but one that also is linked with female subordination through women's need to serve, satisfy, and defer to others." (De Vault, 1991: 35). A woman's caring nature can be a hindrance to attaining and maintaining a good sense of identity if neglected. Most female characters think that to succeed in the workplace they have to efface that image of the nurturer, the caring provider, by refusing to accept their motherhood that is. They avoid marriage, "playing house," and avoid conceiving, and when they illegally conceive they immediately abort, give up their newborns for adoption, or simply do not "pay attention" because it is "easier to do nothing." According to *Issues in the Psychology of Women*, abortion is physically and psychologically affecting and post-abortion trauma is "a variant of posttraumatic stress disorder." (Biaggio and Hersen, 2000: 12). Churchill's female characters' ambiguous maternal attitude has a very tremendous painful effect on these characters' sense of identity and its darkness is conveyed in their laughter-crying gesture. That might help us better understand the rationale behind the fact that most of these characters' laughter takes place in a restaurant or an empty kitchen, places which are associated with food and eating, but they are not cooking or even providing/serving meals or food.

Similarly, the settings of these characters' laughter that are associated with food highlight these females' sense of confusion and bewilderment as they attempt to re-view themselves as ruthless individuals, not as caretakers. But the attempt has clearly painful consequences because they seek that new self-image through violently rejecting an essential instinctive part of their identity. Through these females' experience of re-evaluating their sense of identity, they experience a high sense of identity crisis as they try to assert themselves as individuals, not as caretakers.

In addition to experiencing a strong sense of identity crisis, Churchill's characters' troubled familial relationships are another essential factor that underlines these characters' pain that is conveyed in their paradoxical laughter. Absence of the father, absence and/or presence of passive pathetic mothers, and difficult childhood are issues that contributed a great deal to these characters' identity crisis and sense of confusion. Most of the female characters in this play suffer from, what James M. Herzog calls "father hunger." He describes it as "the unconscious longing experienced by many males and females for an involved father." (Herzog, 2011: 19). Even though "it hurt[s] to remember the past," all the historical figures during the dinner party excessively talk about the devastating loss of their fathers. Nijo is proud of her father because he wrote a poem in the anthology, and she was "overwhelmed with grief" when he died. Similarly, Isabella describes her father as "the main spring" of her life, who "taught her Latin although [she] was a girl." When he passed away she "was so grieved." In the last scene, when Marlene visits Joyce on a cold Sunday night, "a funny time to visit," the sisters' tension increases as they talk about their troubled familial relationships. Marlene admits that she has "no memory for birthdays and Christmas seems to slip by" and that she does not "know much." (Churchill, 1991: 74). She had her mind set on leaving her family when she was thirteen as she could not bear being a part of her mother's "wasted," "rotten" life. While Marlene asserts the mother "had nothing" and "went hungry" because their

violent father “drank the money” and the whole family had “bad days,” Joyce blames the capitalist society and the rich for whom she works and who kept her father working “like an animal.” They remember how drunk they were the night of their father’s death, and how they were overcome with grief. Sibling rivalry surfaces as Marlene accuses Joyce of continuing to be “Dada’s little parrot” while Joyce reiterates her pride in that she has been there for her sick mother, visiting her every Thursday. Yet, she is clearly devastated by her husband’s abandonment and the fact that “the minute you’re on your own, you’d be amazed how your friends’ husbands drop by. I’d sooner do without.” (Ibid, 92). The dinner guests’ and the sisters’ dark confessions and painful memories of familial trouble still haunt their present and future, and their laughter that is mixed with crying metaphorically heightens their sense of insecurity and confusion.

In addition, like these characters’ dissatisfaction with their past, their awareness of their dehumanizing, mechanical reality is haunting. Caryl Churchill’s (2008) plays (as Nicolas Wright noted in *The Guardian* on September 3, 2008) “say things we are all thinking about but have not yet expressed.” Louise feels neglected and not appreciated after twenty years of hard work where men are getting ahead. The absent Mr. Howard is devastated and even has a heart-attack as a result of Marlene having been chosen as the managing director simply because he cannot work for a woman. Despite her independence and professional success, Marlene doubts that Angie, her biological daughter, can make something of herself. Most of the female characters live in delusion deceiving themselves and numbing their senses by pretending to be proud, strong, and happy.

Delusion is a very prevalent feeling throughout the play. The play opens in a dreamlike, surrealist setting where different allegorical characters from different places and different centuries gather in a restaurant one early evening, and it concludes with a depressing flashback to a late Sunday evening in poor Joyce’s kitchen. These female characters’ sense of delusion that is marked by their loud laughter increases as they start drinking. They recount their stories and memories of “success” as they depict themselves as able to defeat, fool, or resist patriarchal dominance and violate some given substantial norms. Yet these females’ sense of illusion, symbolized by the setting and intensified by alcohol, is underlined by their intentionally fractured sense of identity.

Churchill’s skillful symbolic use of many literary/theatrical devices such as an open ending, physical absence of male figures from the stage, an ironic title, an unconventional non-linear plot, and a non-chronological setting of time indirectly reflects these female characters’ sense of confusion and delusion. For instance, Marlene’s paradoxical laughter at the end of the play is so communicative that it sums up the whole play. In the last scene of the play, Joyce and Marlene have a very dark conversation in which the sisters express their regrets over paying for their choices. Marlene’s loss of love and family and Joyce’s loss of opportunity are dear prices for their choices. The play ends in a cold, shabby living room late Sunday night where half-drunk Marlene sits wrapped up in a blanket while Angie is calling and repeating the word “frightening.” Churchill effectively leaves her audience to sort through a great deal of ambiguity, trying to figure out what it is that is frightening to a young female teenager. One way to interpret the source of human fear is the human struggle in life. As the first scene of the play ends

melancholically, Griselda and Joan recite fragments by Lucretius (Carus, 2001: 103) that describe the human struggle to “rise up to the height of power and gain possession of the world” as a useless effort, which is indeed freighting. Lucretius (Ibid) describes life as “a struggle in the darkness” where “even children tremble and fear everything in blinding darkness, so we sometimes dread in the light things that are not whit more to be feared that what children shudder at in the dark.” He asserts that “the dread of death leaves your heart empty.” Thus, quoted words such as “struggling,” “trembling in the darkness,” “shuddering,” “an empty heart,” “fear of death,” and “miserable minds of men, blind hearts” might help one grasp what is universally frightening to Angie, Marlene, and the audience.<sup>(4)</sup> It seems that what is frightening to these characters is the futile human struggle to “rise up to the height of power and gain possession of the world.” But one might wonder what it is that defines power and possession for a human being. Is being professionally successful and financially efficient quitable to having power for a woman? Or is being a selfless caretaker and a loving nurturer a form of attaining and maintaining a woman’s power? Is it possible to combine a successful career with a thriving family life? In fact, Churchill’s characters’ attempt to answer such a universal dilemma is frightening.

It is important to note that all these female characters’ concerns revolve around the patriarchal injustices they have suffered and how to liberate themselves from males’ domination. Yet not one male character appears onstage throughout the play. Joan is dressed as a boy at the age of twelve to be able to go to the library, but soon she elopes with her male friend. Nijo feels that there was “nothing in life without the Emperor’s favor,” and Isabella’s “heart was much affected” and “there was nothing” in her life when John, her sick lover, “faded and left” her. (Churchill, 1991: 26). Men’s physical absence in this play centralizes these marginalized females’ struggles, dilemmas, and conflicts while marginalizing men’s role onstage but not in these women’s lives. In Act One, Scene One, all six allegorical ladies survived in life by imitating men: sometimes this imitation is physical such as with Pope Joan; satisfying men like the Japanese courtesan of the thirteenth century, Lady Nijo; attracting attention by displacing men like the Victorian traveller, Isabella Bird; or having their own way of getting into a man’s world such as the figure from a Brueghel painting who led an attack on Hell, Dull Gret, and Marlene, an allegorical figure who stands for the woman who succeeded at all costs yet is empty and lonely. Marlene and her co-workers become less human, but less fulfilled as they become more obsessed with professional success.

Like the ending of the play, the title of the play<sup>(5)</sup> is ironic. By the end of the play, one realizes that these “top girls” who gather to recount their stories of travels, adventures, and intellectual accomplishments reveal a lot about their suffering, loss, agony, economic struggles, and identity fraction, to the extent that they could be labeled as “bottom girls” instead. In fact, Churchill criticizes both men and women and calls upon both to be human. Churchill has been described as a socialist as well as a feminist. Throughout *Top Girls*, she satirizes social, gender, and religious hypocrisy. She also criticizes people, men and women, who strive to succeed at the expense of their humanity. Churchill (1987: 81) declares that *Top Girls* is an “indictment of people, male or female, who get ahead at the cost of their humanity and their capacity to care for others.” The play, asserts Churchill, “tries to illuminate the ways

in which we make ourselves less human, less fulfilled, when we are driven to a success that is illusory and values that are false.” (Ibid). That realization, which is implied in Churchill’s female characters’ ambiguous laughter, confirms Lucretius’ idea of struggling human beings as having “miserable minds” and “blinds hearts.”

To conclude, the multi-layered laughter of Churchill’s female characters is not only intriguing to reflect on from a literary perspective; it also strikes a deeper reflective vein. Though *Top Girls* instantly seems to be a play about women’s struggles, one realizes very early in the play that it is more than a didactic play that is part of the feminist theater. The play is a humanistic representation that subtly conveys human bewilderment. Through skilfully using a seemingly comic non-verbal mode of expression, the playwright communicates a horrified frightening image of one’s self and the world around one. Churchill’s female characters’ laughter that is often mixed with crying conveys a lot of pain and confusion. Churchill’s artistic ability is paramount in metaphorically depicting a bewildering reality for humans-not only women-through using an oral non-verbal mode of expression thereby distinguishing her *Top Girls* as universal.

## الضحك في مسرحية شرشيل *Top Girls*: ضرب رمزي من ضروب التعبير

تركز هذه الدراسة على مهارة الكاتبة المسرحية كايرل ليسلي شرشيل في توظيف ضرب من ضروب التعبير الشفهي اللاحرفي على المسرح . ضحكات شخصيات شرشيل الأنثوية في مسرحية *Top Girls* لا تعكس مشاعرهن وصراعاتهن الداخلية فحسب بل تعبر عن صراعات ومعاناة داخلية يعيشها معظم البشر.

من خلال الاستعانة بحفائق فسيولوجية ونفسية تتعلق بالضحك تختبر الدراسة الحالية عبقرية شرشيل في استخدام هذا الضرب الشفهي اللاحرفي من التعبير من خلال تحليل زمان ومكان وطريقة ضحك تلك الشخصيات الأنثوية لإلقاء الضوء على عدة أمور بشرية . يركز البحث على تحليل محاولات (الواعية والغير واعية) تلك الشخصيات للتعبير بشكل رمزي غير مباشر عن شعورهن بالشتات والألم ليس فقط كشخصيات أنثوية بل كبشر.

عبرت شرشيل رمزياً عن معاناة البحث عن الهوية البشرية كقضية رئيسة من خلال التركيز على ضحكات شخصياتها الأنثوية في المسرحية.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** التعبير اللاحرفي ، شفهي ، الضحك ، الهوية ، رمزي ، المعاناة البشرية.

## **Acknowledgment**

This is a research project that was supported by a grant from the Research Center for the Humanities Deanship of Scientific Research at King Saud University.

## **Endnotes:**

1. Allegorical in the sense that they are different women from different centuries and societies. They are famous women from different historical periods such as: Pope Joan, who posed as a man and became a pope; Lady Nijo, a Japanese courtesan of the thirteenth century who became a Buddhist nun; Isabella Bird, a Victorian adventurous traveler; Dull Gret, a figure from a Brueghel painting who led an attack on Hell; and Patient Griselda, the obedient wife who inspired a church and whose story is told in Chaucer's the *Canterbury Tales*. Marlene is allegorical in the sense that she ruthlessly succeeds at all costs.
2. Churchill was inspired by her conversation with American feminists, who comment on the contrast between American feminism, which celebrates individualistic women who acquire power and wealth and British socialist feminism which involves collective group gain (Betsko and Koenig).
3. It would be intriguing to investigate the relationship between alcohol and laughter as a form of releasing tension further in a different study.
4. It would be intriguing to investigate Griselda's description of Hell and analyze it symbolically in relation to our lives as human beings.
5. The title of the play is the same name of the company for which Marlene works.

## References

- Aston, Elaine and Elin Diamond. *The Cambridge Companion to Caryl Churchill*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009.
- Bavelas, Janet Beavin, and Nicole Chovil. "Nonverbal and Verbal Communication: Hand Gestures and Facial Displays as Part of Language Use in Face- to- Face Dialogue," in *The Sage of Handbook Nonverbal Communication*, edited by Valerie Manusor and Miles L. Patterson, 97-118. California: Sage Publications, 2006.
- Bergson, Henri. *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1911.
- Betsko, Kathleen, and Rachel Koenig. *Caryl Churchill: Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights*. New York: Beech Tree Books, 1987.
- Biaggio, Maryka, and Michel Hersen. *Issues in the Psychology of Women*. New York: Plenum Publishers, 2000.
- Chung, Hye Seung. Kim Ki-duk. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2012.
- Churchill, Caryl. *Top Girls*. London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 1991.
- De Vault, Marjorie L. *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1991.
- Dunbar, R. I.M. "Social Laughter is Correlated with an Elevated Pain Threshold." *Royal Society Journal* 279 (1731): 1161-67.
- English Encyclopedia Online, s.v. "Gelotology." accessed Nov.9, 2013. <http://www.encyclo.co.uk>
- Finney, Gail. *Look Who's Laughing: Gender and Comedy*. Langhorne: Gordon and Breach, 1994.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. Translated by Joyce Crick. New York: Penguin Group, 2003.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Translated by J. Stracy. London: Hogarth Press, 1958.
- Frijda, Nico H. *The Emotions: Studies in Emotion & Social Interaction*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986.
- Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Seattle: Pacific Publishing Studio, 2012.

- Glasgow, R.D.V. *Madness, Masks, and Laughter: An Essay on Comedy*. Massachusetts: Massachusetts UP, 1995.
- Goodwin, James. *Modern American Grotesque: Literature and Photography*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2009.
- Herzog, James M. *Father Hunger: Exploration with Adults and Children*. Hillsdale: The Atlantic Press, 2001.
- Josselson, R. *Finding Herself: Pathways to Identity Development in Women*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1987.
- Junkins, Enda. "The Role of Laughter in Psychotherapy." LCSW, LMFT, ACSW. August 25, 2014. <http://www.laughtertherapy.com/enda-junkins>.
- Lakin, Jessica L. "Automatic Cognitive Processes and Nonverbal Communication." *The Sage Handbook of Nonverbal Communication*, edited by Valerie Manusor and Miles L. Patterson, 59-78. California: Sage Publications, 2006.
- Lawrance, M. *Fed Up and Hungry: Women, Oppression, and Food*. London, Women's Press, 1987.
- Lewis, Wyndham. *Wyndham Lewis, 1882-1957*. California: Austin/Desmound Fine Arts, 1990.
- Lucretius, Titus Carus. *On the Nature of Things*. Translated by Martin Ferguson Smith. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2001.
- Marmyzy, John. *Laughing at Nothing: Humor as a Response to Nihilism*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2003.
- Monro, D.H. *Theories of Humor: Writing and Reading across the Curriculum*. Edited by Lawrence Berkens and Leonard J. Rosen. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foreman and Company, 1988.
- Morreall, J. *Taking Laughter Seriously*. New York: Albany New York State UP, 1983.
- Nelson, Judith Kay. *What Made Freud Laugh: An Attachment Perspective on Laughter*. New York: Routledge, 2012.
- Notkin, Melanie. "Unnatural Women: Childless in America." *Psychology Today*, December (2011): 3.
- Oxford Dictionaries, s.v. "grotesque," accessed March 7, 2013. <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com>

- Pfister, Manfred. *A History of English Laughter: Laughter from Beowulf to Beckett and Beyond*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002.
- Ravenhill, Mark. 2008. "On the Genius of Playwright Caryl Churchill." *The Guardian*. Accessed September 3.  
<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2008/sep/03/carylchurchill.theater>
- Santangelo, Paolo. *Sentimental Education in Chinese History: An interdisciplinary Textual Research on Ming and Qing Sources*. Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2003.
- Siegel, Bernie. *Peace, Love, and Healing*. New York: Walker & Co. 1990.
- Spencer, H. *On The Physiology of Laughter: Essays on Education*. London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1910.