

Group Dynamics and the Dramatic Surge of British Feminism in *Cloud Nine*

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Abstract

The play Cloud Nine (1979) belongs to a period in which British society, and especially women, were going through dramatic changes; the late 1970s represent the period of group dynamics, radicalization of women's movement and the recognition of women's self-reliance. The purpose of this essay is to prove that common dynamics and contemporary discussions influenced the life of Betty, the character who was, when considering other female characters in the play, most set in her ways.

The play *Cloud Nine* by Caryl Churchill, a contemporary British playwright mostly concerned with questions of feminism and socialist convictions attacking a capitalist system, is considered to be one of the plays that marked a watershed in her career. Since *Cloud Nine* (1979) was written in a period when British society, and especially women, were going through dramatic changes and since the play depicts the life of women in Great Britain and their concerns, *Cloud Nine* is considered to be a feminist play dealing with women's situations, questions, and strains.

Cloud Nine belongs to the period of the dramatic surge of British feminism characterized by the peak of sisterly solidarity and sharing among women. The late 1970s also represent the period of group dynamics connected with the rejection of patriarchal values, the period when women tended to question traditional orders, were attempting to liberate themselves and to find new ways of life. Therefore, the period itself brought the radicalization of feminism and the recognition of women's self-reliance. Moreover, the dramatic surge of the movement is also connected with the zeal and sisterly solidarity of middle class women who invested money in a smoother process of women's liberation. In that way they helped to support educated and active women of present time in publishing activities that thus made available the knowledge of women's issues and therefore made the wider public aware of the preoccupations with the liberation. The purpose of this essay is to prove that common dynamics and the dramatic surge of British feminism influenced the life of

Betty, the character who was, when considering other female characters in the play, most set in her ways and whose process of liberating herself from the bonds was thus gradual.

It is Betty, Edward and Victoria's mother, whose way to recognized liberation and discovery of a sense of sisterhood seem to be the longest and the most difficult, she "faces the hardest task in trying to change her life because she is older than others and more set in her ways" (Cousin, 44).

To fully understand Betty's process of self-recognition and the recognition of other women, it is necessary to focus on the patriarchal background in which she was trapped in act one. Via the first act set in colonial Africa a hundred years earlier, the way of life of the characters, who have aged only twenty-five years, is shown in contemporary Great Britain of 1979. *Cloud Nine*, through the Victorian period of act one, proves how hard it was for people brought up in the period before "the end of Victorianism" (Marwick, 145), as the period of the 1960s was often labeled, to free themselves and their minds from the biases connected with the atmosphere in which they grew up. In act one Betty is depicted as a person completely influenced by her husband Clive and her mother; both of them control her and impose proper feminine behaviour on her. Thus, Betty is played by a man since, according to Cousin, she is what men want her to be (Cousin, 40), she seems to be totally subordinated to her husband and his acquired patriarchal orders. When talking about Betty's fondness for Clive's friend Harry, Betty shows she perceives herself from the acquired point of view.

BETTY: There is something so wicked in me, Clive.

CLIVE: I have never thought of you having the weakness of your sex, only the good qualities.

BETTY: I am bad, bad, bad –

CLIVE: You are thoughtless, Betty, that's all. Women can be treacherous and evil. They are darker and more dangerous than men. The family protects us from that. (Churchill, 277)

The dialogue further shows that Betty represents a common perception of a woman who is either a black or white character, who can be either put on a pedestal to be fully admired or removed from it to be doomed completely, who is perceived as 'the other'; and thus, because of her innate danger, she has to be controlled. Hence, patriarchy, so often criticized especially by the second wave of feminism, served as the means of control of women whose treacherous nature, so to speak, needed to be monitored. The family, where

all the members are controlled by a man, is represented through all of act one as a principal institution of patriarchy. As Millett claims:

[Family] is both a mirror of and a connection with the larger society; a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole. [...] Serving as an agent of the larger society, the family not only encourages its own members to adjust and conform, but acts as a unit in the government of the patriarchal state which rules its citizens through its family heads. (Millett, 33)

Betty's role as a wife and mother in a patriarchal family, the way she was brought up and taught to think about herself, her husband and other women were a big influence on her and even in act two, set in 1979, when nearly everything seemed to be possible for women, she finds it hard to change her life and the views imposed on her.

Notwithstanding, already in the first scene of the second act, when meeting her children in a park, Betty mentions that she is going to leave her husband, which is rather surprising news for Edward and Victoria. Betty seems to be quite excited about the possibility of a divorce and of the fact that she would rely on herself when saying: "Yes you hear aright, Vicky, yes. I'm finding a little flat, that will be fun." (Churchill, 295) However, while in the process of separating, Betty suddenly doubts her ability to manage everything by herself and feels like an outcast from the patriarchal life that seemed safe and straight when roles are considered.

BETTY: I'll never be able to manage. If I can't even walk down the street by myself. Everything looks so fierce. [...] It's since I left your father.

VICTORIA: Mummy, it really was the right decision.

BETTY: Everything comes at me from all directions. Martin [her son-in-law] despises me. [...] I don't want to take pills. Lin says you can't trust doctors.

VICTORIA: You're not taking pills. You're doing very well.

BETTY: But I'm so frightened. (Churchill, 298)

As a response to the act of leaving Clive and the patriarchal way of life, she starts to relate to her children and their friends much more, via the conversation with them she learns about the new possibilities and new perceptions of life that can be organized in various liberating patterns.

Even though Betty has made a big change in her life by leaving Clive and recognizing his domination over her, she is depicted as finding it

difficult to understand that patriarchal family is not the only option for women and she struggles to acquire a positive approach to herself. She slowly learns it especially from Lin whose ideas have already been influenced by the dramatic surge of British feminism and common dynamics of the period. Betty seems to relate to Lin in spite of Betty's skepticism to women.

BETTY: You must be very lonely yourself with no husband. You don't miss him?

LIN: Not really, no.

BETTY: Maybe you like being on your own.

LIN: I'm seeing quite a lot of Vicky. I don't live alone. I live with Cathy. [Lin's daughter]

BETTY: I would have been frightened when I was your age. I thought, the poor children, their mother all alone.

LIN: I've a lot of friends.

BETTY: I find when I'm making tea I put out two cups. It's strange not having a man in the house. You don't know who to do things for.

LIN: Yourself.

BETTY: Oh, that's very selfish. [...] There's nothing says you have to like yourself. (Churchill, 301-302)

In the quoted dialogue Betty reveals how much she depended on her husband and how difficult it is for her to be on her own, especially when she was taught to despise herself and identify herself via a husband for whom she used to do everything. Via Clive, she acquired the 'right' picture of herself, so to speak, and believed that "a rational and virtuous woman can be proud only of her husband and children; not of herself, for she forgets herself in them" (Figes, 125). The dialogue between Betty and Lin further confirms that Betty, even though divorced and in a way free from a patriarchal unit, still perceives herself as 'the other', undervalues herself and shows she still finds it difficult to recognize that "the image of women as we know it is an image created by men and fashioned to suit their needs. These needs spring from a fear of the 'otherness' of woman" (Millett, 46). Thus, Lin's ideas that a woman can do things just for herself, that a woman can like herself and that women have their own value are rather new and shocking for Betty. Moreover, Betty can be perceived as a person fully influenced by the representation of women by male writers and patriarchy as a whole; she accepted completely the picture of women depicted in 'malestream' literature and did not think of the fact that women could have

a history of their own, that their representation as black and white inferior creatures might be based just on the male idea of 'the other'. Thus, the misrepresentation of women in literature and literary canons, which are believed to be, according to Morris, the most prestigious form of an expression since literature depicts the highest ideas and aims of humankind (Morris, 19), was another feature affecting Betty who did not find the representation of her own sex anyhow irrelevant and did not question it in any way:

LIN: Have you any women friends?

BETTY: I've never been so short of men's company that I've had to bother with women.

LIN: Don't you like women?

BETTY: They don't have such interesting conversations as men. There has never been a woman composer of genius. They don't have a sense of humor. They spoil things for themselves with their emotions. I can't say I do like women very much, no. (Churchill, 301-302)

Even though Betty left her husband Clive, a representative of patriarchal orders and beliefs, and also experienced a gradual change throughout act two in managing to develop a sense of sisterhood, she expresses her doubts about women and their skills. Her statement strongly depicts what women were taught to believe and accept, how they perceived themselves and other women. Thus, Betty, a character with truly Victorian roots, represents the women who were still in the process of being influenced by the work of the many feminists who attempted to prove that women had their own tradition, that they expressed solidarity with one another and that "genius of a sort must have existed among women as it must have existed among the working classes" (Woolf, 50). Betty's antagonistic ideas towards women, her true belief that they are inferior and that they do not have any wisdom to pass to other women strongly represent that Betty and:

[All the] women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. [...] Hence, the enormous importance to a patriarch who has to conquer, who has to rule, of feeling that great numbers of people, half the human race indeed, are by nature inferior to himself. (Woolf, 35)

However, as will be further shown, Betty gradually frees herself from the patriarchal values imposed on her so thoroughly. She recognizes and refuses to serve “as looking-glass” and manages to acquire solidarity towards herself, which can be perceived as a necessary step towards learning to express solidarity and recognition of other women, and the acceptance of their worth. Her advancement forward is clearly visible when considering other movements towards freeing herself and finding her own value. In scene four Betty reveals how joyful, fulfilling and liberating the act of leaving domestic duties, which were always automatically expected from her, and moving towards paid work can be when she claims:

I do miss the sun living in England but today couldn't be more beautiful. You appreciate the weekend when you're working. Betty's been at work this week, Cathy. It's terrible tiring, Martin, I don't know how you've done it all these years. And the money, I feel like a child with the money, Clive always paid everything but I do understand it perfectly well. Look Cathy let me show you my money. [...] Look what a lot of money Cathy, and I sit behind a desk of my own and I answer the telephone and keep the doctor's appointment book and it really is great fun.

(Churchill, 313-134)

Betty's pure excitement about her new way of life and her emotional and material independence from her ex-husband shows her new perspectives, values and meanings. In that scene she is represented as a person excited by life, she seems to be very positive; her fright, which was expressed above, of being alone and the suspicion that she cannot manage by herself has disappeared. Her feelings about her own and regular income can be linked to Virginia Woolf's feelings. In the following quotation, a pronoun 'I' can easily stand for Betty, not for Woolf, which further stresses Woolf's urgency of her argument:

Indeed, I thought, slipping the silver into my purse, it is remarkable, remembering the bitterness of those days, what a change of temper a fixed income will bring about. [...] Food, house and clothing are mine for ever. [...] I need not hate any man; he cannot hurt me. I need not flatter any man; he has nothing to give me. So imperceptibly I found myself adopting a new attitude towards the other half of the human race. (Woolf, 38)

Moreover, the last scene further supports Woolf's claim since Betty is depicted there as a person not refusing the possibility of finding another partner, her way towards self-realization and self-understanding did not leave her bitter when men are taken into account. On the contrary, she acquires a new attitude towards men via freeing herself from a patriarchal world, via earning her own money, thus being materially independent of a man, and via adopting a new attitude towards other women. It is women's solidarity, group dynamics and the achievements of the second wave of feminism building on sisterhood and sharing that helped to change Betty's life. Therefore, it does not seem surprising when Betty suggests that she would buy a house with a garden where Victoria, her son, Lin and her daughter and Edward could live together with her because as Betty says: "You do seem to have such fun all of you" (Churchill, 317). Betty obviously wants to be a part of new orders and dynamics so long unknown to her; hence, by the recognition of the group dynamics, solidarity and sharing, she seems to leave the patriarchal world of act one for good and recognizes and acquires the dynamics of women's solidarity so commonly believed to be the important element of women's liberation, especially of the dramatic surge of feminism in Britain at the end of the 1970s.

The play *Cloud Nine*, written in the period of radicalization of British feminism and of its dramatic surge influencing everyday lives of ordinary women, depicts that the important feminist belief in sisterly solidarity and the sense of sharing stood for a widely recognized and applied practice. The fact that women's solidarity helped to change the lives of other women, influenced their recognition of self-worth and of the worth of other women, and helped them to recognize and refuse patriarchal bonds and oppression is undeniable. In Betty's case it is very obvious by the end of the play that Betty acquired the sense of sharing and found the value of herself and of other women; however, the process towards that awareness, influenced by the atmosphere of the 1970s and achievements of the Women's Liberation Movement, was quite gradual in Betty's case because of various circumstances of her life in a truly patriarchal family and due to very often true Victorian values which were imposed on her and which were demonstrated in the first act. Via the dramatic surge of British feminism and common dynamics Betty managed to leave the patriarchal orders that were tying her so much, and with the help of others she managed to recognize the biases long imposed on her and started to perceive herself and other women from a different angle, the one that the second wave of feminism, women's solidarity and their group dynamics helped to be generally recognized among women.

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