The Scientific Journal of Cihan University – Sulaimaniya **PP: 95-108**
Volume (7), Issue (1), June 2023
ISSN 2520-7377 (Online), ISSN 2520-5102 (Print)

Coercion in Gendered Power Relations in Caryl Churchill's *Vinegar Tom*

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Abstract:

This paper titled "Coercion in Gendered Power Relations in Caryl Churchill's *Vinegar Tom"* examines the coercive gendered relations of power in the play. Gender is an effective form of social power and gender norms occur within a binary system that can often be restrictive and coercive, compelling subjects to conform to them to prove their illegibility to belong to what is considered *normal* or *human.*

The reason for choosing this play is that it is often recognised as one of Churchill's best feminist works in which she addresses gender issues and the struggles arising from not conforming to the norms governing one's assigned gender. It is set in the seventeenth century and deals with gender issues from different angles where the struggles of women in the past are portrayed and linked to the struggles of women in today's world.

Keywords: Vinegar Tom, Gender, Power, Coercion, Butler, Binary Oppositions, Witches, heterosexual.

الملخص:

هذه الدراسة بعنوان "الأكراه في علاقات القوة بين الأنواع الاجتماعية في مسرحية فينجار توم لكاريل تشرشل " وتتناول موضوع العلاقات التي تتسم بالأكراه بين الأنواع الأجتماعية في المسرحية. النوع الأجتماعي شكل فعال من اشكال القوة الأجتماعية، والأعراف الخاصة بالنوع الأجتماعي تحدث في نظام ثنائي يمكن ان يكون في كثير من الأحيان مقيدا وقسريا حيث يجبرالأفراد على الخضوع لتلك الأعراف من اجل اثبات شرعية انتمائهم الى ما يعتبر طبيعيا او بشريا.

سبب اختيار هذه المسرحية هو انها غالبا تعرف كواحدة من أفضل أعمال تشرشل النسوية التي تتناول فيها القضايا الخاصة بالنوع الأجتماعي والصراعات الناشئة عن عدم الامتثال للمعايير التي تحكم النوع الأجتماعي المخصص للفرد. تدور أحداث المسرحية في القرن السابع عشر وتتناول القضايا التي تعالجها من زوايا مختلفة حيث تصورنضال النساء في الماضي وتربطه بنضال النساء في عالمنا اليوم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: فينيجار توم، النوع الاجتماعي، القوة، الإكراه، بتلر، المعارضات الثنائية، الساحرات، مغاير الجنس.

پوختە:

ئەم توێژینەوەیە بە ناوی "زۆرەملێکردن لە پەیوەندییە جێندەرییەکانی هێز لە ڤینیگەر تۆم'ی کاریل چەرچڵدا"، لە پەیوەندییە زۆرەملێیەکانی جێندەر لەناو شانۆنامەکەدا دەکۆڵێتەوە. جێندەر جۆرێکی کاریگەری دەسەڵاتی کۆمەڵایەتییە، هەروەها رێسا جێندەرییەکان لەناو سیستەمێکی دووانەییدا ڕوودەدەن کە زۆرجار دەشێت ئەم سیستەمە سنووردارکەر و زۆرەملێ بێت و تاکەکان ناچار بکات بۆ سەلماندنی ئەوەی بۆیان هەیە بەشێک بن لەوەی بە ئاسایی یان مرۆڤ دادەنرێت، خۆیان لەگەڵ ئەو رێسایانەدا بگونجێنن.

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.25098/7.1.6

The Scientific Journal of Cihan University – Sulaimaniya **PP: 95-108**
Volume (7), Issue (1), June 2023
ISSN 2520-7377 (Online), ISSN 2520-5102 (Print)

هۆکاری هەڵبژاردنی ئەم شانۆگەرییە ئەوەیە کە زۆرجار وەک باشترین بەرهەمە فێمینیستەکانی چەرچڵ دەناسێنرێت کە تێیدا باس لە پرسە جێندەرییەکان و ئەو ململانێیانە دەکات کە لە ئەنجامی نەگونجاندن لەگەڵ ئەو ڕێسایانەی ڕەگەزی بۆدیاریکراوی مرۆڤ بەڕێوەدەبەن، سەرهەڵدەدەن. رووداوەکانی شانۆنامەکە لە سەدەی حەڤدەدا ڕوو دەدەن و لە گۆشەنیگای جیاوازەوە مامەڵە لەگەڵ پرسەکاندا دەکەن، بەجۆرێک کە وێنای خەباتی ژنان لە ڕابردوودا دەکات و دەیبەستێتەوە بە خەباتی ژنان لە جیهانی ئەمڕۆدا.

کلیلە وشە: ڤینیگەر تۆم، جێندەر، هێز، زۆرەملێکردن، بەتڵەر، دژایەتییە دووانەییەکان، جادووگەرەکان، جیاوەگەزخواز.

Methodology

The applied theory in the current study is gender performativity theory by the American philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler. In 1990, Butler published *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* which became the foundation of her gender theory, influencing feminism, gender studies and queer theory ever since. In 1996, she further developed her ideas in her book *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* and she continued to do that in later books, essays and research.

In her theory, Butler argues that gender is not a concrete and innate core identity; it is performative, that is, it is *done* through a number of acts, gestures, words, and expressions of desire that in turn create the illusion of a core essence. This illusion is maintained largely for the sake of regulating sexuality within "the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality" (*Gender Trouble* 173) which is to perpetuate and maintain reproductive heterosexuality as an end (180). To Butler, performative gender acts are controlled by socially and culturally established norms and regulations that both constrain the *doer* in their *doing* of gender and direct them in *doing* it. Therefore, shifting from these norms can result in consequences that can be as severe as death, making gender norms have a coercive nature (*Bodies that Matter 95*).

Butler's ideas can be extremely complex, encompassing many concepts borrowed from various fields of philosophy and socio-political sciences. Due to the limited scope of the current research, her *Gender Performativity* theory and her arguments regarding compulsive heterosexuality and coercive gender norms will be applied to *Vinegar Tom* with a special focus on the views closely related to the argument.

1. Introduction

Caryl Churchill, a recognised name in British theatre, made a name for herself through her works for radio, theatre, and television since 1965. Churchill is known for her experimentations in the theatre, such as her technique of overlapping dialogues. Her plays also tend to follow non-linear time and have fragmented plots with an innovative practice in Brechtian dramaturgy through employing defamiliarisation or distancing devices like songs and music, cross-gender-casting, and doublings. Churchill often resorts to these devices to distance the audience from the action, inviting them to reflect on the unfolding events that often carry historical, social and political implications to form their unique understanding and judgment of them (Howard 40).

Churchill's plays contributed immensely to her fame due to the controversial social and political issues they address, such as capitalism, socialism, patriarchy, feminism, and environmental issues.

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This paper examines the use of coercion in the gendered relations of power in Churchill's play *Vinegar Tom* (1976).

2. Coercion in Gendered Power Relations

In early 1976, Caryl Churchill met with the feminist theatre company Monstrous Regiment to write a play about witchcraft. Established in 1975 in response to male dominance in the industry, Monstrous Regiment held socialist-feminist views and aimed at producing works free from male bias (Reinelt, "On Feminist", 99). The result of this collaboration, which was their first, was *Vinegar Tom*. As Churchill explains in the preface to the play, she had read *Witches, Midwives and Nurses* by Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English before that collaboration. The brainstorming process and her discussions with the members of the group helped to form her impression of the seventeenth-century witch-hunts. As she explains, to her "witchcraft existed in the minds of its persecutors" and 'witches' were a scapegoat in times of stress like Jews and blacks" (*Plays 1* 129). Churchill's studies for the play helped her discover the extent of misogyny in Christian teachings and see the continuity between the medieval attitudes towards witches and attitudes towards women today. Women accused of witchcraft were often from the marginalized groups of society, such as the old, underprivileged, single women, or women unconventional in their sexuality. Churchill, therefore, decided to write a play "about witches with no witches in it; a play not about evil, hysteria and possession by the devil but about poverty, humiliation and prejudice, and how the women accused of witchcraft saw themselves." (*Plays 1* 130) *Vinegar Tom*, therefore, contains no witches; it only portrays some women persecuted for being deviant. The environment as well as social and economic circumstances can be coercive to certain members of society by either pressuring them to make choices they would not have made under normal circumstances or by placing them in situations that make them susceptible to coercion and injustice. The women in *Vinegar Tom* are both coerced by their social and economic circumstances and by others that find them vulnerable to coercion. Yet, the main reason for both forms of coercion in the play is deviations from the compulsive gender norms as will be explained shortly. Based on Judith Butler's argument, deviations from gender norms imposed on gendered bodies can lead to punishment and even death because such deviations challenge heterosexual hegemony.

Aston suggests that *Vinegar Tom* was the result of the Women's Liberation Movement in the sixties and seventies which had a great influence on Churchill ("The 'Picasso'", 208). The movement campaigned for demands like equal pay and equal work and educational opportunities, as well as free contraception and abortion on request (Luckhurst 41). Therefore, although it is set in the seventeenth century, the action is interrupted by songs about contemporary issues of women and performed by actors in modern clothes. These interruptions, as Aston suggests, can emphasise that the oppression of women is not something of the past; it needs to be viewed and addressed as an urgent issue of today's world ("The 'Picasso" 208). These songs also help to draw a parallel between the issues of sexism, ageism and capitalism in the past and the present (Reinelt, "Caryl Churchill", 175) The thematic connection between each song and the scene that precedes it with each song corresponding to one of the "sins" of the women accused of witchcraft further testifies to this (Bi 73). Hence, there are songs about: female sexuality, scapegoating, prescribed societal roles, witches as representatives

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of the inherently weak and sinful nature of women; the strive for self-determination; and medical intervention as a patriarchal method of control (Luckhurst 64).

The witch-hunt in Churchill's play involves no witches; it involves five women who are labelled as "witches" by the witch hunters because of: healing people without a medical license, living without men, aborting a foetus, enjoying sexual intercourse outside marriage, and refusing to get married. As Keyssar states, because of these crimes, these women are at first ostracised and made "objects of horror in the community", and later, they are tortured and in the end, hanged (210). The plight of these women also reveals itself in being placed as social subjects in the middle of economic, religious and political power relations that work together to discipline their sexuality and prescribe their gender. Consequently, Christianity's misogyny and the growing capitalism along with the state authorities collaborate to display and re-establish their power through using poor/unmarried and sexually unconventional women like the accused women in this play as scapegoats that are punished for their disobedient and uncontrollable bodies and behaviour (Reinelt, "Caryl Churchill", 175). That is, these women are twice marginalised and persecuted owing to their class and gender (Aston and Diamond, "Introduction", 4). However, gender proves to be the leading cause and the common factor for discriminating against these women. This is because the only way to achieve social acceptance for the woman in this play is to be confined within the boundaries of marriage and domestic life as part of a misogynistic Christian tradition that insists on the inferiority of women to men (Luckhurst 65). Accordingly, the gender roles in the play are within "dominant power discourses prescribing binary oppositions between men and women." (Pankratz 177) This statement; however, should not limit our analysis to using the lenses of patriarchy and early feminist notions of gender. Instead, a different perspective can be achieved using Butler's notions of gender performativity. Butler argues that the different social, political and religious institutions work together to maintain the heterosexual hegemony that serves reproductive purposes; that is, sexual relationships should exclusively be between men and women to guarantee childbearing. Therefore, even within the play's heterosexual/binary relationships, we can argue that the main issue is not patriarchal forces oppressing women and coercing them into conforming to prescribed gender roles; it is that deviating from these roles results in nonconforming performative gender acts that can subvert the gender binary and endanger the heterosexual hegemony.

3. The Witches

The first "witch" in the play is Alice, a poor, unmarried woman in her twenties who has an illegitimate son and lives alone with her elderly mother. Alice's rebelliousness is that she enjoys sexual encounters with multiple men and does not want a traditional married life. Alice's unconventional character is revealed in the play's first scene where she appears standing with a male character only referred to as "Man". From their conversation, the audience can deduce that they have just had casual sex. The man, seemingly representative of any man in that era, shows signs of guilt, claiming that he is the devil and asks Alice questions that reveal his suspicions about her:

> MAN. If you come with me and give me body and soul, you'll never want in this world.
> ALICE. Are you saying that as a man?

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MAN. Am I saying it as the devil?
ALICE. If you're saying it as a man I'll go with you. There's no one round here knows me going to marry me. There's no way I'll get money. I've a child, mind, I'll not leave the child.
MAN. Has it a father
ALICE. No, never had.
MAN. So you think that was no sin we did?
ALICE. If it was I don't care.
MAN. Don't say that.
ALICE. You'd say worse living here. Any time I'm happy someone says it's a sin. (*Vinegar Tom* 135-136).

The above dialogue shows Alice's lack of guilt about her sexual desires and choices; her only issue is with the society that does not accept her lifestyle and labels her a "whore" (Ravari 156; Zadeh and Ouliaeinia 311). Furthermore, her words reveal her dire financial condition because the gender norms of her society deny a woman like her any chance of financial security unless she is supported by a man. She, therefore, finds herself begging to be taken by a stranger she had just met only to escape her oppressive society. However, the man, being a member of that same society, reacts to the request with shock and disgust asking how she could ask him to take "a whore" with him, and when Alice objects to that label, he asks, "What are you then? What name would you put to yourself? You're not a wife or a widow. You're not a virgin. Tell me a name for what you are." (*Vinegar* 137). The man can only define Alice in terms of her relationships with men while he does not think he has to do the same with himself (Pankratz 177). His questions also seem to be Churchill's way of questioning the roles assigned to female bodies and asking whether they should exist as rigid and stable identities at all (Connelly 38-39)

It is then Alice's refusal to be defined within the confines of such roles that destabilises the gender hierarchy and makes her a suspect of witchcraft and a freak of nature that needs to be destroyed. As Connelly argues, Alice embodies a typical challenge to "male sexual power, holding sway over men in the community through her sexual potency." (33) because she is a "consumer" of sex without wanting any romantic or formal attachment to men (36). This is seen in her conversation with Susan when she says:

ALICE. ... I want a man I can have when I want, not if I'm lucky to meet some villain one night.

SUSAN. You always say you don't want to be married.
ALICE. I don't want to be married. Look at you. Who'd want to be you? (*Vinegar* 147)

It is hard for Susan to understand what Alice wants because she does not understand having a sex partner outside marriage, but Alice's wish is clear, she wants access to sexual pleasure whenever she wants without the romantic, social and formal attachment of marriage (Ravari 156). For her, the person does not even matter, she says she does not even remember the man's face; it appears that it is the sensual side that she seeks. This attitude to sex, however, is a performative gender attitude assigned to men, so by possessing a body that is sexually active and seeks sexual pleasure, Alice is crossing the line of the gender norms assigned to her side of the binary. It is also the attitude, one can

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argue, that makes her perceived as a threat to the normative values of her time. This is because if Alice refuses the marriage institution, which was exclusively heterosexual, and seeks sexual pleasure outside it, she may as well find it outside heterosexuality. Although there is no hint of this in the text, according to Judith Butler's theory, the fear that divergent gender performances may pose a threat to the heterosexual hegemony is why deviations from the gender norms can often be punishable.

Joan, Alice's mother, is another character who is falsely accused of witchcraft. Besides, being an old poor widow, her unspoken crime is that she does not follow the gender norms specified for a woman her age. For instance, instead of retreating to the background, living her remaining days silent and invisible, playing a grandmother's role surrounded by her grandchildren, Joan lives alone supporting herself and is on the verge of poverty. This lifestyle is seen as destabilising the typical nuclear family model and makes Joan hated by her middle-class neighbours (Connelly 34) as the song says, "nobody loves you when you're old/ unless you're someone's gran." (*Vinegar* 160). Furthermore, Joan deviates from other norms: she drinks a lot to cope with her predicament, she swears and curses, and despite her age, she still desires for having a man in her life, even if mostly to be financially secure (Zadeh and Ouliaeinia 311) as this dialogue shows:

> JOAN. If we'd each got a man we'd be better off.
> ALICE. You weren't better off, mum. You've told me often you're glad he's dead. Think how he used to beat you.
> JOAN. We'd have more to eat, that's one thing. (*Vinegar* 141)

Based on all that was mentioned, Joan is deviant in the way she lives her gender and this makes her vulnerable to being viewed as a witch by her society. Based on Butler's arguments on gender norms, Joan can be regarded as a challenge to the normative values that form the heterosexual hegemony since all bodies within this system need to conform to the norms defining them to guarantee the preservation of this hierarchy. If not, their noncompliance will be faced with retributions just like what happens to Joan at the end of the play.

Similarly, Susan, Alice's best friend, is accused of witchcraft for not conforming to the limits of her gender. Susan is a typical housewife with her body at the service of her husband who treats her as a procreation tool and continues to make her pregnant regardless of her poor health and being a mother of three young children (Seal and Das 147). A poor housewife like Susan; however, accepts that role because her other option is to be like Alice - poor, unsupported, ostracised, and seen as a prostitute. Therefore, when Alice tells Susan that she does not want to be married like her, Susan replies:

> SUSAN. He doesn't beat me.
> ALICE. He doesn't beat you.
> SUSAN. What's wrong with me? Better than you.
> ALICE. Three babies and what, two, three times miscarried and wonderful he doesn't beat you.
> SUSAN. No one's going to marry you because they know you here. That's why you say you don't want to be married — because no one's going to ask you round here, because they know you. (*Vinegar* 147)

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From the dialogue above, it can be deduced that both women struggle with coercive gender norms that force them to choose one unpleasant option over another equally unpleasant one, each based on what they can endure more than the other. Susan does not want to live her life like Alice, poor, scorned and exploited by men who only want her for satisfying their desires, and she prefers to endure her husband's treatment of her body as a child-breeding tool as long as he does not beat her. Alice, on the other hand, does not want a life like Susan's, but her other option is not satisfying either because she is not in a relationship on her terms; she is tired of her brief sexual adventures and how men treat her, as she tells her mother when she comes back from her encounter with the nameless man, "Oh mum, I'm sick of myself" (*Vinegar* 141) or when she tells Susan:

> ALICE. I hate my body.
> …
> ALICE. Blood every month, and no way out of that but to be sick and swell up, and no way out of that but pain. No way out of all that till we're old and that's worse. I can't bear to see my mother if she changes her clothes. If I was a man I'd go to London and Scotland and never come back and take a girl under a bush and on my way. (*Vinegar* 146)

As Ellin Diamond explains, "Alice hates her body because, in the play's fictional seventeenth-century village, where poverty and terror are displaced into misogynist scapegoating, her body is materially and sexually abused, her desire inexpressible." (*Unmasking Mimesis*, 83) In other words, even though that lifestyle is her choice, it is not a fully free choice, it is the best she could settle with under the gender norms enforced in her society. She is not as pleased as she wants with her intimate life, and she is poor and ostracised by everyone as a result of her choice.

Interestingly, even choosing to comply and follow the norms does not seem to protect these women from punishment. At the first act of defiance, their bodies become what Butler calls, bodies that do not matter (*Bodies* 16). Already a mother of three young children and undergoing several miscarriages that endangered her life, Susan eventually refuses to be a mother again. This decision, however, can be interpreted as defying the heterosexual hegemony's reproductive aims which may explain why it is seen as a crime that qualifies Susan to be a witch. However, Susan's case is different from the other women because due to years of oppressive treatment by her husband and under the coercive tools of imprisonment and torture by the witch hunters, she believes that she is a witch and accepts her fate as the only way to salvation (Luckhurst 66), "I was a witch and never knew it. I killed my babies. I never meant it. I didn't know I was so wicked. I didn't know I had that mark on me." (*Vinegar* 174-175).

Susan is conditioned to believe that she has no right to decide what to do with her body, as she tells Alice, "I must think on Eve who brought the sin into the world that got me pregnant. I must think on how woman tempts man, and how she pays God with her pain having the baby. So if we try to get round the pain, we're going against God." (*Vinegar* 146) It is this belief that leads Susan to break and accuse both Alice and Ellen. Yet, this betrayal makes Susan herself accused of witchcraft because she went to a woman healer to have an abortion and she is later brainwashed into believing that narrative. Hence, the religious and societal rules that regarded abortions as evil acts against nature deny Susan the right to protect her own body and interpret her abortion as witchcraft (Ravari 157). Viewed from the angle of coercive gender norms, her action is rendered unnatural and wicked because

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abortions and rejecting motherhood indicate rejecting the goals of what Judith Butler calls compulsive heterosexuality, and can consequently destabilise the entire power hierarchy.

The last two women accused of witchcraft, with only one escaping being convicted, are Betty and Ellen. Betty is the daughter of the landowner, and her rich parents had arranged for her to marry a wealthy man. When she rejects the marriage, preferring to stay single and roam the village, enjoying nature, her parents lock her up, and later they even tie her down and bring a doctor to bleed her as a "cure". Betty, as Janelle Reinelt suggests, is trapped in a vicious circle where she tries to understand her condition in "circular reasoning" ("Caryl Churchill", 178) as she asks:

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

For defying her assigned gender role and rejecting marriage, Betty is subjected to forced bleeding as a cure for what her doctor refers to as "hysteria" which he then defines as "A woman's weakness" (*Vinegar* 149). This so-called treatment; however, is only a tool of coercion to break her will into submission and force her to accept the arranged marriage (Seal and Das 148); it is a tool to create a "docile body" the way coercion often does (Reinelt, "Caryl Churchill", 178).

To escape this torture, Betty pretends to have accepted the marriage and instead, seeks help from the herbal healer, Ellen. Betty finds in Ellen, an unconventional woman who lives alone, a solace and a place to unburden her anxieties. Her frequent visits, however, almost lead to her ruin and become evidence against Ellen. Betty, instead, meets a better fate than Ellen and the other women because she is from the upper-middle class and her marriage, as Kritzer argues, is an economic alliance in which she is a useful glue (Qtd. in Ravari 158). Nevertheless, Betty's class is not the main factor that saves her from meeting the same fate as the other women; she only narrowly escapes it due to complying with the coercive gender norms and getting married to the man her father chose for her (Ravari 158; Zadeh and Ouliaeinia 312). The below dialogue demonstrates that Betty faces coercive options by her parents and society that leave her helpless:

> BETTY. I'm frightened to come any more. They'll say I'm a witch.
> ELLEN. Are they saying I'm a witch?
> BETTY. They say because I screamed that was the devil in me. And when I ran out of the house they say where was I going if not to meet other witches. And some know I come to see you. (*Vinegar* 169)

Here, Betty is out of options as a result of the coercive practices of her society which are themselves the result of rigid gender norms that do not allow women to decide what to do with their lives and bodies. If Betty continues to reject the suitor, she is going to be accused of being a witch because her defiance and rebellious conduct do not match the passive submissive attitudes that are performative gender acts assigned to the female body. Adopting Butler's views, a woman like Betty who does not want to get married and wishes to be left alone, deviates from the gender norms, disrupting the

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heterosexual hierarchy where women are dominated by men. The subject causing this disruption, hence, is deemed *unnatural* and *nonhuman* and needs to be coerced into succumbing to the norms or they have to be eliminated to preserve the power hierarchy (*Gender* 142). Betty, therefore, either has to prove she is *normal*, not a witch, by getting married to the man chosen for her or like the other four women, she will be facing confinement, torture and death under the suspicion of being a witch. In other words, she will no longer be seen as human because a witch is a demonic being. Furthermore, even if Betty escapes the witchcraft accusation due to her class, she will not escape torture and confinement by her doctor who diagnosed her rebellious attitude as hysteria and has been draining out her blood as a form of masked punishment (Reinelt, "Caryl Churchill", 178). Thus, the marriage offer to Betty appears as the more endurable option, as Ellen advises, "Your best chance of being left alone is marry a rich man, because it's part of his honour to have a wife who does nothing." (*Vinegar* 169) Not only that, the fear of that looming threat forces Betty to start to believe in her doctor and conform to the norms, "maybe I've been bewitched. If the witches are stopped, maybe I'll get well." (*Vinegar* 169) This proves that the doctor's coercive technique of making her lose so much blood and keeping her tied and locked up, has brainwashed Betty and drained her out of her will to resist.

Ellen, on the other hand, is not as lucky as Betty because she is neither from the upper class nor has a man to marry as a way to escape society's judgement. When Betty tells her that she does not want to get married and prefers to be left alone, Ellen makes her confront the reality of what awaits women who are left alone with no social and financial support, "Left alone for what? To be like me? There's no doctor going to save me from being called a witch." (*Vinegar* 169). What Ellen means is that she has no safety net in the form of a wealthy family or a husband to protect her from witchcraft accusations. Like Joan and Alice, Ellen leads an unconventional life without a man and performs a role exclusive to men, making her another defiant of the gender norms. Ellen challenges societal expectations, not just by living alone without the support of a man, but also by being a female healer and earning a living from her practice (Ravari 157; Seal and Das 148). Back then, offering medical treatment was a male field of work where all doctors were men, so Ellen trespassed the boundaries of her gender, especially since she made a living out of her healing work (Zadeh and Ouliaeinia 312). That is, she adopted two performative gender practices that used to be exclusive to men, practicing medicine and earning a living. As Churchill mentions in the preface to the play, she read Ehrenreich and English's *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers* (1973) before writing the play and according to that book, witch-hunts were associated with excluding women from "independent healing roles" and creating "a new male-dominated medical profession that has continued a practice of violent, medicalised pacification of women to the present day." (Luckhurst 65) In other words, the doctors overtook the female healers and used medicine as a tool of violence against women intended at controlling and subduing them.

With Ellen, the list of the condemned witches in *Vinegar Tom* is complete, but there remains a list of characters that become agents of coercion in this play or take part in the tragic ending of the accused women. Although the female characters in the play are all oppressed and abused in one way or another, "class and fear divide [them] and prevent them from supporting each other" while "ruling institutions, such as medicine and the church, legitimated oppression" (Reinelt, "On Feminist", 24). Indeed, a character like Margery, Joan's middle-class neighbour, does not sympathise with her poor neighbour and refuses to help her, treating her unkindly. This causes Joan to burst into anger and

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.25098/7.1.6

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curse her, but because Margery is a vain superstitious woman, when later their cows get sick and she suffers a headache and her husband gets a stiff arm, she thinks it was because of Joan's curse. She, therefore, encourages her husband to suspect Joan and Alice, and they offer them to the witch-hunters (Luckhurst 65). Ironically, Margery is often oppressed by her husband who verbally abuses her and calls her a "lazy slut" (*Vinegar* 145) he intends to cheat on her, lusting after Alice, and he offers Alice presents. Yet, after they visit Ellen and under Margery's influence, Jack starts to believe that Joan is a witch and confronts Alice claiming that she bewitched him and took away his manhood. Almost killed by Jack's tight grip around her neck, Alice has to play along and pretend to give Jack his manhood back:

> JACK. Give it me.
> [ALICE puts her hand between his thighs.]
> ALICE. There. It's back.
> JACK. It is. It is back. Thank you, Alice. I wasn't sure you were a witch till then.
> [JACK goes.]
> SUSAN. What you doing Alice? Alice? Alice?
> [ALICE turns to her.]
> ALICE. It's nothing. He's mad. Oh my neck, Susan. Oh, I'd laugh if it didn't hurt.
> SUSAN. Don't touch me. I'll not be touched by a witch. (*Vinegar* 164-165*)*

In the above dialogue, as Elin Diamond argues, "Jack endows Alice with the power of the phallus to repossesses his organ, but then, newly authorized and empowered, he must subdue her by 'seeing' her as, labelling her a witch." ("(In)Visible Bodies", 194) That is, Jack is succumbing to the female gaze of Alice because it is what gives him his manhood back, but the moment he regains it, he finds himself with the power to make Alice the object of his gaze, calling her a witch. Although in this situation, Jack is hardly in "a phallic position of knowledge and authority", Susan who watches the scene as a spectator believes that he is in a state that allows him to condemn Alice as a witch and prosecute her accordingly because as the possessor of the phallus, he also possesses the truth (Diamond, "(In)Visible", 194). This incident is what entices Susan to see Alice as a witch and join Margery in playing a direct role in bringing about the grim fates of Joan, Alice and Ellen.

On the other hand, Goody, Packer's elderly assistant, does not stop at accusing innocent women of witchcraft; she even participates directly in torturing and coercing them into confessing to being witches even though they are not. She does that for material gains and to lead a comfortable life, as she says, "Yes, it's interesting work being a searcher and nice to do good at the same time as earning a living. Better than staying home a widow. I'd end up like the old women you see, soft in the head and full of spite with their muttering and spells." (*Vinegar* 168) This indicates that Goody is aware that she is in the same boat as other lower-class women who find it hard to make a living once they are widowed, and yet, she is proud of escaping that rough life by working with a man like Packer and helping him in torturing and convicting her peers (Ravari 162).

Besides, the women taking part in the oppression of other women, other characters become agents of coercion, representing the establishments they are from. As it was mentioned earlier, Betty's doctor is an agent of coercion by using medical practices that are highly misogynistic and aimed at taming

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defiant women. Packer, the witch-hunter, is authorised by both the church and the state to find witches, subject them to questionable methods of interrogation and hand them in to be hanged. For this, Packer uses methods of pricking the accused women with needles and depriving them of sleep as ways to weaken their will and make them confess to crimes they did not commit. As it turns out, Packer never fails to convict any accused witch he finds. This is because his method is simple: he continues to torture the women and threaten them until they confess to what he commands them to. If not, the process continues until proof is found, and this can be something as random as a birthmark on the body or even a spider passing by:

> PACKER. Ah. Ah. What's this? A spider. A huge black one. And it ran off when it saw a godly man. Deny if you can that spider's one of your imps.
> ALICE. No.
> PACKER. Then why should it come? Tell me that.
> ALICE. I want my boy.
> PACKER. Why? Why do you keep on about the boy? Who's his father? Is the devil his father?
> ALICE. No, no, no.
> PACKER. I'll have the boy to see me in the morning. If he's not the devil's child he'll speak against you. [ALICE cries.] I'll watch you. I've watched plenty of witches and hanged them all. I'll get that spider too if it comes back. (*Vinegar* 172)

Packer here is clearly stating that Alice either has to confess to escape that torture or anything will be used as proof to convict her the way seeing a spider or a mother's instinctual longing for her child can all be interpreted as evidence of her demonic nature. Furthermore, his final words mean that no woman ever caught by him escapes being hanged due to his methods of torture. This is further proven through Susan's confession at the square after the hanging of Joan and Ellen. Although when Susan's body is shaved in search for marks, Goody fails to find any, that does not make a difference to Packer who says, "Though a mark is a sure sign of a witch's guilt, having no mark is no sign of innocence for the devil can take marks off." (*Vinegar* 173) Therefore, we later see Susan telling Alice at the square that she is a witch and Packer helped her discover that. That confession proves that she broke under the pressure of Packer's methods of coercion and was even brainwashed into believing him.

Churchill ends the play with a scene presenting two women in top hats, standing in a music hall as actors playing the characters of Kramer and Sprenger, the writers of *Malleus Maleficarum*, translated as *The Hammer of Witches*. Churchill learned about that book while researching for the play and she understood much about the misogyny involved in the prosecuting of witches from it. Churchill uses these two characters to highlight extremist religious teachings since they claimed that women were more exposed to witchcraft because they were inherently wicked and weak (Ravari 161). As a result of these claims, for the next two centuries following its publication, this book became instrumental in the oppression, torture and killing of women accused of witchcraft (Reinelt, "On Feminist", 24).

Churchill, however, insisted that these two characters be played by female actors. This might be to show women's complicity in the oppression of other women, as with characters like Margery and Goody (Bi 72; Ravari 162). It can also be a celebration of the achievements of the feminist movements to have women playing the men who would have persecuted women like them in the past (Luckhurst 66). Viewing the scene from Butler's gender performativity, is similar to Butler's example of a Drag

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performer, a person dressing and acting as the opposite sex, that subverts the dominant gender norms (*Gender* 175). This scene can reveal the performative nature of gender where these women dressing as men blur the gender boundaries and criticise the rigid gender norms that divide bodies into binary oppositions that establish a hierarchy of dominated and dominators. At the same time, the entire scene with the irony that the two characters appear as performers in a musical, according to Reinelt, may suggest that "this attack on women has been incorporated into common ideology and internalized by culture." ("On Feminist", 24). In other words, it may be a warning that the fight is not over and modern witches are women persecuted in different areas of life, given different labels that limit and interfere with their rights and freedoms, as the song says:

> Look in the mirror tonight.
> Would they have hanged you then?
> Ask how they're stopping you now.
> Ask how they're stopping you now.
> Where have the witches gone?
> Who are the witches now?
> Ask how they're stopping you now.
> Here we are. (*Vinegar* 176)

Before concluding this analysis, it must be noted that oftentimes coercion is faced with resistance even if it is due to sheer desperation. Among these women, Joan and Alice face their coercers with defiance and courage. When Joan knows that she is convicted and will be hanged because the witch hunters Goody and Packer found a scar on her aging body that they interpreted as devilish, she bursts into a long false confession in which she pretends to have been a witch for ten years. She pretends to have made a pact with the devil whom she says it her old cat Vinegar Tom, and she says she fed him her blood and she was responsible for every evil in their village. Besides a final act of rebellion, the way Joan embraces her role as a witch in these final moments may be due to realising that it is only through death that she can escape being weak, oppressed and humiliated (Ravari 156-157; Seal and Das 146). We may also view it as embracing injurious words to reach their enabling power as Butler argues in her views on hate speech. That is, an object of hate can embrace an injurious word or hate speech to exist as a subject in society (Jagger 116) Likewise, Joan embracing the role of the witch is the only way for her to become a subject and face her death with some strength and dignity. Similarly, Alice displays defiance in the face of her looming death. As she watches her mother and Ellen hanged in the square and Susan tells her that they too are witches and need to repent to be forgiven after being hanged, Alice replies:

> I'm not a witch. But I wish I was. If I could live I'd be a witch now after what they've done. I'd make wax men and melt them on a slow fire. I'd kill their animals and blast their crops and make such storms, I'd wreck their ships all over the world… Oh if I could meet with the devil now I'd give him anything if he'd give me power. There's no way for us except by the devil. If I only did have magic, I'd make them feel it. (*Vinegar* 175)

Here, Alice's defiance is the result of realising that they are the victims of a disease that wants to control and eliminate any woman that is unconventional and independent. She realises that the only

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way she can overpower the male authority and "challenge the status quo" is to become "the Other" (Luckhurst 66). That is, to be able to wrest her rights from them and escape the state of being oppressed and a subjugated object is to embrace the *witch* label and employ its enabling potential to move to subjecthood even if that means becoming the monster they claim she is.

4. Conclusion

Vinegar Tom can be regarded as Churchill's attempt at dramatically presenting the struggles of women who chose to defy and deviate from the oppressive societal rules and restrictive gender norms of their times and the price they had to pay as a result of that. Furthermore, through the incorporation of contemporary songs, Churchill linked that struggle to the struggles of defiant women today, showing that the hunt for "witches" is not over. This *witch* label, particularly, resonates with Butler's argument that bodies that diverge from the gender norms are seen as *unnatural* or *nonhuman*; they are bodies that do not matter and, just like Churchill's witches, need to be eliminated.

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