

# Re-writing Colonial History: A Contrapuntal Reading of Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine*

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**Abstract:** The paper aims to focus on how Caryl Churchill's play *Cloud Nine* (1979) works as an experimental instrument or medium to deal with the most controversial themes like colonization, exploitation, identity politics and power relations. It will show how Churchill is able to go beyond mainstream culture and narratives to deal with intertwined and overlapping histories, diversity and different perspectives. Saidian contrapuntal reading of the play helps to investigate the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. It addresses the issues and experiences from both the perspectives of the white man and the non-white man. This theory connects the readers to the structures of the plot as well as the idea behind it and also provides a new way of analyzing a literary especially a colonial text. The paper will explore the legacy of imperialism within and beyond the geographical territory and highlight the concepts of cultural dominance and resistance. This paper intends to investigate Churchill's play through the light of the contrapuntal reading. A contrapuntal reading of the play defends its value by historicizing its combined complicity in, and critique of colonialism.

**Keywords:** Colonization, contrapuntal, colonizer, imperialism, resistance

## Introduction

Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. Should it be said that one is always "inside" power, there is no "escaping" it, there is no absolute outside where it is concerned... Their existence depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relations. These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network.

(Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*)

The term 'contrapuntal' occurs in Edward Said's book *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). The term is actually derived from music that refers to the melodic lines that are in counterpoint with each other. Said uses the term to interpret colonial texts in order to make discourse and counter discourse from both the perspectives of the colonizer and the colonized. This reading helps to understand the political, social and economic relationship between the emperor and its colonies. Said wants his readers to connect them with the structure of the narrative and to the idea or concept behind it, and experiences from which it draws support. It provides a set of background or a structural reference and attitude in order to describe the relationship between the narrative set in the metropolitan cities of the colonizer and the colonized lands. He says that this reading deals with "awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts" (Said 51). Said asserts that the contrapuntal reading involves "not only the construction of the colonial situation as envisaged by the writers, but the resistance to it as well" (Said 79). The contrapuntal reading leads the readers to consider the unconsidered, unrecognized and unrepresented native land and its people. Said's theory

highlights the perspectives of imperialism and the resistance to it “We must therefore read the great canonical texts with an effort to draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present to ideologically represented in such works. The contrapuntal reading must take account of both processes- that of imperialism and that of resistance to it, which can be done by extending our reading of the text to include what was once forcibly excluded” (Said 78-79).

### The Legacy of the British Empire

The colonizers claim themselves as the agents of God who came to the dark continent of Africa for a noble mission. They let the natives to realize that they need the white men to make a disciplinary society and to bring law or rules; and to sustain order and equilibrium in this land. They inculcate racial inferiority into the minds of the natives and consider them as savage, evil, uncultured and uneducated. That is why the natives should be governed, dominated and controlled by the colonizer. This governmentality of the British government establishes the issues like exclusion, exploitation and resistance. The emperor's legacy is not only limited to the acquisition of the geographical territory but also to dominate or demolish native cultural heritage. Edward Said exposes the politics of the cultural, literal representation of the natives and tries to investigate the dependency of the colonizer's prosperity on the colonized land and its people. That is why Said aims to highlight the setting of the plot and the context of the text.

A contrapuntal reading helps to illuminate the weakness or darkness of the colonizer because the power and prosperity of the emperor depends on the non-white people and their lands. It also reflects multiple intertwined and overlapping histories, experiences and perspectives. There are power politics of the colonizers behind their mission of civilizing the natives. They impose their ideology, culture on the colonized people in order to extend the rule of authority of the emperor and to exercise power relations between the master or the white man and the slave or the non-white man. Said's theory aims to visualize the darkness of the emperor beneath the lamp of imperialism by bridging the plot of the Western setting and the non-Western setting. In the Introduction to the *Culture and Imperialism*. Edward Said says that “The novels and other books I consider here I analyze because first of all I find them estimable and admirable works of art and learning, in which I and many other readers take pleasure and from which we derive profit. Secondly, the challenge is to connect them not only with that pleasure and profit but also with the imperial process of which they were manifestly and unconcealedly a part; rather than condemning or ignoring their participation in what was an unquestioned reality in their societies, I suggest that what we learn about this hitherto ignored aspect actually and truly enhances our reading and understanding of them” (Said xvii). This paper will critically interpret Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* in the light of contrapuntal reading of the structural dependency that aims to heighten readers' awareness regarding multiple perspectives on the problems.

### Text, Context and Counter Text

Caryl Churchill, a contemporary British woman playwright who has written many plays with different themes for radio, television and theatre including *Owners* (1972), *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (1976), *Vinegar Tom* (1976), *Cloud Nine* (1979), *Top Girls* (1982), *Far Away* (2000), *A Number* (2000), *Love and Information* (2012), *Ding Dong the Wicked* (2012). She deals with the most controversial themes like politics, colonialism, culture, society and feminism. This paper intends to explore colonial histories and experiences through the play *Cloud Nine*. In this play *Cloud Nine*, she explores issues related to race, gender, colonialism and exposes the legacy or hypocrisy of the British. She does not afraid to represent the problems of society even being British and then a woman. Her plays work as an experiment in the field of theatre to pave the path for alternate possibilities and different perspectives. In the first act of the play, she addresses the issues like cultural imperialism, the white man's racial supremacy, burden and colonial domination or exploitation

over the colonized land as well as the patriarchal suppression over women. In the second act of the play, she destabilizes or denaturalizes heteronormativity and demonstrates alternate sexual identities and relations. A contrapuntal reading of this play brings the readers into the threshold of the different context or setting of the plot. In respect to the historicizing of the colonial experience and discourse, Homi K. Bhabha in his *The Location of Culture* states that “My concern is with other articulations of human togetherness, as they are related to cultural differences and discrimination. For instance, human togetherness may come to represent the forces of hegemonic authority; or solidarity founded in victimization and suffering may, implacably, sometimes violently, become bound against oppression; or a subaltern or minority agency may attempt to interrogate and rearticulate the ‘interest’ of society that marginalizes its interest. These discourses of cultural dissent and social antagonism cannot find their agents... In the process I’ve described as the return of the subject, there is an agency that seeks revision and reinscription: the attempt to renegotiate the third locus, the intersubjective realm” (Bhabha 191).

The first act of the play is set in a British colony in Africa during Victorian time. The second act of the plot takes place in London in 1979. The two acts of the play constitute a contrapuntal structure that shows a connection between the two different settings. In act one Churchill satirizes the Victorian imperialism, society, code of conduct, strict ideology and lifestyle of the people. But in the second act, she presents the changing nature of the people and less authoritarian society. She tries to establish a parallel between the colonized Africa and England. She also compares the colonial oppression with the patriarchal oppression. Because the traditional process of establishment of one group or category depends on the destruction of the other. The exploitation of the natives extends the British Empire. Similarly, the marginalization or subjugation of women perpetuates the hegemonic hetero-patriarchal society and its ideology. The paper explores the politics of ideologies, institutionalized or politicized power relations, reasons and consequences of domination in the name of civilization.

Churchill develops the concept of the white man’s burden in her play in order to deconstruct and ridicule the mechanism of this idea. The concept is derived from Rudyard Kipling’s poem *The White Man’s Burden* (1899). Kipling wrote this poem to celebrate the diamond jubilee of Queen Victoria (1897) based on the context of the colonial control of the United States over Filipino. The poem encourages the American colonization, legacy of its territorial acquisition or expansion, policy of ideology and power domination. Here Kipling refers to the moral burden of the white man towards the non-white people. The mission of the civilization of the white man is to educate the natives and civilize them. In respect of the role of the white man in raising the natives to a civilized state, Joseph Conrad in his *Heart of Darkness* writes the colonizer’s perspectives in such a way that “We whites, from the point of development we have arrived at, must necessarily appear to them (savages) in the nature of supernatural beings- we approach them with the might as of a deity, and so on, and so on. By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded” (Conrad 82). The conceptualization of the white man’s burden is also reflected in this play. Churchill strategically uses this concept in order to expose the atrocious and tyrannical nature of the colonizer beneath the white skin. She unmasks the masked mission of the white man who makes the natives as slaves in their own land and also kills them in the name of civilization or humanization. Churchill shows how the British are capable of promoting cultural imperialism and imposing Western culture and ideology on the natives by dismantling native culture, identity and heritage. This paper aims to disclose the mechanisms and legacy of imperialism.

### **Hybridization and Multiculturalization**

The play incorporates different cultural, sexual, racial perspectives and experiences. Churchill blends cross-gender and cross-racial subjects, identity and culture. She sheds light on the natives as well as the colonizers. The play reveals the process of colonization, the formation of colonial subjects,

the process of native identity formation and the policy of colonial domination. It shows the British cultural imperialism that let the natives to adopt the Western language, attitude, behavior and culture. Churchill presents the racial and cultural hybridization in order to destabilize the stable and fixed identity and culture by demonstrating the changing nature of the culture. As culture is the source of all identity in respect of class, race, gender religion and ethnicity. That is why she deconstructs the traditional way of thinking, behaving and paves a path for alternate possibilities in the multicultural world. Though the production of hybridization not only expresses the colonial enunciation but also marks the possibility of counter-discourse and civil disobedience within the discipline of civility.

The play begins with a song that indicates the legacy of colonization and the power of England. The song also describes the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. Joshua being a black African servant, participates in the white British family union

“All (sing):     Come gather, sons of England, come gather in your pride.  
                     Now meet the world united, now face it side by side;  
                     ...From bush and jungle muster all who call old England ‘home’  
                     ...From north and south and east and west  
                     Come one and all for England” (Churchill 1).

The song glorifies Queen Victoria and her rule of authority over the whole world. It also celebrates the British invasion, acquisition and expansion of geographical territory. While introducing the audience with his family Clive, a colonial administrator, declares that

“Clive:            This is my family. Though far from home  
                     We serve the Queen wherever we may roam.  
                     I am a father to the natives here,  
                     And father to my family so dear” (Churchill 1).

The initial statement of Clive forms a relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. It also indicates his power to control all the characters around him.

### Configuration of Identity

Churchill's characterization of Joshua exposes the hypocrisy of the colonizer because the colonizer not only takes the native land but also native culture, identity, power and wealth, etc. That is to say the colonizers not only conquer the body but also the soul of the natives

“Joshua:         My skin is black but oh my soul is white.  
                     I hate my tribe. My master is my light.  
                     I only live for him. As you can see,  
                     What white men want is what I want to be” (Churchill 1).

The statement of Joshua problematizes the process of imperialism. In this respect Said says in his *Culture and Imperialism* that imperialism is “the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling over a distant territory” (Said 90). To elucidate further, the function of cultural imperialism Said asserts that “For the enterprise of empire depends upon the idea of having an empire...and all kinds of preparations are made for it within a culture; then, in turn, imperialism acquires a kind of coherence, a set of experiences, and a presence of ruler and ruled alike within the culture” (Said 11). That is why it shows how Joshua is being able to become a slave in his own land. His statement formulates the hierarchical or binary paradigmatic relationship between master and slave, white and black, the colonizer and the colonized. There is a power relation behind any politicized and institutionalized relations. While defining the function of power, Michel Foucault in his book *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Vol. 1* states that “...it operates according to the simple and endlessly reproduced mechanisms of law, taboo, and censorship: from state to

family, from prince to father, from the tribunal to the small change of everyday punishment, from the agencies of social domination to the structures that constitute the subject himself, one finds a general form of power, varying in scale alone...power represses sex and idea that the law constitutes desire, one encounters the same putative mechanics of power. It is defined in strangely restrictive way...centered on nothing more than the statement of the law and the operation of taboos. All the modes of domination, submission, and subjugation are ultimately reduced to an effect of obedience" (Foucault 84-85). A contrapuntal reading of the play helps to understand the process of colonialism from the native perspectives and the unjust, unequal and uneven status or position of the natives. The paper shows the process of identity formation of the British who becomes the master in other land and the natives who become the slaves in their own land.

### Politics and Perspectives of the Colonizers

The theoretical interpretation of the play constitutes the experience, aims, and responsibility of the white man from their point of view. Clive being the agent of Queen controls his family as well as the natives. He is the representative of the Victorian society as well as the hetero-patriarchal society. The Victorian code of conduct, manners, ruling attitude, ambitious nature of the people and the societal norm are disclosed through the speech of the characters. Clive glorifies his empire where the sun is always rising

"Clive: All rise please. To Her Majesty Queen Victoria, God  
God bless her, and her husband and all her dear children" (Churchill 18)

The contradictory nature of Clive reveals the mechanism of colonialism. Clive's speech exposes the politics behind the white man's burden and the colonizer's indifferent attitude towards the natives

"Clive: ...I know I have a responsibility towards them, to care for them and bring them all to be like Joshua. But there is something dangerous. Implacable. This whole continent is my enemy. I am pitching my whole mind and will and reason and spirit against it to tame it, and I sometimes feel it will break over me and swallow me up" (Churchill 33).

A contrapuntal reading of the play helps us to know the aims of the colonizer and the process of colonization

"Clive: ...When I heard about our fine fellows last night fighting those savages to protect us I thought yes, that is what I aspire to" (Churchill 39).

Apart from Clive, there are multiple different experiences and perspectives regarding their relation to the natives from the other white men who live in colonial Africa. Harry Bagley is also a representative of the courage and discovery of the British Empire who harbors a sense of duty to the Queen- "Harry: I have my duty to the Empire" (Churchill 38). But still, he demonstrates sympathy for the natives. Harry prefers family than the empire and his speech exposes the hypocrisy of the colonizers who aim to seek territorial acquisition

"Harry: ...A chap can only go on so long lone. I can climb mountains and go down rivers, but what's it for? For Christmas and England and games and women singing. This is the empire, Clive. It's not me putting a flag in new lands. It's you. The empire is one big family. I'm one of its black sheep, Clive. And I know you think my life is rather dashing. But I want you to know I admire you. This is the empire, Clive, and I serve it. With all my heart" (Churchill 20).

Though Mrs. Saunders is a British widow, she has a sense of justice that leads her to contend British colonialism. She prefers a world of negotiation, solidarity and interdependency between the genders, nations, and the people. During her conversation with Harry Bagley, she shows her sympathy for the natives

"Mrs Saunders: ...I have something important to tell you. I've just found Joshua putting earth on his head. He tells me his parents were killed last night by the British soldiers. I think you owe him an apology on behalf of the Queen" (Churchill 41).

Churchill presents a parallel between colonial and patriarchal oppression. Maud, a colonial administrator's mother-in-law who lives in colonial Africa with Clive and Betty, but still she knows nothing about the outside affairs related to the natives that reveal her subordinate position in the family and the society

"Maud: ...The men don't tell us what is going on among the tribes, so how can we possibly make a judgement?" (Churchill 29).

A contrapuntal reading of the play will be helpful to understand the above-quoted speech of Maud to reconsider colonial history, perceptions and different perspectives.

Churchill's use of symbols helps to better understand the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, the mechanism of the white men and the native resistance. Gun represents a system of power and control. It symbolizes the rule of authority of the British Empire. Clive keeps a gun with him to kill the natives and to protect the British. That indicates the colonial domination and violence over the natives as well as the hetero-patriarchal domination and exploitation over the women. Gun symbolizes safety for the British on the one hand and on the other violence for the natives. Churchill ironically subverts the system of control and power when Clive's gun brings about his own demise by the hands of Joshua. That is to say gun not only wields power but also stimulates opposition and resistance. The song is another symbol used in the play to heighten the colonizer's blind loyalty to the Queen of England. It also shows how the white men strategically impose religious imperialism, Christian ideals and ideologies on the natives. Joshua sings Christmas carols that unmask the masked politics of the colonizers who intend to dismantle native culture, religion, identity and ethnic heritage. This contrapuntal reading brings an awareness of power relations between Western culture and native culture.

### Native Perspective and Resistance

Churchill intends to focus on the injustice of the natives. She satirizes the Victorian colonialism. This reading proposes the experiences, perspectives and double consciousness of the natives from their point of view. Joshua represents the colonized Africa. The play explores the problems and politics related to the colonial domination, oppression, legacy of the emperor and the tyrannical nature of the colonizers towards the colonized. It represents the pathetic condition of the natives who have lost their land, identity, culture and relatives. Homi K. Bhabha in his *The Location of Culture* articulates the colonial problems "My purpose here is to define the space of the inscription or writing of identity... The experience of the disseminating self-image goes beyond representation as the analogical consciousness of resemblance. This is not a form of dialectical contradiction, the antagonistic consciousness of master and slave, that can be sublated and transcended... Each time the encounter with identity occurs at the point at which something exceeds the frame of the image, it eludes the eye, evacuates the self as site of identity and autonomy and most important- leaves a resistant trace, a stain of the subject, a sign of resistance" (Bhabha 49).

A contrapuntal reading reveals how the colonizers kill the natives to conquer their land and how the white men impose Western ideology and culture on the natives in order to perpetuate the power relations as well as the colonization. That is why it gives birth to the concepts of resistance, reclamation of own culture and identity, recovery of geographical territory. Though Joshua is forced to adapt British culture and configurations of identity, but still at the end of the act he resists to the West and tries to shoot Clive when his parent's death news by the hands of British soldiers approached to him. Ultimately it produces a culture of opposition and resistance. In an article *Postcolonialism*, Elleke Boehmer writes that "The forces of resistance interpenetrate the imperial regime, they also

work tirelessly at undermining and then reconstructing the structures of knowledge...the colonial encounter often fundamentally changed both the material world and native consciousness. As a result pre-colonial or indigenous cultural resources that might otherwise have provided the means and the material of cultural resistance... This means that resistance may in many situations be confined to the reworking of existing authoritative meanings and structures” (Boehmer 352).

### Transformations and Alternatives

In the second act of the play, Churchill presents a different world full of freedom and less authoritarian society and traces a connection between dominant colonial nation England and colonies of Africa. She subverts the colonial world of suppression, repression, domination and exploitation in order to present a multicultural world that produces cultures of opposition and resistance. There is neither colonial oppression nor patriarchal domination. She dreams of a world of equality, equity among the genders, race, and ethnic groups. Churchill through the two acts of the play shows the journey of the characters from the colonial world to the postcolonial and postmodern world, from margin to the center and from victimized society to the empowered flexible multicultural world.

### Conclusion

A contrapuntal reading of the play leads the readers into the threshold of the context and historical setting of the plot. The paper helps to understand the misrepresented and unrepresented relationship between the British and the non-British. Churchill historicizes the colonial experience in order to explore the unexplored and excluded voices and experiences of the natives. She gives voice to the natives to expose the politics behind the process of imperialism, homogenization and misrepresentation of the non-white people. She satirizes colonization and deconstructs the Victorian values of civilization. The paper shows how the discourse of history is dominated. With historicization or the use of the historical effect, the play is designed to provoke an inquiring attitude towards the present through the past and change the dominant versions of history. Churchill demonstrates the relationships of interdependency, negotiations and solidarity among the colonizers and the colonized. The paper aims to widen knowledge regarding the formulation of discourses, and paves the path for counter-discourse from both the perspectives of the white men and the non-white men.

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