

Feminist Aesthetics: Cross-Gender Technique
**Feminist Aesthetics: Cross-Gender Technique in Feminist
Theatres**

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Abstract

It is known that theatrical techniques are used in theatres to produce specific effects. As a result, some feminist theatres have used cross-gender technique in performing their plays to express their feminist culture and perspective, in other words, the aesthetic of feminist culture. This research will expose the cross-gender technique in feminist theatres as a form of feminist aesthetics and a form of aesthetic of dissent, which has challenged the traditional dramatic structure of play to undermine patriarchal ideology operating in theatres as well as in the whole world in searching for feminist subjectivity. In fact, it is considered as one of feminist aesthetic approaches in feminist theatres. The research tries to shed light on cross-gender technique in feminist theatre as a form of feminist aesthetics from different feminist perspectives: radical and social feminism. It tries to find out how this theatrical technique helps the radical and social feminists to achieve their goals.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Cross-Gender, Feminist, Theatre.

In contemporary feminist theatres, cross-gender technique is considered as a form of feminist aesthetics that is used to undermine the traditional theatrical performances which are mediums for patriarchal ideology that has marginalized women in theatres as well as in all fields of life. It is a feminist intervention which aims to subvert the patriarchal hegemony in theatrical performances to assert feminist position in theatrical field and consequently in society. In fact, feminist aesthetics is considered a form of aesthetics of dissent because aesthetics of dissent is a sort of protest that may make new modes and practices of change by bringing attention to these modes and practices, and that what feminist aesthetics wants to achieve.

Feminist aesthetics is a group of perspectives that pursue certain questions about philosophical theories and assumptions in art and aesthetic categories concerning gender (Korsmeyer). It is a device that is used to analyze how aesthetic categories and art is understood using gendered issues (Fedorvina 22). Feminist aesthetics is a new feminist philosophical perspective in the late of 1990s. But its beginning was in 1970s, the time which witnessed the rise of feminist movements. During that time, Linda Nochlin's essay, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?", prompted a new inquiry which became the base of the foundation of feminist aesthetics. Linda Nochlin tried to draw attention to the idea that women are not equally valued in the art world. In her essay, Linda Nochlin explored women's obstacles, in the west, that prevented them from ascending to valuable position in the art world; she investigated the inequality in the art world and inquired the influence of gender in aesthetic value which is considered the core of feminist aesthetics as well as feminist theory. In fact, her feminist perspective is a considerable contribution in feminist philosophy which paves the way to the emergence of feminist aesthetics.

Another feminist perspective that shared in forming feminist aesthetics is Hild Hein's feminist perspective. In her essay "The Role of Feminist Aesthetics in Feminist Theory", Hild Hein tries to demonstrate the relation between aesthetics and feminism. Hild Hein believes that aesthetics and feminist theory have a shared factor which shaped both of them, and which is experience. It is known that aesthetics descended from the concept of experience and "feminist theory derives its vitality

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from feminist practice and its credibility is tested in women's experience" (282). So, feminism based on the aesthetic of experience because "feminist theory must revert to experience for its formulation" (284). Thus, Hild Hein suggests that feminism is related to aesthetics "because of its inherent pluralism and inseparability from experience" (283). Many feminist researchers, like Hild Hein, try to find the connections between feminism and aesthetics. They try to find out how feminist theory and aesthetics are related, and this area of research is known as "feminist aesthetics" (Brand 254).

The most important feminist perspective in aesthetics inquires the influences of gender in forming aesthetic value and, in general, its impact on women's identity. In feminist aesthetics, as well as in feminism, gender inequality is considered the main inquiry that promotes the emergence of feminist aesthetics. So, in her essay "Feminist Aesthetics", Carolyn Korsmeyer tries to shed light on the cultural influence that has led to women's lack of presentation in aesthetic canon and in other canons. Thus, feminist aesthetics tries to subvert gender inequality in art and aesthetic categories. Carolyn Korsmeyer demonstrates that feminist perspectives in aesthetics are "attuned to the cultural influences that exert power over subjectivity". Korsmeyer, also, asserts that "feminist aesthetics pursues inquiries and critiques that reach into the values at the very foundations of philosophy, examining concepts that often do not directly refer to men and women at all, yet whose hierarchies are imbed with gendered significance".

Indeed, feminist perspective has changed the face of theatre, in other words, the traditional form of theatre. Feminist theatres are considered as "a forum for feminist redefinitions of the aesthetic"(Laughlin 17). One of the feminist approaches in feminist theatre is cross-gender technique. The cross-gender technique is simply defined that the role of a woman is played by a man or the role of a man is played by a woman. In fact, the cross-gender technique is not considered a new theatrical technique. Actually, it was used in ancient Greek plays and then in the Renaissance period, frequently, in Shakespeare's plays, when men portrayed female roles according to the custom and tradition of that

time. Thus, women were forbidden to stage performances or to take part in many fields of life.

After the Restoration, (when Charles II came to the throne and theatres were opened again) women, for the first time, began to stage roles -simple roles for young boys- in English theatres. And in the 18th century, women began to take profitable roles in English theatres. At the beginning of the 19th century, which was marked by important changes in all fields of life because of Darwin's theory of evolution and natural selection and industrial revolution, women's performance on English theatres was common. But, in the late 19th century and early 20th century, theatres witnessed many changes in their theatrical performances, according to the great changes in all fields of life at that time. Thereby theatrical techniques were attended many changes. For example, cross-gender technique was used in Brecht's plays as a tool that "highlighting gender as a social construction"(Mumford 246). Cross-gender was one of Brecht's alienation devices which he used in his plays as an alienation effect. Brecht believed that the effect of alienation "consists of turning an object from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected "(Brecht 143). And he asserted that "a presentation that alienated is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the sometime makes it seems unfamiliar"(Brecht 192), in order to prompt social and political response of the audience, as he believed that theatre has to make social and political change.

Indeed, the rise of feminist movements has made many changes in the whole world as well as theater. Since that time cross-gender technique has been used in different way. While cross-gender technique was considered as a common technique that was used to give a sense of humor or to approve the tradition and custom, since the time of feminist movements, cross-gender technique has been used by feminist theatres to serve their feminist concepts and it is considered as a form of feminist aesthetics.

Cross-Gender Technique in Socialist Feminist Theatre

In contemporary theatre, when cross-gender technique is mentioned, immediately, the name of Caryl Churchill is invoked. Caryl Churchill is considered as one of the most famous socialist feminist playwrights in contemporary drama who uses frequently cross-gender technique in

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performing her plays. Unlike radical feminist, Churchill, a socialist feminist, believes that the patriarchal system is not the only source of women's oppression; in other words, gender is not the exclusive source of women's oppression. She asserts that struggles against all oppressive system that based on gender, class, economic, and race help women to get their independence and their rights in all fields.

In her play, *Cloud Nine* (1979, Joint Stock at the Royal Court), Churchill uses cross-gender technique through Betty, the heroine of the play. Betty, in the first act (which takes place in Victorian era), is played by a man. She is shown as a man-made character; she says "I am man's creation as you can see, and what men want is what I want to be" (251). Betty's words show woman's image in patriarchal society. She is portrayed as a weak woman who cannot achieve her identity in a male-dominated society. So, "[g]ender is portrayed as a social construction by replacing the feminine body with large burly man" (Kritzer 41)

Like Brecht, who used cross-gender technique as alienation device, Churchill uses cross-gender technique in her plays to alienate actors from their characters; in other words, to discuss the role of gender by making the audiences think about the concept of gender and its ideology. Caryl Churchill uses the alienation impact with her characters to challenge the traditional way of representation to provoke social change by making the audience realize gender as a means of women's oppression. According to Kritzer, "[t]his cross-casting makes gender visible by separating feminine gender and female body"(113). So, cross-gender technique helps Churchill to demonstrate her feminist perspective. According to Willet " if the part is played by somebody of the opposite sex, the sex of the character will be more clearly brought out; if it is played by comedian whether comically or tragically, it will gain fresh aspect" (197), and that is what Churchill tries to do.

According to Churchill, the use of cross-gender technique in Betty's character is very expressive in showing how Clive (Betty's husband who is the symbol of the patriarchal society) dominates his wife, a woman. Indeed, cross-gender technique demonstrates how a woman's subjectivity and identity is subverted and wrecked completely in male-dominated society. Kathern Martin demonstrates that Churchill's use of

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cross-gender technique prompts the audience to understand the notion of women's subjectivity clearly. She explains:

If in production the role of Betty is performed within the realistic theatrical contract...she will not be read by the audience as an (un)subject. Such a performance will fail to meet the (un)aesthetics' goal of creating an environment of questioning that extends beyond the door of the theatre. The gap between the character's gender and the actor's has to be highlighted in order for a production to effectively break the gendered representation system. (42-43)

So, in *Cloud Nine*, Churchill tries to alienate Betty from her gender which, according to Churchill's perspective, makes her suffering. In fact, Betty as a woman is not existence. Thus, in the second act, which takes place in 1979 (when Betty's patriarchal world ended by Clive's death), Betty is played by a woman, "as she becomes real to herself" (Churchill 246).

In *Vinegar Tom*, Caryl Churchill exposes the marginal status of women in the 17th century, in England, by using cross-gender technique. In Churchill's *Vinegar Tom*, most of the female characters suffer from humiliation, indignity, poverty and patriarchal hegemony. Four female characters, in the play, were hanged because they were accused of witchcraft. Churchill wants "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 how the women accused of witchcraft saw themselves" (Churchill 130). According to Churchill, these women were oppressed because of their patriarchal capitalist society.

In the last scene of *Vinegar Tom*, Kramer and Sprenger, the witch hunters and the professors of Theology, are played by women. They produce a bitter description of women, such as "imperfect animal", "a defect of intelligence", "weak memories", and "liar by nature. Churchill produces them in male-appearance to assert that the patriarchal system is one of the reasons that oppressed women besides economic conditions in the play. The cross-gender technique is used to "shock the audience into an awareness of the underlying misogyny

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that has become so invisible to patriarchally dominated vision in many contemporary cultures" (Morelli 105).

Some critics assert that Churchill uses cross-gender technique, in this play, as an alienation effect that exposes women from their female perspective; it gives "a graphic illustration of women's alienation from their female selves" (Morelli 105). In fact, it reveals another source of women's oppression that is women themselves who inherited the patriarchal system and practiced it up on other women. In other words, Churchill's cross-gender casting demonstrates how an oppressed person turns to an oppressor. Khozaei comments on Churchill's cross-gender casting in *Vinegar Tom*, she says:

[B]y having women to ...play the roles of witch-hunters Churchill successfully highlights that patriarchy and oppression are not solely male domains. In other words, women can also practice patriarchy and oppress other women. Indeed, *Vinegar Tom* demonstrates the marginal and vulnerable position of women as a result of both women and men's roles as patriarchal elements. Basically, Churchill is trying to deconstruct the whole accepted understanding of what it means to be a man. This leads us to the notion of gender construction whereby gender is not a real notion but a socially constructed one. (162)

Thus, Churchill uses cross-gender technique in performing her plays, as alienation device to motivate her audience to think about gender's roles which (from Churchill's socialist feminist perspective) is a socially constructed one that shares in forming women's oppression, so she prompts women to get rid of one of oppressive systems. In other words, Churchill's cross-gender technique is a call for social change which can be considered as the feminist aesthetic's "conceptualization of subjectivity" (Martin 25).

Cross-Gender in Radical Feminist Theatre

Radical feminism is one of the feminist strategies that aim to undermine the patriarchal system because radical feminists believe that male-domination is the main source of women's oppression in society. As a result, they call for radical perspective attempting to destroy the patriarchal hegemony (from their point of view) to help women to get their position and rights in society. Unlike socialist feminists, they consider an individual is more important than a group and stress the superiority of female attributes, and thus female system should be created by female individuals. Radical feminists believe that "the patriarchy has formed a male culture that wherever it has predominated has oppressed women of all socio-economic classes and races"(Case 64), thus they want to challenge and undermine patriarchal hegemony in all fields of life.

In theatre, the radical feminists' perspective makes radical changes to theatrical performances to pervade women's culture, to undermine men's culture, in the world of theatre as well as the whole world. One of their radical perspectives in theatres is their use of cross-gender technique in radical way. Radical feminists believe that patriarchal oppression is considered as gender oppression. So, cross-gender technique is used as a tool that helps the radical feminists to affirm their radical perspective of women's superiority and men's inferiority. They "focus much of their critical and practical work on identifying either male-gender oppression or female-gender strengths (Case 64).

In Donmar theatre, in London, a radical feminist, Phyllida Lloyd used cross-gender technique, in radical way, in producing Shakespeare's plays. Phyllida Lloyd presented all female cross-gender performance of Shakespeare's plays: *Julius Caesar*, in 2012; *Henry IV*, in 2014; and *The Tempest*, in 2016. Unlike socialist feminists who used a selective cross-gender cast, Phyllida Lloyd performed all-female Shakespeare's production to subvert the traditional theatre in radical way. In other words, she encourages women to perform men's roles to assert women's ability to achieve men's position in all fields of life. Phyllida Lloyd believes that cross-gender technique helps women to present their force and their real power. When she is asked that if she is not afraid that people will think that she is doing a feminist-separatist, she says "that is what we are doing"(Higgins 19). Likewise, she chose all-female cast in her

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plays to help women to end female oppression and male domination, as she announced her anger, in her interview with Barbara Bogaev, that English theatres practice male-domination and assert patriarchal hegemony because the number of men who work in the theatre is almost double the number of women.

Some critics describe Phyllida Lloyd's all-female production of Shakespeare's plays as a radical reaction against all-male production of Shakespeare's plays at the Globe such as *Henry V*, 1977; and *Twelfth Night*, 2012. The all-male production of Shakespeare's plays at the Globe tries to justify this production by claiming that they stage the "original practice" of Shakespeare's theatre which is found difficult to be believed. In fact, the all-male production of Shakespeare's plays at the Globe asserts the hegemony of male-domination in theatres which reinforces the ideology of patriarchal domination in theatres.

Gemma Miller asserts that Phyllida Lloyd's cross-gender casting is a kind of feminist activism; it is a radical feminists' "invention in the staging of early modern plays". In fact, Phyllida Lloyd's all-female production of Shakespeare's plays challenges not only the traditional male roles in Shakespeare's time but also the realistic representation in modern time. Phyllida Lloyd believes that women can be better than men; they can be leaders and fighters. Miller explains that Phyllida's productions of "powerful subject roles of Caesar, Brutus, Cassius and Mark Antony... answer back to society's marginalization of the female object. Moreover, relating Roman history through the bodies of female actors amounted to an exorcism of a hegemony that valorize-and through an interventionist Western foreign policy still continues to valorize-the "masculine" values of war and aggression" ("Cross-Gender Casting" 10). Like some critics, Miller commends Phyllida Lloyd's all-female production of Shakespeare's plays; she explains its importance in rising feminist activism. She asserts:

Cross-gender casting within these most masculine of history plays constitutes a bold feminist activism that audiences, academics and critics alike have found difficult to ignore. By refusing to be bound by a cultural

responsibility to reinforce the ideologies of texts born of and endorsing a patriarchal society, this...demonstrates how women have found a way of articulating their own Foucauldian "reverse discourse" from within the power structure itself. (4)

In Phyllida's *Julius Caesar*, women portray male roles in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Phyllida Lloyd gives women the opportunity to perform a powerful dramatization of Shakespeare's most masculine play. According to Phyllida Lloyd, *Julius Caesar* is considered a great opportunity for women to represent the world of power, conspiracy and assassination that was dominated by men. As a radical feminist, she wants to challenge the patriarchal concept of a man and a woman, and she declared, in her interview "Phyllida Lloyd and All Female Shakespeare", that Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* "was a play about how society forces men to avoid being 'womanish' ". So, Phyllida believes that representing womanish characteristics in her performance help the audience to live in reality.

Phyllida Lloyd's production of *Henry IV*, like her *Julius Caesar*, presents women's power. She makes women portray powerful male roles to motivate the audience to "think about and against social conventions of gender" and to subvert patriarchal system (Miller, "Cross-Gender Casting" 15). Phyllida asserts that *Henry IV* helps her to perform all-female cast as it discusses political responsibilities, authority, power and rebellion that can be performed by women (instead of men) and that helps to undermine the role of men in theatre as well as in society. According to Miller, Phyllida's female cast "[was] not impersonating the male characters but rather de-gendering them" ("What" 98). Phyllida explains her use of all-female cast saying "it frees all the actresses from domestic and romantic realm, apart from two of the characters –two of the female characters- and they both give us very good opportunities to exploit what it feels like to be a woman in the world of men" ("I Was Fed Up").

In Phyllida's *The Tempest*, the last play in her all-female cross-gender performances, Phyllida's radical technique, again, gives women an opportunity to demonstrate their attitude when they deal with power and policy. In fact, *The Tempest* shows how power

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(whether political power or scientific power) can change the conditions. By using this radical technique, Phyllida Lloyd wants to assert this perspective by using her all-female cast. In other words, Phyllida Lloyd's radical technique creates a genderless society which is an aim of radical feminist concepts, as they believe that gender identity is the cause of male domination and female oppression.

In fact, in contemporary feminist theatres, cross-gender technique is an impressive theatrical technique that has succeeded in meeting the goal of feminist aesthetics and feminists and attracting audience's attention to women's oppression and suffering, but it cannot help them to solve their problems, on contrary, it increases them indirectly. Although cross-gender casting of women in male roles has witnessed a marked increase, but many critics find it as an insecure business because it "is usually met with far sharper skepticism and critique than the practice of casting men in female roles"(Power 49). One reason for such criticism, according to Power, "comes as a result of an unconscious fear of women holding positions of power or deeply held beliefs that only men can be authoritative figures"(51).

The research finds out that the cross-gender technique is used, in radical feminist theatre, as a kind of queer feminist aesthetics that marginalizes women like the patriarchal system. Although all-female or cross-gender casting of women in male roles attempts to help women to undermine the patriarchal system and affirm women's superiority. It marginalizes women because it constricts them in men's roles which restrict their potential power.

On the other hand, in social feminist theatres, cross-gender technique is used to make the audience perceive the concept of gender as a socially constructed concept by alienating an actor/ actress from his/ her gender. In other words, it is used to prompt the audience to discuss the notion of gender and how it is affected by social condition, and that forms the backbone of the object of feminist aesthetics. However, it alienates women from themselves through their representation of the opposite sex.

Indeed, in contemporary feminist theatres, cross-gender technique, whether in social or radical feminist theatres, alienates a woman from herself to be the other. This "other" is too different, nor a man or a

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As feminists believe that gender is one of the main causes of women's oppression, they seek to distort it to get rid of one of their terrible suffering. But, in fact, feminists ignore that using cross-gender technique as a tool to produce and achieve their perspective does not help them in getting their rights. Unfortunately, feminists failed to perceive the power of female gender, in other words, they failed to get their aims by using a female gender, so they attempt to erase it. Gender inequality occurs as a result of set of social, cultural and political conditions that affect female gender identity negatively and make women's subjection. So, feminists have to realize that they have to resist the negative sides of these conditions to get their identity, not to perform outside their gender, which meets the trend of feminist aesthetics.

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المخلص

الجماليات النسوية: تقنية "التداخل بين الجنسين" في المسارح النسوية من المعروف أن التقنيات المسرحية تُستخدم في المسارح لإحداث تأثيرات معينة. نتيجة لذلك، استخدمت بعض المسارح النسوية تقنية "التداخل بين الجنسين" في أداء مسرحياتها للتعبير عن ثقافتها و منظورها النسوي، او جمالية الثقافة النسوية. و سوف يعرض هذا البحث هذه التقنية في المسارح

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النسوية, كشكل من أشكال الجماليات النسوية, و شكل من أشكال جمالية المعارضة, و التي تحدد البنية الدرامية التقليدية للمسرحية لتقويض الأيدلوجية الأبوية المتواجدة في المسارح و العالم بأسره, للبحث عن الذاتية النسوية. في الحقيقة, تُعد هذه التقنية واحدة من طرق الجمالية النسوية في المسارح النسوية. و يحاول هذا البحث تسليط الضوء على تقنية "التداخل بين الجنسين" في المسرح النسوي, كشكل من أشكال الجماليات النسوية من وجهات نظر نسوية مختلفة: كالنسوية الراديكالية و الإجتماعية. كما يحاول البحث في كشف دور هذه التقنية المسرحية في مساعدة النسوية الراديكالية و الإجتماعية على تحقيق أهدافهن. الكلمات المفتاحية: الجماليات, التداخل بين الجنسين, النسوية, المسرح.