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## CROSS-DRESSING IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH FEMINIST THEATRE

Çağdaş Britanya Tiyatrosunda Karşı Cinsin Kıyafetlerini Giyinme

**Gamze ŞENTÜRK TATAR**

Assist. Prof. Dr; Munzur University,  
Department of English Language and Literature,  
gamzesenturktatar@hotmail.com

**ORCID ID: 0000-0002-5097-7739**

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### **Abstract**

*Sex and gender are two concepts that are often unconsciously used interchangeably, but they have distinct meanings. They are crucial in understanding the gender hierarchy or the distinction between man and woman created by the patriarchal order. While sex refers to a biological difference or an innate existence based on signs such as chromosomes and genitals, gender is a socio-cultural identity subsequently acquired through social interaction. While the biology-oriented approach reduces femininity and masculinity to the body based on an essentialist approach, the socio-culturally oriented approach underlines that femininity and masculinity are culturally constructed, fluid, and changeable. The gender roles assigned to man and woman in patriarchal society bring along certain expectations based on their sexes and their society's values and beliefs about gender. The fact that both woman and man are expected to wear appropriate dress for their gender roles is the reflection of this expectation. When a man wears clothing traditionally associated with women or when a woman wears clothing traditionally associated with men, they might face ridicule or criticism because these clothing choices challenge established gender norms, and because the clothes are reminders of roles or symbols that favour social roles. Contrary to this, cross-dressing is described as an act of wearing clothes and accessories that belong to the opposite sex, and it is possible to see its examples as a deconstructive strategy in contemporary British feminist theatre. This article aims at discussing the functions of cross-dressing as a body memory in contemporary British feminist theatre over selected plays such as Caryl Churchill's plays *Cloud Nine* (1979) and *Top Girls* (1982), *Timberlake Wertenbaker's New Anatomies* (1984), and *Moira Buffini's Silence* (1999).*

**Keywords:** *Cross-Dressing, Cloud Nine, Top Girls, New Anatomies, Silence.*

### **Öz**

*Cinsiyet ve toplumsal cinsiyet, genellikle bilinçsizce birbirinin yerine kullanılan ancak farklı anlamlara sahip iki kavramdır. Bunlar, cinsiyet hiyerarşisini veya patriarkal düzen tarafından oluşturulan erkek ve kadın arasındaki ayrımı anlamak açısından son derece önemlidir. Cinsiyet kromozomlar ve üreme organları gibi işaretlere dayanan biyolojik bir farklılığa veya içsel bir varoluşa işaret ederken, toplumsal cinsiyet ise sosyal etkileşim yoluyla sonradan edinilen sosyo-kültürel bir kimliktir. Biyoloji odaklı yaklaşım, kadınlığı ve erkekliği özünde bir vücuda indirgeyerek özcü bir yaklaşıma dayanırken, sosyo-kültürel odaklı yaklaşım, kadınlık ve erkekliğin kültürel olarak inşa edildiğini, esnek ve değişken olduğunu vurgular. Patriarkal toplumda erkeğe ve kadına atanan cinsiyet rolleri, cinsiyetlerine ve toplumlarının cinsiyet hakkındaki değer ve inançlarına dayalı birtakım*

*beklentileri beraberinde getirir. Kadın ve erkekte cinsiyet rollerine uygun kıyafet giyinmelerinin umulması, bu beklentinin bir yansımasıdır. Bir erkeğin geleneksel olarak kadınlarla ilişkilendirilen giysiler giymesinden veya bir kadının geleneksel olarak erkeklerle ilişkilendirilen giysiler giymesinden dolayı alay veya eleştiriyi karşılaşması muhtemeldir; çünkü bu giyim tercihleri, yerleşik cinsiyet normlarını sorgular veya giysiler, sosyal rolleri destekleyen sembollerdir. Buna karşın, karşı cinsin kıyafetlerini giyinme, karşı cinsiyete ait giysileri ve aksesuarları giyme eylemi olarak tanımlanır ve örneklerini günümüz Britanya feminist tiyatrosunda yapışökümcü bir strateji olarak görmek mümkündür. Bu makale, Caryl Churchill'in *Cloud Nine* (1979) ve *Top Girls* (1982), Timberlake Wertenbaker'ın *New Anatomies* (1984) ve Moira Buffini'nin *Silence* (1999) oyunları üzerinden günümüz Britanya feminist tiyatrosunda karşı cinsin kıyafetlerini giyinmenin bir beden hafızası/belleği olarak işlevlerini tartışmayı amaçlamaktadır.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Karşı Cinsin Kıyafetlerini Giyinme, *Cloud Nine*, *Top Girls*, *New Anatomies*, *Silence*.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The feminist movement, initiated by women in a patriarchal world to address various inequalities in social, cultural, economic, and political fields, significantly reinforces itself in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Women, claiming equal rights and status with men and endeavoring to make their voices heard to the world, have struggled in both political arenas and cultural spheres. The women's liberation movement, spanning four waves, critiques the notion of biological differences determining social roles. It aims to highlight the unjust treatment of women, asserting that their individualities were disregarded within the patriarchal order. This movement seeks to proclaim to the world that women have been unfairly treated and marginalized throughout history. The struggle against the patriarchal system, which views men as powerful subjects and citizens and women as subordinates, confined to roles such as wives and mothers, became more prominently visible in literature and theatre following the advent of Second Wave Feminism in the 1960s. The late 1980s particularly stand out in this regard due to specific societal shifts and notable cultural movements. According to Elaine Aston, "by the late 1980s there was a body of feminist theatre scholarship devoted to re-visioning theatre history, theory and practice. The dramatic syllabus had begun to change as feminists took issue with those 'canonical' texts, written mostly by men, for their representation of women" (1999: 81). This period marked an important turning point in which feminist scholars actively sought to revise and reshape the dramatic curriculum, aiming to address and correct the misrepresented or limited roles of women in theatre works.

Theatre, as a social and political art form, serves as a platform for the oppressed and exploited to amplify their voices and articulate their issues. It adapts and evolves based on the political dynamics and social

conditions of each era. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, theatre has emerged as a means of addressing the problems faced by women marginalized by the patriarchal order in social, political, economic, and cultural spheres. Oppressed by the patriarchal order, women transformed theatre into a platform where they could openly express themselves, engage in discussions about their individual or collective issues, and endeavor to bring these concerns to the world's attention. They defied the entrenched conventional norms prevalent in cultural, literary, and artistic productions, thereby challenging and subverting the traditional perception of theatre. They utilized the theatre as an alternative platform, providing them with an avenue to question societal constructs and advocate for their rights and perspectives. Through their performances and creative endeavors, women aimed to bring attention to their struggles and offer a voice to their experiences within patriarchal society. The experience of womanhood, which had been narrated from a male perspective, began to be narrated from an innovative, experimental, pluralist, deconstructive, critical, and decentred perspective in accordance with the experience of womanhood, especially since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the problems of the women and their struggles were tried to be announced. Distinguished female playwrights like Caryl Churchill (1938-), Pam Gems (1925-), Sarah Daniels (1957-), Moira Buffini (1965-), and Timberlake Wertenbaker (1951-) initiated a feminist tradition within theatre. They disrupted the male-dominated theatrical landscape and conventional discourse by employing various feminist strategies centered on content, form, and practice in their works (Şentürk, 2020). One of these strategies involves the deconstruction of gender roles, notably through practices like cross-dressing, essentially reversing or challenging traditional gender roles. This technique creates an alienation effect on the audience, prompting them to reconsider and question societal norms related to gender. This study aims at discussing the functions of cross-dressing as a body memory in contemporary British feminist theatre over selected plays such as Caryl Churchill's plays *Cloud Nine* (1979) and *Top Girls* (1982), Timberlake Wertenbaker's *New Anatomies* (1984), and Moira Buffini's *Silence* (1999). This study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the development of British feminist theatre and women's struggle against gender roles, to reveal the close relationship between feminism and theatre, and to reveal how women's experiences can be expressed through theatre.

## 2. CROSS-DRESSING AS A FEMINIST STRATEGY

According to *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries*, cross-dressing is described as "the practice of wearing clothes usually worn by a person of the opposite sex" (OLD, 2023) and the term 'transvestism' is listed as a

synonym for this practice. It is the practice of wearing clothing, accessories, or portraying oneself in a manner traditionally associated with the opposite gender. In order to perceive the real nature of cross-dressing, it is necessary to know the distinction between sex and gender. Sex and gender are two concepts that are often misused interchangeably. These two concepts are very crucial to see the gender hierarchy and the distinction between men and women created by the patriarchal order. Sex pertains to biological characteristics or inherent attributes determined by biological indicators such as chromosomes and genitalia. In Judith Butler's words, "the category of 'sex' is, from the start, formative. (...) 'sex' not only functions as a norm, but is a part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs (...) whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce (...) the bodies it controls" (1993: 1). Sex establishes a categorization of individuals based on their physiological traits. On the other hand, gender is a socio-cultural identity shaped through social interactions and cultural norms. It is a multifaceted construct encompassing roles, behaviours, expectations, and identities perceived as appropriate for men and women within a given society. According to Elin Diamond,

*"Gender critique refers to the words, gestures, appearances, and behaviour that dominant culture understands as indices of feminine or masculine identity. When spectators 'see' gender they are seeing (and reproducing) the cultural signs of gender, and by implication, the gender ideology of culture. Gender in fact provides a perfect illustration of ideology at work, since 'feminine' or 'masculine' behaviour usually appears to be a 'natural'-and thus fixed and unalterable-extension of biological sex" (1988: 84).*

Diamond asserts that they are essentially recognizing and perpetuating the cultural symbols and norms related to gender, thereby reinforcing the prevalent gender ideologies within that culture, when people observe and perceive gender. Gender serves as a prime example of how ideology operates within society. Behaviours categorized as feminine or masculine often seem 'natural' and innate, appearing to be an inherent and unchangeable extension of an individual's biological sex. However, this perception overlooks the fact that these gendered behaviours are heavily influenced by societal norms, expectations, and cultural constructs rather than being solely determined by biology.

The clothes have become a reminder of gender roles. Gregory G. Bolich expresses that "these things [clothes] we put on become a part of us, both representing whom we experience ourselves to be and expressing how we want others to experience us. How we dress matters to us and how others

dress also interests us. If this were not true, cross-dressing would be a completely unremarkable phenomenon” (2006: 17). Clothing often carries significant symbolism and is intertwined with societal expectations regarding gender roles. Throughout history and across various cultures, clothing has been used as a tool to signify and reinforce gender identities and roles. The gendered clothing expectations can be restrictive, as they create boundaries and norms that individuals are expected to adhere to based on their gender identity. Breaking away from these norms, such as through cross-dressing that does not conform to traditional gender expectations, can challenge societal perceptions and spark discussions about the fluidity and diversity of gender expression. Paradoxically, according to Judith Lorber, our clothes usually hide gender while simultaneously making our gender visible (1994: 22). Clothes serve as a means of concealing or masking the physical attributes that might be associated with a particular gender. Clothing can obscure the body, making it challenging to discern someone’s gender based solely on their physical appearance. However, simultaneously, clothing plays a pivotal role in signalling and expressing gender identity. The choices individuals make in their attire often align with societal norms and expectations related to gender.

Cross-dressing has manifested as a phenomenon throughout diverse historical epochs and cultural contexts. Cross-dressing in theatre has been practiced for centuries. It is possible to see its practises even in ancient societies and their cultural products such as dancing and theatre, as well as in mythology, history and art. The history of cross-dressing can be traced back to the theatre of the ancient times. In Ancient theatre, male actors portrayed female roles. Cross-dressing in Ancient Greek comedies and tragedies was an inherent part of the genre’s essential conventions. Given that all actors were male during that time, portraying female roles required them to cross-dress as there were no female actors permitted on stage. According to Abbey Kayleen Elder, “female parts could not be played without some cross-dressing on the parts of the actors in Classical Greece, because all of them were adult males. They all wore masks, denoting which character they were playing at the time, and perhaps showing feminine traits, such as lighter paint, for female characters” (2015: 1). Male actors taking on multiple roles cross-dressed to portray female characters on stage. In Ancient theatre, cross-dressing served as a theatrical device that enabled actors to portray characters of the opposite sex and contributed to the artistic and dramatic aspects of the performances.

Cross-dressing was also common in medieval theatre, especially in

Europe during the Middle Ages. Similar to ancient theatre traditions, medieval performances often featured male actors taking on female roles due to social restrictions and cultural norms that prohibited women from appearing on stage. In religious performances such as mystery plays that aimed to educate the audience about religious stories and moral lessons, male actors performed female roles, such as biblical figures like Mary, mother of Jesus, or female saints. According to Katie Normington,

*“The last way in which women were represented on the medieval stage was through the appearance of female characters. The women characters, though played by cross-dressed men, offered a representation of various images of womanhood. Many of these characters were of biblical origin and were influenced by the prevalent iconography which surrounded such ‘holy women’. It is important to examine the breadth of these representations in order to understand how the enactment of these plays helped to construct an image of gender” (2004: 4).*

It is possible to conclude that this form of representation plays a crucial role in the formation of ideals and perceptions of women in the society. It provides us with important clues about how gender roles and social expectations were reflected at the time.

In the Renaissance period, male actors also cross-dressed to play female characters in various productions. David Cressy states that, “literary Renaissance scholars were fascinated by cross-dressing, by men wearing women’s costumes or women dressed like men” (1996: 439). Cross-dressing was most popularised in Britain during the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. Cross-dressing, which started to come to the fore in the 1570s, reached its peak in 1606-1607 despite all the suppression efforts of King James I. By the 1620s, cross-dressing gained popularity again (Normington, 2004: 55). By performing the social roles and expectations of gender, male actors/boys aged between 12 and 21, performed their roles and all female roles on the stage in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Britain and the audience was accustomed to seeing boys play the parts of women. As Wichelene Wandor also asserts, “male cross-dressing in the Elizabethan era came about as a consequence of the society’s taboos on women in the theatre. Officially, women were not allowed to perform in ‘serious’ drama in England, as a result of the Christian Church’s response to the theatre” (2004: 15). Wandor highlights that the prohibition on women participating in serious drama within the English theatre led to the necessity for men to assume female roles. She stresses that this restriction was influenced by the Christian Church’s stance on theatre and its reluctance to allow women to engage in

certain types of performances.

In her article “Patterns of Crossdressing in Shakespeare’s Comedies”, Lucie Johnová underlines that cross-dressing in the Renaissance era offers important clues in terms of revealing the difference in status. She asserts that,

*“From the social point of view, crossdressing in the Renaissance had an important aspect: as women were considered inferior to men and had fewer rights, crossdressing presented an important change of status. Both male and female crossdressing was a pretence, a potential threat to the order of the society. Yet if a woman pretended to be a man, she was, in fact, assuming more rights than she was entitled to, thus threatening the order more dangerously. Apart from several exceptions in the real life, it was only in fiction and carnivalesque festivities that crossdressing was allowed as a temporal escape from everyday reality” (2013: 66-65).*

As Johnová implies, cross-dressing in the Renaissance era clearly reveals inferiority of women to men, because the woman, who is considered inferior to the man, gains some privileges and status when she is disguised as the opposite sex. In the Renaissance era, the idea of one subordinate to the other was common in the depiction of two genders in cross-dressing. This depiction was integral to the Renaissance perception of a hierarchical social structure and served to reinforce the division of labour based on gender roles (Howard, 1988: 423). It depicts women as second-class citizens, imperfect or incomplete men. Considering that women began to act publicly on British stage in the 1660s, its tragic nature becomes clear.

Cross-dressing appears as a recurrent theme in British playwright William Shakespeare’s theatre. There are many female characters disguised as men in Shakespeare’s plays. Shakespeare’s renowned female characters, including Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* (1598), Julia in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1598), Viola in *Twelfth Night* (1599-1601), and Rosalind in *As You Like It* (1600), engage in cross-dressing within the plays for various reasons. Portia dresses as a lawyer’s apprentice to defend Antonio against Shylock, the Jewish merchant while Julia cross-dresses to act freely in a patriarchal society, and to pursue her lover. Viola cross-dresses to win Duke Orsino’s love while Rosalind cross-dresses to escape from Duke Frederick and to test Orlando’s love. All these women, who use their intelligence and capacity, are still biologically female and physically weak women. Through cross-dressing they can act as freely as men and gain certain freedoms. Shakespeare’s women disguised as men were so famous that many of his contemporaries were inspired by these women. As Peter

Berek stresses, “the heroines cross-dressed in Beaumont and Fletcher’s plays are indeed modeled after Shakespeare’s” (2004: 360). In Shakespeare’s plays, cross-dressing helps the women to bring some freedoms such as travelling, entering the male world by acting as men, controlling the action, and pursuing love. All these things show that they are not inferior to men. They have a voice, and they are active, not passive or submissive. As Juliet Dusinberre claims, for Shakespeare both men and women were equal in the world, and he did not think human nature into the masculine or the feminine. Instead, he refused to separate the world physically and psychologically, and tried to reflect human nature naturally (1996: 308).

Cross-dressing has also taken its place as an important feminist strategy and “the means to subvert gender roles by foregrounding sexual difference” (Shiller, 1999: 15) in contemporary theatre. Cross-dressing in contemporary theatre actively disrupts and challenges established gender roles and expectations, fostering a deeper exploration and representation of diverse gender identities on stage. Feminist playwrights employ cross-dressing as a theatrical strategy to reveal the fact that gender roles are culturally structured or built. As “the most important form of disguise” (Gill, 1998: 98), the aim of theatrical cross-dressing is “usually the goal of realist theater itself – to present the audience with a situation that mirrors real life” (Drouin, 2010: 25). Cross-dressing is used as a means to disrupt conventional perceptions of gender. By having characters adopt clothing and roles traditionally associated with an opposite gender, feminist playwrights aim to confront audiences with a deliberate departure from societal norms and expectations. By integrating cross-dressing into their narratives, feminist playwrights seek to create a theatrical mirror that not only entertained but also encouraged audiences to critically examine and reflect upon the societal constructs and constraints related to gender identity and roles. In doing so, they aim to provoke discussions and raise awareness about the artificiality and cultural construction of gender norms within our everyday lives. They dismantle rigid societal norms, advocating for inclusivity and a broader understanding of gender within performance and storytelling.

According to Elaine Aston, “cross-dressing, cross-gendering techniques represent a theatrically exciting way of demonstrating and de-automatising our perception of ‘naturalised’ gender sign-systems. Crossing the gender divide may expose the way in which gender is organised as an arbitrary, artificial sign-system, which, like all such systems, it is possible to disturb and to deconstruct” (1999: 74). Aston highlights that cross-dressing and cross-gender techniques serve as compelling theatrical tools that



challenge and disrupt our ingrained perception of supposedly natural gender signifiers. By crossing gender boundaries through costumes and behaviour, individuals engage in a theatrically exciting manner that reveals and destabilizes the constructed nature of gender norms. Aston suggests that these actions can uncover the fact that gender itself operates as an arbitrary and artificial system of signs. Similar to other constructed systems, gender can be disrupted and deconstructed, thereby questioning its assumed stability and fixed meanings. Through cross-dressing, individuals not only express themselves but also create a platform to challenge societal norms, encouraging a deeper understanding of the performative nature of gender and its influence on our perceptions.

It is possible to evaluate the concept of cross-dressing from the perspective of otherness. According to patriarchal system, “woman constitutes the position of object, a position of other in relation to a socially-dominant male subject; it is that ‘otherness’ which makes representation possible (the personification of male desire)” (Forte, 2002: 237). In the face of a patriarchal system that perceives women as a danger and oppresses them as an ‘other’, cross-dressing serves to tell society about the true nature of women’s otherness and to reflect on it. In this way, the woman disguised as a man can have the opportunity to look at this experience of her otherness from the outside. Likewise, a man disguised as a woman can gain a perspective on this situation by experiencing otherness. At this point, crossdressing also blurs the boundaries between male-female opposites and makes it possible to approach the opposite sex with empathy. It serves as a catalyst for characters to explore and assert their own sense of identity, despite societal expectations or constraints.

Throughout history, the female body has been determined by the male perspective, and even fashion has been shaped according to the viewpoint of the male-dominated system. In today’s world, where fashion programs are proliferating and there’s a prevailing obsession with women’s make-up and clothing, body sociology emerged in the 1980s as the body became a subject of research. There exists an ideological structuring for both women and men. However, there is a higher level of intervention in the female body, delineating a body policy that aligns dressing with cultural, political, and economic practices. Through clothing, the female body is subjected to control and surveillance. Presently, the female body is predominantly perceived as a sexual object, where gender roles are shaped by the attire imposed on individuals’ bodies. Today, there is a societal expectation where a man often assumes ownership or control over a

woman's body while also being expected to provide care for her. According to feminist theory, the body is seen as "a cultural construct which does not precede or exist naturally and unproblematically outside this construct" (Schulze, 1990: 72). Feminists challenge the notion that the body exists in a natural and fixed state independent of cultural influences. They emphasize that societal norms, beliefs, and power structures shape our understanding and perception of the body. In her book *Second Sex*, the feminist activist and existentialist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir also claims "the body is not a thing, it is a situation: it is our grasp on the world and our sketch of our project" (1949). Beauvoir emphasises that our bodies, intertwined with our materiality and selfhood, phenomenologically reveal how we interact with and experience the world. According to her, the negative relationship that women have with their bodies makes women dependent on men, and it is significant for women to make themselves a subject, because women's subjectivity is the only means that can bring about social change and eliminate the subordination to which they are subjected.

Judith Butler, gender theorist known for her significant contributions to feminist and queer theory, delves into the performative nature of gender, proposing that gender identity is constructed through repetitive acts and behaviours rather than being an inherent or stable characteristic (1993). She discusses how societal norms and expectations shape our understanding and performance of gender. Butler does not make a sharp distinction between cross-dressing and drag, and uses cross-dressing and drag synonymously by finding the support from Esther Newton asserting "appearance is an illusion" (qtd in Louise, 2016: 61). In her examination of gender as a performative act, Butler discusses various forms of gender expression, including drag performance and cross-dressing, under the broader umbrella of challenging and destabilizing conventional gender norms. She emphasizes how both drag and cross-dressing can disrupt and challenge traditional notions of gender by highlighting its constructed nature.

According to Butler, "the notion of an original or primary gender identity is often parodied within the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities" (2002: 174). In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler talks about the presence of a three-layered framework for gender identity within the context of cross-dressing in theatrical performance. This framework encompasses the anatomical sex of the performer, the gender they portray during the performance, and their inherent gender identity (2002: 175). According to her,

*"part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the [drag] performance is in the*

*recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender. (...) In the place of the law of heterosexual coherence, we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity" (2002: 175).*

Butler emphasizes that cross-dressing performances challenge and deconstruct the perceived naturalness of the relationship between sex and gender. These performances act as a platform that not only acknowledges but also dramatizes the cultural construct that unifies these concepts, showcasing how societal norms and expectations shape our understanding of gender and its connection to biological sex.

In her book *Carry on Understudies: Theatre and Sexual Politics*, Michelene Wandor outlines key functions associated with cross-dressing. These functions range from its potential to evoke erotic responses in both genders to serving as a functional and creative outlet for performers. Additionally, cross-dressing is seen as a symptom of suppressed creative responses and, paradoxically, as a means to contain rebellion indirectly. Wandor places emphasis on the most significant role of cross-dressing in feminist theatre. Cross-dressing in the feminist theatre is "an expression of rebellion; a form of witty subversion in which one sex impersonates the other, and by so doing shows up some of the ridiculous constraints which define femininity and masculinity" (2004: 17). Within feminist theatre, cross-dressing becomes a powerful tool employed by playwrights to challenge and critique the established sex/gender system. By having one sex impersonate the other, playwrights highlight and ridicule the societal constraints and absurdities linked to femininity and masculinity. This subversive use of cross-dressing functions as a means of questioning and undermining societal norms regarding gender, illustrating its transformative potential within feminist theatrical narratives.

Susan Guber defines cross-dressing in her article "Blessing in Disguise: Cross-Dressing as Re-dressing for Female Modernists", as "a way of ad-dressing and re-dressing the inequalities of culturally-defined categories of masculinity and femininity" (1981: 479). Cross-dressing can be seen as a way to explore the relationship between the female subject and various ideologies. The female subject is shaped not only by sex but also by a complex interplay of cultural practices and discourses involving class, religion, race, and ethnicity. The cross-dressing serves as a tool to highlight how these diverse factors intersect and influence the construction of femininity. Cross-dressing strategy helps the spectator to see their specific

and changeable conditions by informing them women's material conditions in history. It is used to break stereotyped performance acting on the stage, to raise awareness in spectator's mind, and to erase the sharp definition of distinction between men and women. It gives them a chance to display 'theatrical revolt against pre-established images that society had about women and other sexual minor groups' (Dahmani, 2019: 19).

Alisa Solomon highlights a noteworthy contrast between male-to-female cross-dressing and female-to-male cross-dressing. She proposes that "men dressed as women often engage in gender parody, while women dressed as men tend to embody and perform gender" (1993: 145). This distinction sheds light on the complexity of gender expression and societal perceptions. It suggests varying approaches to expressing gender identity, with male-to-female cross-dressing often associated with humour or parody, while female-to-male cross-dressing leans toward a more serious enactment of masculinity. According to Jean E. Howard, "in certain circumstances, cross-dressing intensifies, rather than blurs, sexual difference, sometimes by calling to attention the woman's failure to play the masculine role signified by her dress" (1998: 36). Howard sheds light on how cross-dressing, rather than challenging gender norms, sometimes amplifies them by bringing attention to the discrepancies between expected gender performances and the actual behaviour exhibited. She emphasizes the ways in which societal expectations and gender roles remain rigid and can be reinforced through non-conformity to traditional attire.

Marjorie B. Garber claims that transvestite theatre is "the symbolic on the stage". She also adds "the phenomenon of cross-dressing within theatrical representation (...) may be seen as a return to the problem of representation that underlies theater itself. Transvestite theater recognizes that all the figures on stage are impersonators. The notion that there has to be a naturalness to the sign is exactly what great theater puts in question" (1992: 39). Theatrical representations, including cross-dressing, disrupt the notion of naturalness in signs or symbols. It questions the conventional expectation that symbols or representations must align with a predetermined sense of what is 'natural' or 'normal'. Garber implies that theatre challenges and undermines the idea of fixed and inherent meanings behind appearances or signs. She suggests that great theatre does not adhere to the expectation of representing things in a natural or predetermined manner; instead, it raises questions about the authenticity and constructed nature of representations, including the performances of gender and identity. Consequently, cross-dressing in feminist theatre shows the spectator "arbitrary construction of

gender, suggesting a new vision through the political structure of gender play” (Dolan, 1992: 7).

### **3. UNVEILING GENDER CONSTRUCTS IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH FEMINIST THEATRE:**

Feminist theatre offers its audience a bold stage for questioning gender roles and subverting traditional norms. In particular, the works of masters such as Caryl Churchill, Timberlake Wertenbaker and Moira Buffini embrace a striking and thought-provoking sub-genre in this field, cross-dressing strategies, offering an in-depth exploration of gender identity and social norms on stage. By analysing cross-dressing tactics in contemporary feminist theatre, this study aims to examine how these tactics are used and how they reveal gender constructions in the works of Churchill, Wertenbaker and Buffini. Cross-dressing within their plays serves as a multifaceted tool, allowing these playwrights to challenge, critique, and reshape conventional notions of gender. By deconstructing and reconstructing characters’ gender identities through cross-dressing, these playwrights provide a platform to confront societal expectations and limitations imposed on individuals based on their gender.

#### **3.1. Caryl Churchill’s *Cloud Nine* and *Top Girls***

Carly Churchill, one of the leading figures of feminist theatre in Britain, tries to make the voices of women who are forced to submit to the pressure of the patriarchal system heard and reveals the artificiality of gender roles in her works. Telling the stories of male oppression against women, Churchill wants to show that women’s place has not changed much during history. She reverses gender roles in order to break stereotyped performance acting on the stage, to erase and subvert the sharp definition of distinction between men and women. In *Cloud Nine* (1979), Churchill uses cross-dressing as “a motif to display of cross-dressed characters was implicitly a denouncement of Britain’s colonial policy and the racist mentality that characterized it” (Dahmani, 2019: 4). The playwright, who raises the problems of women in a patriarchal society with her innovative and experimental practices, uses cross-dressing in her play *Cloud Nine*. In her two-act play, Churchill explores power dynamics, colonial and sexual oppression. It displays how sexual and racial identities in Britain were oppressed by patriarchy. Churchill selects her characters such as men and women, homosexuals and heterosexuals, adolescents and adults from different backgrounds in analysing the power and sexual politics.

Churchill’s main character Clive, the colonial administrator

showcases all types of oppression: patriarchal, sexual and racial in the play. He heads himself as the father of family: “I am a father to the natives here,/ And father to my family so dear.” (Churchill, 1984: 3). Clive appears as a “symbolic father” (Silverstein, 1994: 11). In the First Act of the play, set in Africa, a British colony, during the Victorian period, Clive is introduced as status quo, patriarch, a white colonizer, and oppressor. He feels proud of himself as “[the] father to the natives here,/ And father to [his] family [...]” (Churchill, 1984: 3). He desires his wife to be a perfect housewife and an angel of the house. He desires loyalty from his wife, Betty, and expects her to adhere to traditional gender roles as a woman and fulfill the responsibilities of a mother. Betty also accepts this role by saying, “I live for Clive/The whole aim of my life/Is to be what he looks for in a wife./I am a man’s creation as you see,/And what men want is what I want to be” (Churchill, 1984: 3). Betty, as a man-made woman, does not have her own individuality. Because of his oppression, his devoted wife meets Clive’s needs and she shapes herself in terms of Clive’s desire. He desires his homosexual son Edward, playing with his sister’s doll to be like his father. Their daughter Victoria, is a mere doll. Clive, the colonial administrator, also oppresses his devoted black servant Joshua. He obeys all the rules of his oppressive master. Joshua, whom Clive desires to tame, depends on the master’s language and culture.

In Act One, the characters, under the pressure of patriarchy or imperialism, are cross-cast, because they are the products of masculine or imperialist imagination. Betty is played by male performer, Edward by female performer, and Joshua, the black slave of Clive, by white male performer in order to acquire the culture of his white master. Victoria is also performed by a dummy. Churchill’s play “takes the body as a critical si[gh]t of gender representation” (Aston, 2001: 31). She disrupts conventional gender and racial constructs, using the visibility of non-normative bodies to challenge and redefine norms within sexual and racial spheres. She “underscores the artificiality and conventionality of the characters’ sex roles” (Fitzsimmons, 1989: 41). She draws parallels between sexual repression and economic/racial oppression, as well as between male dominance and political imperialism. The cross-dressing or cross-casting highlights the tension between an expressive, experimental identity and the constraints imposed by social roles and dominant ideologies (Reinelt, 1996: 89). In the Second Act which takes place some one hundred years after the events of the First Act, each character is performed by an actor or actress of the corresponding gender, because these characters begin to rediscover their true selves. They begin to live their lives freely. For example, homosexual

Edward begins to live with Gerry. Betty leaves her husband Clive, gains her money and discovers her sexuality. As a result, each character is played by their own gender. Cathy, Lin's mischievous five-year-old daughter, is portrayed by an adult man. Despite being a girl, Cathy disrupts traditional codes of femininity, although subtle traces of gender roles can still be observed within her character. Cathy, encouraged to play with toy guns by her mother Lin, represents "the rebellion of gender images and roles that the British society used to adhere to" (Dahmani, 2019: 44).

In *Cloud Nine*, Churchill questions the dominance, control of male protagonist, Clive over his family, homosexuals and blacks. She alienates the spectator through abnormal casting in order to destroy Clive's idea. She has an emphasis that gender is historically, culturally determined by the dominant discourse by destroying linearity, traditional role casting. She disrupts and challenges established gender roles, aiming to deconstruct and subvert societal notions of gender. She disrupts the notions of gender and "invites men to play the role of women and women to play the role of the opposite sex in order to dismantle the notions of gender" (Ravari & Naidu, 2011: 159). She employs cross-dressing as "a 'gestic' reference to the illogic state of social divisions between men and women" (Badreddine, 2016). In accord with Butler's notion of drag performance, Churchill "exchanges sexual fluidity and gender dissonance, and challenges the sharp demarcations of gender and sexual categories" (Albayrak, 2009: 172). As these lines stress, Churchill encourages her spectator to reconsider traditional perceptions of gender and sexuality, advocating for a more fluid and inclusive understanding of identity expression.

In *Top Girls* (1989), Churchill also provides a platform for her female characters from different backgrounds to articulate their opinions and tell their own stories of surviving in the dominant patriarchal system. By blending characters from different time periods, she creates a platform to explore the challenges faced by women across history and in contemporary society. This technique allows Churchill to address present-day feminist concerns through the lens of historical contexts, drawing parallels and contrasts between the experiences, struggles, and achievements of women from various eras. She gives five female characters from diverse historical periods the right to have their say. Five women including Patient Griselda, Lady Nijo, Dull Gret, Isabella Bird and Pope Joan come together in a restaurant to celebrate the success of the modern-day heroine Marlene. Churchill brings these characters together in a surrealist dinner party scene in the First Act. In this act, they share their experiences, challenges, and

perspectives on womanhood, power, and societal expectations. Patient Griselda who is a fictional character from Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Clerk's Tale*, was forced to obey her husband without question. Her two children were taken away from her by his husband to test her love and loyalty for him. Lady Nijo is a thirteenth-century female character who worked as a prostitute for the Japanese Emperor and later became a Buddhist monk. Dulle Gret is the subject of Brueghel's painting, entitled "Dulle Griet". This woman, pictured wearing an apron and armour, leads a group of women to hell to fight demons. Isabella Bird, who lived between the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, was a Scottish woman, travelling extensively in the later years of her life.

The cross-dressing strategy is revealed through the character Pope Joan. Churchill encourages Pope Joan to tell her narrative of dressing as a man to ascend to the papacy. Pope Joan talks about how she was able to become pope. Pope Joan was a ninth-century woman who is believed to have served as pope from 854 to 856. At the age of twelve, Joan began dressing as a man to gain access to the Athens library for her studies. Pope Joan was a woman who has had male lovers and has lived the rest of her life as a man. Joan was later elected to the papacy. She became pregnant by her chamberlain lover and gave birth to a baby during a papal ceremony, she was stoned to death. In one sense, Pope Joan uses cross-dressing as "one way to avoid your gender-bent destiny" (Whittemore, 1999). According to Safa Badreddine, in *Top Girls*, "the act of cross-dressing is put into relief through the character of Joan who lives a 'manly' life" (2016: 7), because this woman rises to the top of religious hierarchy and to have an honorary position in man's world when she is completely alienated from her female body. In other words, she sacrifices living a woman's life. *Top Girls*, reflecting ideological viewpoint toward women, leaves the spectator with a cultural diversity, because they are different from each other in terms of their ways of speaking, wearing and we can see them as embodiment of culture, history, ideology of the period when they lived. Churchill tries to show patriarchal practices that dominant ideology codes culturally, ideologically and to make the audience direct to evaluate the women's conditions during history objectively. This presentation indicates that everything is open to change, if women see ideologically structured gender roles in the society, they can change it as they have their own powers.

### 3.2. Timberlake Wertenbaker's *New Anatomies*

American born British playwright Timberlake Wertenbaker has also been known for her exploration of feminist themes in her plays. She focusses



on the issues of power dynamics, gender roles, language, and identity. She puts women characters who are oppressed by patriarchal system and opposes patriarchal rules at the centre of her plays. Her play *New Anatomies*, written for the Women's Theatre Group in 1981, is based on the life of the European traveller and writer Isabelle Eberhardt who dresses as a boy, and thus feels "the mental liberation in the simple physical act of cross-dressing" (Wertenbaker, 1996: vii). As "a woman in love with adventure, on a quest" (Wertenbaker, 1996: vii), Isabella cross-dresses as an Arab man. She is "dressed in a tattered Arab cloak, has no teeth and almost no hair" (Wertenbaker, 1996: 5). She is in search of a better self and freedom. She is against the oppression by acting as a man in a male costume. Thus, she breaks the distinction of sex and gender and reverses the stereotypical image of a woman by cross-dressing. She does not want to wear skirts, stay at home and do housework, behave like a woman and have children and raise them as a mother, shortly does not want to take sexual role of a woman. She dreams about traveling in the desert in Africa, joining the army and taking on adventures, going out at night alone, because she has a "non-gendered childhood utopia" (Carlson, 1989: 170), and she dreams a "genderless existence" (Carlson, 1989: 169). She also wants to take part in the Sufi sect, to become a Qadria. Through her unusual and unconventional life style, she is not a lady, instead she is a masculinized woman (McMillan, 1999: 141).

In recounting her upbringing, Isabelle expresses that she was "the sole embodiment of boyhood in the family" (Wertenbaker, 1996: 7) and portrays her brother Antoine as a person of "delicate and possessing feminine qualities" (Wertenbaker, 1996: 8). Antoine also describes her as non-gendered by stating, "Isabelle looks like all our recruits. No one would know you were a girl. Is this male or female?" (1996: 125). Isabella's unconventional representation reflects "just an outcome of her reaction to patriarchal structure and gender roles." (Evren, 2019: 46). This woman escapes the limitations of her gender by disguising herself in the freedom of men. As in a disguised man, Isabella can easily do what she cannot do as a woman. As Hedi Abdel-Jaouad denotes, "by rejecting the symbolism of her female clothing, Isabelle transgressed and broke more than a dress code; she put into question not only gender roles and functions but also their political and ideological implications" (1993: 107). By rejecting the symbols of femininity, Isabelle went beyond a mere outfit and challenged gender norms. Joanna Entwistle comments that "when it comes to clothes we are far removed from the realm of biological facts and firmly located within the realm of culture" (2000: 141). According to Entwistle, clothing is a product of cultural norms, social values, and individual expressions. Thus, cross-

dressing helps Isabelle to gain new gender, religious and cultural identities. Through cross-dressing, Isabella “(re)invent(s) her own identity” (Foster, 2007/8: 110).

Wertenbaker “subverts not only conventional androcentric definitions of ‘gender and imperialism,’ but also the ethnocentrism used to ungender colonised people and silence colonised women” (Yang, 2014: 34). In the play, which questions rigid identity politics, female characters, who dress as men for different reasons, reflect the fluid nature of identity through a change of clothes. Thus, Worthenbaker “highlight(s) the idea of traversing gender boundaries as well as the strict lines between different ethnic groups” (Evren, 2019: 45). The play is structured for a cast including five women who portray a total of eighteen different characters, encompassing both male and female roles. In the play’s “Note on the Staging”, Worthenbaker highlights that “except for the actress playing Isabelle, each actress plays a Western woman, an Arab man and a Western man” (Worthenbaker, 1996: 4).

Isabella uses cross-dressing in order to break free from the secondary position imposed on woman by patriarchal society and to get power. In the beginning, Isabella rejects domestic life. She does not adopt domestic roles and she maintains that she is “strong” (Worthenbaker, 1996: 9). She is a woman who does not fit the traditional role of womanhood. She encourages her siblings to reject all the conventional roles. Isabella, dreaming about travelling to the Sahara desert, thinks that she can escape the limitations imposed by European society on her gender by adopting a masculine identity. Verna A. Foster stresses that wearing man’s clothes as clothing and thus creating a new sexual, cultural and racial identity allowed Isabella to live among Arab men as one of their equals (2007: 111). She says “I’m not a woman. I’m Sir Mahmoud. I like men. They like me. As a boy, I mean. And I have a firm rule: no Europeans up my arse” (Worthenbaker, 1996: 40-41).

According to Foster, “[T]he best scenes in *New Anatomies* are those dealing with gender and cross-dressing, reflecting Worthenbaker’s original interests” (2007: 119). In the play, five female performers appear as cross-dressers. For example, Séverine says, “I wear male clothes so I can take my girlfriends to coffee bars without having men pester us” (Worthenbaker, 1996: 38). Crossdressing gives Séverine freedom and serves a practical purpose. Although Lydia is the only woman wearing skirts, she also dresses as a man, because she thinks that dressing like a man gives an inspiration her to write. She states, “Do you know that in order to write seriously I must dress as a man? I finally understood why: when I am dressed as a woman, like this, I find I am most concerned with the silky sound of my skirt rustling on the

floor, or I spend hours watching the lace fall over my wrist, white against white. But when I dress as a man, I simply begin to think, I get ideas” (Wertenbaker, 1996: 38). Lydia makes a traditional connection between gender identity and creativity. She reflects this patriarchal perspective when she states that when she is disguised as a woman, her attention is focussed on the texture and details of the clothes, but when she is disguised as a man, her thoughts and ideas are more formed. As a female musician, Verda wants to share her music with people, and to reject her female fan’s love; so dresses as a man. She states, “I left my hair all the way down and wore the most feminine gown I could find. And then I gave her [a fan] a good talking to. She never came back” (Wertenbaker, 1996: 38). Verda thinks that she will impress her fans by displaying a strikingly feminine image with her appearance and demeanour, but the result is disappointing. In this context, it is revealed how binding and restrictive gender is. Eugénie also cross-dresses to submit and compromise with society, to have a strong voice, to have a good chat with men. This woman, who is considered abnormal in society and by her family, is sent to travel in order to get away from people’s judgment, and cross-dressing is seen as a way of surviving for her. She says, “I have not been unhappy, but I would have liked to be useful” (Wertenbaker, 1996: 39). Eugénie is about the desire to realise one’s personal potential, whereas one’s gender is an obstacle to this. By engaging in cross-dressing, these women highlight how conventional clothing restricts them to certain roles, whereas adopting different attire expands their job opportunities. By dressing as a man, all the women can go to the public space freely and easily, and can do whatever they want. In this way, cross-dressing is seen as “a transvestite attitude violating the dressing code of the society” (Ülker Erkan, 2017: 185. Their cross-dressing refers to a recognition of male dominance and a disloyalty to their own gender. Both Isabelle and the others seek liberation from patriarchal oppression and aspire to lead gender-neutral lives. All these women highlight the existence of a socially enforced division based on sex, asserting that dressing is a construction shaped by social dynamics of sexuality. All of them create a new space for them to perform their new identities and to problematise the existing system. Marjorie Garber defines this space “space of possibility,” explaining, “transvestism is a space of possibility structuring or confounding culture; it is the disruptive element that intervenes, not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself” (1992: 17). As Ayça Ülker Erkan claims, “Isabelle’s transformation is different from the other women characters in the play because Isabelle not only transgresses her gender but also radically transforms religious, national and cultural identities

both by externalizing all the social impositions in her escape to the desert and by rejecting her religious and national identity in order to construct a new one” (Erkan, 2017: 180). By creating a new identity and benefitting from the advantages of this identity, Isabella challenges gender politics, even though she does not realise her dream in the end. Unlike Isabella, by dressing as men, they get male dominance, but maintain the values of patriarchy; however, their cross-dressing is only a “cosmetic, instead of a feminist awakening” (Peacock, 1991: 166).

### 3.3. Moira Buffini’s *Silence*

The British playwright and screenwriter Moira Buffini, described by David Greig as a “metaphysical playwright” (*TheInfoList*, 2023), is one of the founding members of the Monsterist group<sup>1</sup>. She explores power dynamics, gender roles, societal issues, and the human condition. Buffini, supporting the struggle of women, tries to reveal the difficulties of being a woman in a patriarchal society, and allows us to understand the world from a female perspective. Her three-act black comedy *Silence* (1999), winning the Susan Smith Blackburn Award for the best play in the English language, touches on issues such as sexual identities and power politics. Buffini takes her inspiration from the medieval narrative *Le Roman de Silence*, which recounts the tale of a girl raised as a boy due to a mythical king’s decree prohibiting women from inheriting family wealth. The playwright treats the story of the Dark Ages with a contemporary sensibility. Colin MacLean describes the play as “a cross-dressing romantic comedy with lots of gender confusion; it’s about suffocating practices of early Christianity; and there’s a bit of Monty Python in there as well” (2019). The play begins around the theme of nobles’ marrying off their children for the sake of power. The story is based on the forced marriage of French Princess Ymma and 14-year-old Lord Silence of Cumbria, who was raised as a man and received her freedom, and who were exiled by the King of England, Ethelred. Ymma is a young woman who is strong, self-confident, outspoken, and outside the norms of femininity accepted by society. Ymma, raped by her brother and exiled by her father, has little say. The victimisation of Ymma as a woman by her brother and father shows us that women have been able to exist in male society for centuries on the axis of silence. Silence was raised as a man

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<sup>1</sup> Moira Buffini defines Monsterist group as follows: “It’s our job to take people where they don’t expect to go. It’s our job to provoke, move, unsettle and inspire. It goes without saying that plays that manage to do this are big. It is possible to write them for a cast of two and perform them in a box barely bigger than a lounge but I’ve got to the point where I want to kick down the walls of these boxes. I’m sick of writing epics for epic.” In Massive Attack by David Eldridge, *The Guardian* June 27, 2005.

by her mother, the Queen of Cumbria, who did not want her to be crushed as a woman in the male-dominated world, and she tried to be strong with her silence as her name indicates. But the truth about Silence's sexual identity emerges when he finds out that she was a woman on his wedding night after she married Ymma. That night Ymma tells Silence that he has breasts and that she is a woman and that naturally he has married a woman. But at first Silence does not say that she is a woman and insists that she is a man. Silence thinks that she is a boy until that night, because her mother hides the fact that she is a girl from her and raises her as a boy in order to prevent her daughter from being oppressed in a male-dominated world and to be freer. This secret, which even Silence does not know, will change everyone's life. Ymma expresses her surprise that they both have the same gender and cannot believe that Silence has not realised this until now. Silence desires to have herself from womanhood, because she believes that women's souls are losers. Ymma praises Silence's mother of being a cunning woman because she has given Silence power and freedom to have everything.

In patriarchal society, the sharp distinction between men and women pushes women to a subordinate position and deprives them of the right to speak and make decisions. Ymma, as a woman, was subjected to oppression by both her father and her brother and was forced into marriage. Silence, on the other hand, was raised as a man, so she has primarily experienced the freedoms of being a man. After Silence confronted her own truth, the two women joined forces to protect each other, keeping silent and concealing the truth. Although she gives up her identity at the end of the play, she enjoys power and freedom as a man until she has learned her own female identity. Silence enters Ymma as a woman disguised as a maid. "Silence, who will now spend her life as a girl, and with her beloved Ymma, has given up everything she had as a man, but has found happiness with Ymma as a woman" (Korad Birkiye, 2018: 48).

The play reveals gender "as a term with psychological or cultural connotations, which means that the acquisition of sexual roles is acquired later, irrespective of the presence of physiological organs" (Korad, Birkiye, 2018: 46). Buffini explores the complexity of gender, its fluidity, and the significant role played by social and cultural factors in shaping individual identities and societal expectations. According to Melih Korukçu,

*"The woman's lack of the right to have a say over her own body and her use of silence to cope with it is also supported by the conflicts of power and monotheistic religions' control over the body on the individual and her identity. (...) Although set in dark age England, this play, which has a very*

*strong dramatic structure, opens the question of “who am I?”, one of the oldest problems of humanity, to discussion through the question of who we are not, by refuting the assertion that the meanings attributed to the body constitute identity.”*

Buffini strives to show how the patriarchal system isolates and silences women, and disrupts identity constructions. Buffini discusses body politics through *Silence*'s cross-dressing. As Butler proposes, “that the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality” (2002: 173). She allows us to show how clothes form our identities and explore boundaries in identity and self as well as gender.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Cross-dressing in contemporary British feminist theatre has been used as a deconstructive strategy to show that gender roles are culturally constructed, because clothes are used as a distinctive tool to form gender roles. Wearing the clothes of the opposite sex is used as a powerful tool to question, criticise and deconstruct gender roles. This strategy shows us how clothing is not only a means of aesthetic expression, but is also used to construct gender roles and determine power dynamics in society. Men in the patriarchal society have many opportunities and rights such as going out at night, having a voice on every subject, working one's way up, being at liberty; however, women don't have such rights. At this point, for a woman, wearing the clothes of the opposite sex brings certain freedoms to the woman dressed as a man. In *Silence* by Moira Buffini, *Top Girls* by Caryl Churchill, and *New Anatomies* by Timberlake Wertenbaker, wearing the clothes of the opposite sex created a new area of freedom for the woman and gave the woman in disguise the opportunity to speak and act freely. Each character lives the experience of the other by wearing the clothes of the opposite sex. This allows female characters to discover their inner strength and potential. On the other hand, as in Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine*, clothes are used to show how imposing gender codes are. In this sense, in order to reveal the cultural codes of gender, the characters in the play show the artificiality of gender roles by wearing the clothes of the opposite sex. Each playwright has tried to show the patriarchal practices coded culturally and ideologically by the dominant ideology and to show the audience the oppression of women's conditions throughout history. Each play shows how much women are restricted in patriarchal society. Each of them deciphers social roles through clothes. Through cross-dressing, the characters reveal that gender is a social construct, the power dynamics underlying these norms

and the oppression of women throughout history. This makes the audience think and at the same time provides an in-depth understanding of the struggle for social change and equality.

## 5. SUMMARY

Cross-dressing in the theatre has been practiced for centuries. The history of cross-dressing dates back to ancient times. In Ancient Greek comedies and tragedies, cross-dressing was a natural part of the stage. In Renaissance theatre, male actors also cross-dressed to play female characters in various productions. In the plays of William Shakespeare, the female characters were likewise played by young male actors. In contemporary British feminist theatre, cross-dressing also appears as a feminist deconstructive strategy. Playwrights use this strategy to show that gender roles are a cultural construct and that we wear these roles like clothes. Accordingly, playwrights reveal the difficulties experienced by women who are oppressed in the patriarchal order by resorting to this strategy. Women who wear men's clothes feel freer and act more comfortably in the guise of men. For example, in Timberlake Wertenbaker's *New Anatomies*, Carly Churchill's *Top Girls* and Moira Buffini's *Silence*, women dressed in men's clothes are free to express themselves and move freely. In some cases, this strategy shows the audience how artificial and changeable the gender roles can be. For example, in Churchill's *Cloud Nine*, while those under the pressure of Clive, the representative of the patriarchal system and the imperial order, are forced to assume the gender roles determined by him, Churchill challenges that these roles are a social construction of cultural roles by having the characters played by members of the opposite sex. By using the strategy of cross-dressing, all these playwrights such as Churchill, Wertenbaker and Buffini challenge and critique the established gender system. This subversive use of cross-dressing functions as a means of questioning and undermining social norms of gender and demonstrates its transformative potential within feminist theatre narratives.

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