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Gendered Humor and Stylistic Play in Modern Feminist Theatre: A Pragmatic-Stylistic Approach

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Abstract: *This study explores the intersection of gendered humor, stylistic innovation, and pragmatic subversion in modern feminist theatre, focusing on works by Caryl Churchill, Sarah Ruhl, and Ntozake Shange. These playwrights employ humor not merely as entertainment but as a discursive weapon to challenge patriarchal norms, expose socio-political absurdities, and redefine gendered subjectivities. Drawing on frameworks from, stylistics, and pragmatics—particularly politeness theory, speech act theory, and incongruity theory of humor—this research investigates how stylistic choices (e.g., fragmentation, surrealism, poetic language) intertwine with humor strategy articulate feminist resistance. By analyzing selected scenes from Top Girls (Churchill), The Clean House (Ruhl), and for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf (Shange), the research reveals how humor in feminist drama functions both as a coping mechanism and as a mode of critique. This study contributes to feminist stylistics by offering a nuanced account of how gendered language and stylistic form shape subversive humor. Ultimately, it foregrounds how female playwrights turn theatrical space into a site of both laughter and liberation.*

Keywords: *Bilingual Book, Luwu Folktales, Reading Comprehention*

INTRODUCTION

Theatre has long served as a crucible for social commentary, but feminist theatre in particular has reimagined the stage as a site of resistance, identity formation, and cultural intervention. Humor—often trivialized or misunderstood—emerges as a subversive and sophisticated tool in this endeavor. This study investigates how modern female playwrights use gendered humor and stylistic play to challenge power structures, question societal norms, and articulate female agency. The research focuses on the dramaturgical and linguistic strategies employed by Caryl Churchill, Sarah Ruhl, and Ntozake Shange, whose works exemplify how laughter can be politically potent.

As Judith Butler (1990) suggests, gender itself is performative, constituted through repeated acts within a regulatory framework. Feminist theatre thus becomes a metadiscursive space where these gender performances are laid bare, satirized, and rewritten. Humor plays a crucial role in this process, operating through

linguistic and stylistic choices that disrupt normative expectations. For instance, Churchill's Top Girls defamiliarizes historical narratives through surreal dinner-party scenes where anachronistic female figures trade witty, biting commentary. Ruhl's The Clean House blends poetic language and absurdist humor to explore emotional labor and gender roles, while Shange's choreopoem for colored girls… uses rhythm and vernacular speech to both heal and protest through performance.

This study is framed by two key theoretical strands: stylistics and pragmatics. Stylistics allows for a detailed analysis of formal elements—syntax, imagery, narrative structure—that shape the tone and affective resonance of humorous exchanges. Pragmatics, particularly theories of politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987), impoliteness (Culpeper, 1996), and incongruity (Morreall, 2009), helps in unpacking how meaning is contextually constructed and subverted through humor. These approaches are applied within a broader feminist linguistic framework, recognizing that women's humor often occupies a marginalized space in both literary and theatrical discourse (Holmes, 2006).

Churchill's Top Girls offers a rich example of feminist stylistic play. The overlapping dialogue, nonlinear plot, and historical-fantastical characters constitute what Carter (2015) calls "disrupted realism," a stylistic device that mirrors the fractured nature of female experience in patriarchy. In one memorable scene, Pope Joan, Lady Nijo, and other historical women exchange witty retorts about their subjugation—"I was pope for two years… dressed as a man" (Churchill, 1982). Their humor reveals pain, but also resistance, transforming tragic histories into collective defiance.

Sarah Ruhl's work leans into absurdism, a style often gendered as masculine, but which she feminizes by anchoring it in domestic and emotional terrains. In the Clean House, Matilde, a Brazilian housekeeper and aspiring comedian, insists: "If I don't laugh, I will die." The humor here is not decorative but existential. According to Hughes (2014), "Ruhl's stylistic minimalism juxtaposed with surreal speech acts invites the audience to laugh, then reflect—an ethical operation of feminist humor."

Ntozake Shange's for colored girls… further exemplifies the stylistic-pragmatic power of humor as empowerment. Her choreopoem blurs the boundaries between poetry, monologue, and dance, using African American Vernacular English, puns, and tonal shifts to convey a collective experience of trauma and resilience. In one scene, a woman jokes about her lover's absence: "he was jus here yesterday / wit his smile." This blend of humor and heartbreak reflects what hooks (1992) calls "the oppositional gaze"—a way of looking and speaking back through layered performance.

In feminist comedy, stylistic play and pragmatic strategy are not merely linguistic choices but ideological acts. They deconstruct hegemonic discourse by foregrounding female voices that laugh not to entertain but to expose, to reclaim, and to heal. As Mills (2005) argues, "Feminist humor challenges the seriousness of patriarchal discourse while revaluing the mundane, the domestic, and the emotionally complex." This research, therefore, aims to identify how these

playwrights use stylistic and pragmatic tools to construct humor that is gendered, performative, and politically loaded.

The intersection of gender, humor, and style is not only underexplored but also critically important in understanding contemporary theatre's role in cultural discourse. By employing a methodological blend of discourse analysis, stylistic reading, and pragmatic interpretation, this study bridges the literary with the linguistic, the comic with the critical. Ultimately, it proposes that in the hands of feminist playwrights, humor becomes both a mode of resistance and a medium of transformation.

Research Questions:

1. How do female playwrights use stylistic features (e.g., fragmented narrative, poetic diction, surrealism) to shape subversive humor in modern feminist theatre?
2. In what ways does gender influence the construction and reception of humor in plays by Churchill, Ruhl, and Shange?

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Gendered Humor: A Sociolinguistic Inquiry

In his 2019 study, Joel Mayo Torres conducts a mixed-methods sociolinguistic investigation into gendered humor among Filipino university students. He develops a comprehensive framework for analyzing humor styles, targets, structures, and competencies across gender lines. Although the study is not exclusively focused on theater, the pragmatic stylistic model and emphasis on gendered humor modes provide valuable theoretical tools for examining feminist theatrical discourse.

2. Unifying the Humor Theories: A Stylistic Approach

In December 2023, Faye Chambers contributes a chapter to *Humour Theory and Stylistic Enquiry*, where she innovatively applies stylistic theories, particularly foregrounding through linguistic deviation, to unify various humor theories—namely release, hostility, and incongruity. This chapter directly engages with stylistic play, which is crucial to modern feminist theater that frequently employs subversion and satire.

3. Objectification of Women Through Metaphors in Stand-Up Comedy

Justyna Wawrzyniuk's 2023 analysis focuses on gendered metaphors utilized by female comedians in stand-up performances, particularly the metaphor "Women Is An Object." This corpus-based, pragmatic stylistic analysis reveals how such metaphors serve to subvert stereotypes, highlighting the ways metaphorical

and stylistic play within performance can reclaim power—mechanisms that closely parallel those found in feminist theater.

Pertinent Ideas

1. Feminist Stylistics

Feminist stylistics, as outlined by Sara Mills (1995; 2005), examines how textual and linguistic features—such as narrative voice, lexical choice, genre conventions, and grammatical structures—contribute to the construction and contestation of gender ideologies. Mills argues that language is not a neutral medium but a socially coded system through which power, identity, and gender are both reinforced and subverted. She states, "Feminist stylistics is concerned with the way that texts are constructed and received in gendered ways, and how language choices index power relations." Key areas of focus include:

1. **Lexical Patterning:** The recurrent use of gendered metaphors and evaluative terms.
2. **Narrative Voice:** The dynamics of who speaks, who is silenced, and how authority is linguistically encoded.
3. **Genre Blending:** The subversion of conventional literary forms to express alternative identities.
4. **Textual Fragmentation:** The disruption of linear narratives to reflect plural or marginalized subjectivities.

Feminist stylistics serves as a method for identifying textual strategies of resistance, such as fragmentation and reappropriation of gendered diction, while also attending to reader positioning.

2. Incongruity Theory of Humor

Incongruity theory, as proposed by John Morreall (2009) and Victor Raskin (1985), posits that humor arises from the violation of expectations—when narratives or linguistic constructions take unexpected turns. This cognitive shift often triggers emotional responses and serves a critical function in feminist contexts, destabilizing dominant ideologies and exposing contradictions in gender roles and cultural norms. Morreall states, "Humor occurs when there is a sudden shift in perspective or expectation, a hallmark of feminist subversion." The core elements of this theory include:

1. **Cognitive Dissonance:** Juxtaposing conflicting frames of reference.
2. **Subversion of Logic:** Disrupting what is deemed socially or narratively appropriate.
3. **Tonality Shifts:** Abrupt transitions between emotional registers that surprise or unsettle audiences.

This framework is particularly useful for analyzing humor as a form of ethical provocation that critiques structural inequalities through exaggeration and distortion.

3. Gender Performativity

Judith Butler's gender performativity theory (1990) posits that gender is not an innate quality, but rather a reiterative performance comprising repeated acts, gestures, and speech patterns that produce and sustain gender identities. Butler asserts, "Gender is not something one is, it is something one does." The main concepts of this theory include:

1. **Repetition and Ritual:** Identity is constructed through repeated enactments of gendered behavior.
2. **Speech Acts:** Language is performative, constituting identity rather than merely reflecting it.
3. **Parody and Resistance:** Gender can be subverted through exaggerated performances that reveal its constructed nature.

In cultural or literary analysis, this theory aids in uncovering how characters perform gender through linguistic choices and behaviors, emphasizing how subversive humor and role reversal can destabilize coherent gender identities.

4. Theory Integration Summary

The integration of these three frameworks enables a multilayered reading of texts where language, structure, humor, and performance are viewed as sites of political and cultural contestation.

Theory	Main Concepts	Role in Analysis
Feminist Stylistics	Gendered diction, narrative voice, textual form	Analyzing how linguistic and formal features reflect gendered power
Incongruity Theory	Expectation violation, absurdity, tonal clash	Understanding how humor disrupts logic and challenges social norms
Gender Performativity	Repetition, speech as act, performance of gender	Revealing how identity is constructed, destabilized, or reclaimed

RESEARCH METHOD

1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative**,** interpretive research design informed by principles of discourse analysis and feminist literary criticism. The focus is on unpacking the relationship between language use, theatrical form, and gender ideology in selected feminist plays. The research is textual and analytical, involving

close reading of dramatic texts through a multi-theoretical lens to identify how humor functions as a tool of subversion.

2. **Corpus of Study**

The research focuses on three contemporary feminist plays that center female experience and subversive comedy: Caryl Churchill – *Top Girls* (1982)**,** Sarah Ruhl – *The Clean House* (2004)**,** Ntozake Shange – *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (1976) These texts were selected for their: Stylistic innovation (e.g., poetic form, surrealism, montage), the use of gendered humor as social critique, Emphasis on women's voices, embodiment, and identity.

3. **Analytical Framework**

The analysis draws on four interrelated theoretical lenses**:** Feminist Stylistics**,** Incongruity Theory of Humor andGender Performativity (Judith Butler, 1990) Gender is approached not as fixed identity but a set of repeated, socially regulated performances**.** Scenes will be analyzed to uncover how characters either conform to, parody, or disrupt normative femininity and masculinity.

4. **Data Collection**

The "data" consists of selected scenes and dialogues from the three plays that: Feature humor used in unconventional or subversive ways, Showcase stylistic deviation or formal experimentation and Enact gender roles in performative, exaggerated, or contradictory forms Key scenes include: The dinner party in *Top Girls*, The perfect joke monologue in *The Clean House* and The choreopoem confessions in *for colored girls…*Passages were chosen based on their linguistic density**,** pragmatic tension**,** and thematic resonance with feminist critique.

5. **Data Analysis Procedure**

The analysis proceeds in three phases**:**

Each play will be read multiple times to identify: Stylistic markers (e.g., fragmented dialogue, repetition, poetic shifts), Humorous elements (e.g., irony, absurdity, satire), Gendered behavior (e.g., gender role-play, bodily metaphors)

Each scene will be interpreted through interwoven theoretical frameworks, integrating stylistic, pragmatic, and performative insights. Special attention is given to how: Humor disrupts patriarchal authority; Fragmentation embodies feminist consciousness and Gender performance breaks down normative binaries

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Gendered Humor and Stylistic Play in Modern Feminist Theatre

This section explores the intersection of feminist stylistics, incongruous humor, and performative gender across three modern feminist plays: *Top Girls* by Caryl Churchill, *The Clean House* by Sarah Ruhl, and *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* by Ntozake Shange. Each play challenges patriarchal ideologies through stylistic fragmentation, tonal dissonance, and gender performativity. Drawing on feminist stylistics (Mills, 2005), incongruity theory (Morreall, 2009), and Butler's (1990) gender performativity, the analysis is grounded in close textual reading and theoretical triangulation.

Stylistic Fragmentation as Feminist Resistance

In feminist drama, fragmentation is not disorder but design**.** Rather than follow linear, unified plots traditionally associated with male-centered narrative authority, feminist playwrights often opt for discontinuous structures, overlapping voices, and poetic disjunctions. These stylistic strategies reflect the interrupted, unstable, and plural nature of women's experiences**,** especially under patriarchy. As Sara Mills (2005) notes, such "resistant textualities" challenge both content and form: "They refuse dominant modes of representation by disrupting the expectations of conventional narrative coherence."

The plays *Top Girls*, *for colored girls…*, and *The Clean House* all employ fragmentation differently, but each creates a formal rupture that mirrors political rupture—a refusal to contain women's stories within patriarchal bounds.

1. *Drama Top Girls* by Caryl Churchill: Overlapping Dialogue and Disrupted Authority

Churchill's *Top Girls* opens with a surreal dinner party where Marlene, a Thatcherite career woman, dines with famous women from history and myth. The scene's fragmentation is immediate and relentless: characters speak **o**ver each other, interrupt each other's narratives, and rarely receive full attention. This formal chaos mirrors the social reality of women being talked over, ignored, or having to compete for space in male-dominated discourse.

Extract 1 – Fragmented Dialogue:

Joan: *"I was Pope for just two years..."*
Isabella: *"I travelled widely alone..."*
Nijo: *"My father was a priest..."*

These lines often collide, overlap, or trail off mid-thought, denying the audience a clear, linear narrative. The effect is polyphonic but not harmonious—voices compete rather than integrate. Churchill thus critiques how even in a seemingly celebratory space, women's **stories** are fragmented by competition, not unity**.**

Extract 2 – Silencing of Pope Joan:

Joan: *"I was very clever. I read everything…"*
(She is interrupted repeatedly, and her voice fades beneath louder ones.)

Joan, the most intellectually radical figure, is constantly cut off, symbolizing the historical silencing of women's intellect, especially in spiritual or academic contexts. The form reflects the content: Joan's fragmented speech *is* her oppression.

2. ***The drama for colored girls…*** **(Ntozake Shange): Choreopoem as Fragmented Healing**

Shange's groundbreaking play uses a chore poem format, merging poetry, dance, and monologue without a central plot or unified character arc. This nonlinear fragmentation resists the logic of Western theatrical tradition and instead presents a kaleidoscope of intersecting Black female voices, each speaking her truth in her own rhythm, diction, and cultural code.

Extract 1 – "somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff"

Lady in Green: *"somebody almost run off wit alla my stuff / not my poems or a dance i gave up in the street / but somebody almost walked off wit alla my stuff..."*

The monologue shifts abruptly between rage and mockery, with line breaks (enjambment) that disrupt syntax and conventional flow. The style embodies **fracture and reclamation**—fragmentation becomes the form through which the speaker regains power over her violated self.

Extract 2 – Nonlinear Voice Montage:

Lady in Yellow: *"i used a live in the world / now i live in harlem…"*
Lady in Blue: *"& i found god in myself / & i loved her / i loved her fiercely"*

These lines emerge from distinct personal narratives but resonate as a collective arc of survival and self-discovery. The fragmentation reflects diasporic, embodied trauma, but also the plurality of voices denied in mainstream narratives.

3. ***Drama the Clean House*** **by Sarah Ruhl: Poetic Abstraction and Surreal Language**

Though Ruhl's play appears more subdued, it also employs stylistic fragmentation, primarily through surrealism, poetic speech, and abrupt shifts

between languages and tones. The character Matilde, a Brazilian maid, opens the play in Portuguese—a moment of intentional audience estrangement**.**

Extract 1 – Opening Monologue in Portuguese:

(In Portuguese)
"Minha mãe morreu rindo de uma piada que meu pai contou. Eu não posso contar essa piada em inglês. Ela não funciona."

This opening refuse immediate access to meaning. The joke that killed Matilde's mother—described as the "perfect joke"—is never translated. The lack of translation fragments audience comprehension, symbolizing the cultural and emotional labor often invisible or indecipherable to outsiders.

Extract 2 – Poetic Refusal of Realism:

Matilde: *"I hate cleaning. I love jokes. I want to make people laugh so hard they die."*

This surreal declaration breaks from realism and introduces an existential, metaphorical register**.** Her resistance to cleaning is also a resistance to narrative domestication—to being assigned a role (maid, immigrant, woman) without choice or voice. The style fractures realism just as Matilde fractures social expectations.

Table 1: Fragmentation Techniques and Their Feminist Functions

Play	Fragmentation Technique	Representative Quote	Function
Top Girls	Overlapping speech, interruption	"I was Pope for just two years…" *(interrupted by others)*	Highlights silencing and competition among women under patriarchy
for colored girls…	Nonlinear structure, poetic montage	"somebody almost runs off wit alla my stuff…"	Embodies collective trauma, healing, and intersectional subjectivity
The Clean House	Surreal transitions, non-English speech	"Minha mãe morreu rindo de uma piada…" *(spoken in Portuguese)*	Resists narrative clarity and centers cultural dislocation

Discussion: Fragmentation as Feminist Form

Across these plays, fragmentation emerges as more than a technique—it is a thematic embodiment of dislocation, resistance, and multiplicity. Where patriarchal narratives demand linearity, resolution, and hierarchy, feminist playwrights respond with interruptions, ruptures, and refusals. Quotation,

disjunction, silence, and polyphony all become methods of writing women into history, emotion, and space on their own terms.

Stylistic fragmentation resists not just how women are *spoken about*, but how they are *formally structured* within a narrative. It creates a performative and political disruptio**n**, urging audiences to feel the fractures—and to hear the voices—too often smoothed over in dominant culture.

Incongruous Humor as Ethical Disruption in Feminist Theatre

In feminist theatre, humor functions not merely as a tool for entertainment but as a weapon for resistance and ethical awakening. According to John Morreall (2009), incongruous humor—where expectations are subverted through sudden, surprising shifts—disrupts conventional logic, forcing audiences into cognitive dissonance. In this rupture, the comedic becomes critical. Feminist playwrights Sarah Ruhl, Caryl Churchill, and Ntozake Shange exploit incongruity not just to amuse but to unsettle, using humor as a subversive strategy that exposes the paradoxes, injustices, and contradictions inherent in gendered power structures.

1. **Drama the *Clean House*: Death by Laughter as a Critique of Domestic Mythology**

Sarah Ruhl's *The Clean House* opens with a deeply unsettling comedic premise: Matilde, a Brazilian maid and aspiring comedian, believes her parents—both humorists—died from laughter at the "perfect joke." This surreal image of death-by-joke is not merely absurd; it provokes ethical reflection on labor, grief, and identity.

"They laughed for three minutes. I timed it. And then they died." — *Matilde, The Clean House*

The tonal clash here is stark: death, typically treated with reverence, is juxtaposed with uncontrollable laughter. This incongruity shakes the audience's emotional expectations. What should be tragic becomes comic, compelling us to question what kind of emotional narratives we deem acceptable.

Matilde's refusal to clean—despite being employed as a housekeeper—is framed not as laziness but as resistance. She tells Lane, her employer:

"I don't like to clean. I like to think. And I like to make jokes." — *Matilde, The Clean House*

Ruhl's humor becomes ethically jarring when we see how emotional labor is both expected and invisible in domestic spaces. The cultural dissonance—between Matilde's Latin American humor tradition and Lane's sterile American professionalism—amplifies this critique. The "perfect joke" becomes a symbol of uncontainable, uncommodifiable feeling that cannot be assimilated into the capitalist logic of domestic efficiency.

2. Drama Top *Girls*: Satirical Empowerment and the Irony of Success

Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* weaponizes satire to interrogate the moral cost of neoliberal feminism. Marlene, the protagonist, is a successful career woman who celebrates Margaret Thatcher's rise with ironic enthusiasm:

"She's a tough lady, Maggie. I'd give her a job." — *Marlene, Top Girls*

On the surface, this line is humorous—a flippant endorsement of a prime minister. But its incongruity lies in what it omits: Thatcher's dismantling of welfare, disregard for working-class women, and alignment with masculine power structures. Marlene's admiration is undercut by her emotional detachment, particularly in scenes revealing her rejection of her daughter and working-class sister, Joyce.

The dinner party in Act 1 is a masterclass in ironic juxtaposition. Historical women—Pope Joan, Lady Nijo, Isabella Bird—recount traumatic lives while casually dining and drinking wine. Their monologues frequently overlap and compete:

Lady Nijo: "When I returned to court I was punished."
Pope Joan: "I disguised myself as a man for many years."
Isabella: "The Japanese women had their feet bound."

This overlapping dialogue, while absurdly comic, creates cognitive overload. The humor arises from the incongruity between formal setting and traumatic disclosure. Churchill's satire is ethically disruptive—it mocks the idea of linear feminist progress and critiques a model of success that demands emotional sacrifice and complicity with patriarchal systems.

3. Drama for *colored girls...*: Irony as Reclamation and Resistance

Ntozake Shange's choreopoem *for colored girls...* diverges from the overt absurdity of the other two plays but still employs incongruous humor to reclaim agency and subvert trauma. The humor is embedded in Black vernacular speech, irony, and spoken-word rhythm. One of the most powerful monologues, *"somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff,"* exemplifies this:

"Somebody almost run off with alla my stuff / & I didn't bring it wit me." — *Lady in Green, for colored girls...*

The monologue oscillates between mockery and fury, with rhythm and repetition producing a comic undertone that is also devastating. The speaker confronts the theft of her emotional, sexual, and intellectual self—not just by a man, but by a system that renders Black women invisible.

The incongruity lies in the performative bravado juxtaposed with vulnerability. She lists her "stuff":

"My stuff—my rhythms & my voice, open arms, my innocence..."

This litany, delivered with escalating cadence and sarcasm, transforms personal violation into political commentary. The humor disarms the pain without minimizing it. It invites ethical reflection: How does society normalize the theft of Black women's bodies, labor, and identity?

Moreover, Shange's characters use irony to navigate pain and survival. The humor here is not laugh-out-loud funny but registers as a knowing smirk—an assertion of dignity in the face of dehumanization.

Table 2: Incongruous Humor and Its Ethical Effects

Play	Humorous Element	Ethical Function
The Clean House	Absurd death by laughter	Highlights the invisibility of emotional labor and critiques domestic norms
Top Girls	Ironic celebration of Thatcherism	Exposes the moral bankruptcy of capitalist feminism
for colored girls...	Spoken-word irony and cultural wit	Reclaims voice and agency; critiques racialized gender trauma

Discussion regarding Incongruous Humor and Its Ethical Effects

In each of these plays, humor is not incidental—it is insurgent. The incongruity embedded in surreal images, satirical dialogue, and culturally specific vernaculars produces not just laughter but ethical disturbance. As Morreall (2009) argues, humor enables us to step back and rethink rigid social conventions. In feminist theatre, this means confronting the hypocrisies of empowerment, the cost of emotional labor, and the commodification of identity. These playwrights remind us that laughter—especially when it disorients—is a powerful tool of critique, resistance, and transformation.

Gender Performativity and the Undoing of Norms

Judith Butler's foundational theory of gender performativity (1990) challenges the notion of gender as a fixed identity. Instead, gender is seen as a **series of stylized, repetitive acts**, reinforced through language, behavior, clothing, and roles— **"a doing rather than a being."** These performances are governed by cultural norms and often enforced through social pressure and institutional structures.

"Gender is not something that one is, it is something one does, an act…a public performance." — Butler (1990)

In feminist drama, gender performativity is made visible by showing characters inhabiting, resisting, parodying, or collapsing under the weight of assigned gender roles**.** The stage becomes a space where gender norms can be rehearsed, disrupted, or entirely rewritten.

1. *Drama for colored girls...*: Performing Grief, Autonomy, and Black Womanhood

Shange's *for colored girls…* uses choreopoem form—movement, verse, and music—to dramatize the performativity of Black womanhood in a society that both fetishizes and devalues it. The characters are not named but identified by color, which already suggests that their identities are fluid, performative, and symbolic**.**

Lady in Red: Performing Maternal Autonomy

In her monologue about abortion, the Lady in Red blends poetic rage with ceremonial vulnerability. The scene becomes an embodied performance of grief and agency, disrupting social taboos around Black women's reproductive choices.

"I cdnt stand being sorry & colored at the same time / it's so redundant in the modern world."

She later describes herself kneeling before a toilet:

"I have lost it… i am cold. i am cold. / somebody opens the window."

Her vulnerability is ritualized—not as confession to patriarchy but as communal storytelling**,** where gender is enacted not through submission but through public reclamation of pain**.** This performativity destabilizes the notion of private female shame, instead asserting grief as a shared political act**.**

Multivocal Performance

Across the play, gender is not essential but multivocal—sung, shouted, whispered, danced. The act of shifting registers and modes (from vernacular to lyrical, from body to voice) makes gender a choreographed social script**,** open to both interpretation and resistance.

2. *Drama Top Girls*: Ambition as Masculine Drag

In Churchill's *Top Girls*, gender is explicitly performed—and at times, parodied—through language, gesture, and professional identity. Marlene, the play's central character, performs a hyper-masculine version of femininity as a hard-edged, career-focused woman who has assimilated into patriarchal capitalism**.**

Marlene: Performing Thatcherite Masculinity

"I don't believe in class. Anyone can do anything if they've got what it takes."

This line echoes Thatcherite ideology—denying structural oppression in favor of individualism. Marlene's clipped, unemotional tone mimics masculine business-speak, positioning her identity as a performance of male-coded power.

However, this gendered performance becomes unstable in the final act, where she reunites with her sister Joyce. The encounter strips away the façade:

Marlene: *"I don't believe in crying."*
Joyce: *"That's what you do, isn't it? Leave the crying to me."*

Here, Butler's notion of performativity as failure-prone becomes clear: Marlene's performance falters. Her emotional detachment **is** revealed as a costume—worn to survive in a man's world, but at great emotional cost.

The Dinner Guests: Performing Historic Femininities

Each woman at the dinner party in Act 1 performs a culturally idealized role of femininity**:** the obedient wife, the spiritual virgin, the self-sacrificing mother. These "types" are not essential identities but socially enforced scripts**,** worn and suffered.

Griselda: *"I always obeyed him. I had to."*
Joan: *"I dressed as a man."*

Their performances show how gender has always been a series of external expectations, often tragic or absurd, highlighting how compliance is misread as natural femininity**.**

3. *The Clean House*: Contrasting Femininities and Comic Subversion

Sarah Ruhl's *The Clean House* explores gender performance through contrast: Matilde, the poetic Brazilian maid, and Lane, the efficient, repressed American doctor, enact two distinct but socially coded femininities. Both roles—maid and professional woman—are inherited costumes shaped by race, class, and gender expectations.

Matilde: Resisting Through Comic Performance

Matilde performs resistance not by direct confrontation but through absurdist humor and strategic silence**.**

"I hate cleaning. I love jokes. I want to make people laugh so hard they die."

This declaration inverts her assigned role (maid) into a poetic, mystic identity. Her refusal to clean is not laziness but a symbolic disruption of domestic servitude—a gesture that questions the expectations placed on women of color to serve, clean, and disappear.

Her language often shifts into lyricism and fantasy, a performative escape from realism that aligns with Butler's notion of gender as a fiction with real effects—mutable, unstable, yet deeply consequential.

Lane: Performing Detachment and Rationality

Lane, by contrast, performs the "professional woman" who suppresses emotion for logic.

"I didn't go to medical school to clean my own house."

This line encapsulates a gendered performance of clinical authority**,** where success is tied to distancing oneself from "feminine" labor and emotion. Yet, as the play progresses, Lane's coldness fractures, suggesting that the performance of strength is a fragile defense—one that disintegrates when emotional vulnerability surfaces.

Table 3: Gender Performativity and Disruption

Character / Play	Gender Role Performed	Subversive Strategy	Representative Quote
Marlene (*Top Girls*)	Careerist, Thatcherite woman	Irony and emotional collapse reveal contradiction	"I don't believe in class." / "I don't believe in crying."
Matilde (*The Clean House*)	Immigrant maid, poetic mystic	Absurdity and lyrical resistance undermine servitude	"I hate cleaning. I love jokes."
Lady in Red (*for colored girls...*)	Black womanhood, maternal pain	Public ritual of grief and poetic empowerment	"somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff." / "i am cold. somebody open the window."

Discussion regarding Performing Gender, Disrupting Norms

Each of these plays' exposes gender as a socially rehearsed act rather than a stable identity. Whether through poetic confessions, satirical performance, or ironic collapse, the characters demonstrate how gender can be worn, manipulated, subverted, and ultimately undone. Butler's theory finds rich embodiment here:

these aren't stories of women being women, but of women performing, resisting, and reimagining what that might mean.

Through theatrical language, gesture, and form, these works insist that if gender is a stage, it is one we can choose to rewrite, disrupt, and sometimes walk away from entirely.

Thematic Integration Across Plays

To visualize how the major feminist themes, operate across the three plays, the graph below presents a comparative rating (1-5 scale) of thematic intensity.

This comparative graph illustrates:

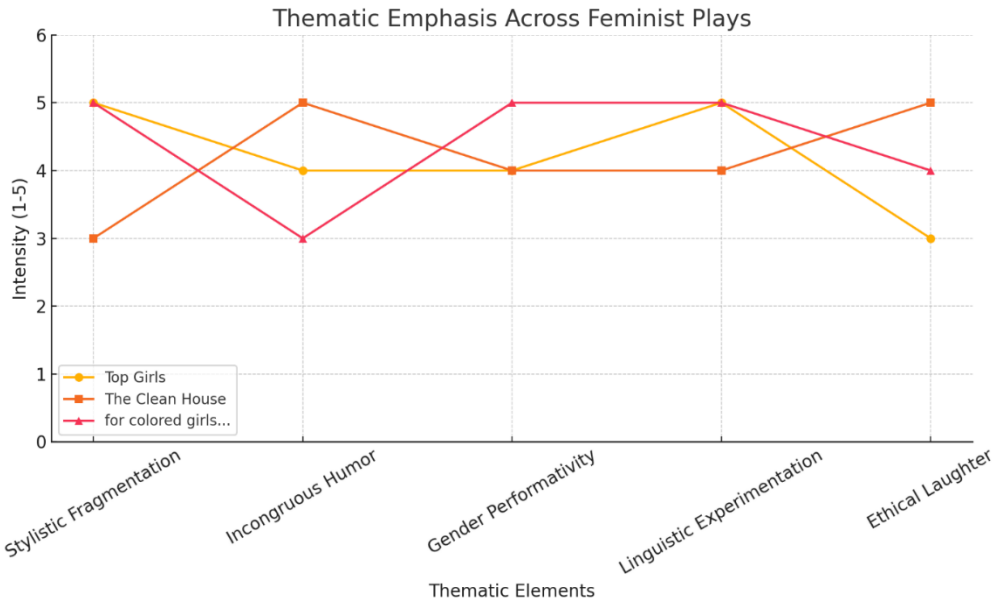
1. *Top Girls* scores high on fragmentation and linguistic experimentation but uses humor more sparingly.
2. *The Clean House* blends surreal humor and ethical contradiction most strongly.
3. *for colored girls...* emphasizes performativity, poetic fragmentation, and embodied voice.

Cross-Textual Findings

Fragmentation is Resistance: All three plays use structural disruption to break with patriarchal expectations of coherence, logic, and control. Fragmentation is not a stylistic whim but an ideological strategy.

Humor is Ethical: In these feminist works, humor disturbs more than it delights. Absurdity, irony, and tonal dissonance become cognitive triggers, confronting the audience with moral ambiguities.

Gender is Performed and Disrupted: Characters engage in exaggerated, contradictory, or parodied performances of gender. These performances reveal gender as a social construct open to subversion and reinvention.



CONCLUSION

Through a triangulated lens of feminist stylistics, humor theory, and gender performativity, this analysis reveals how Top Girls, The Clean House, and for colored girls... enact a deeply political dramaturgy. Humor is wielded as critique, fragmentation as rebellion, and performativity as possibility. These plays do not merely reflect feminist values—they perform them, stylistically and pragmatically, offering theatre as both an aesthetic and ideological site of resistance.

This study affirms that modern feminist theatre not only engages gender politics in content but formally destabilizes the very linguistic and narrative norms that support gendered oppression. The audience is not merely entertained; they are provoked, unsettled, and called into ethical reflection.

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