

Research Article

Flipping the Script: Marion as the Capitalist Queen Bee and the Commodification of the Subjugated Woman in Caryl Churchill's *Owners*

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Abstract: Caryl Churchill's *Owners* presents a deeply thought-provoking vision of power, ambition, and gender relations in modern capitalist society. Rather than celebrating the rise of a successful woman as an unquestionable feminist achievement, the play compels readers to ask whether occupying positions of power necessarily transforms the structures that have historically oppressed women. While *Owners* has been studied from a variety of critical approaches, available research has not yet analyzed the text from a perspective that highlights how a successful capitalist woman adapts male tactics to subjugate others regardless of their gender. This paper attempts to enrich Caryl Churchill studies by analyzing the protagonist, Marion, as the perfect epitome of Queen Bee Syndrome, a condition in which a woman who attains authority within patriarchal institutions distances herself from other women and unconsciously reproduces the very systems of domination that once excluded her. The study further explores the commodification of the subjugated woman through the experiences of characters who become trapped within Marion's vision of power. Instead of creating spaces of solidarity, empathy, or collective emancipation, Marion internalizes patriarchal definitions of success and measures liberation through acquisition and possession. Her rise, therefore, exposes the paradox of a feminism that seeks equality by imitating the logic of patriarchal capitalism rather than challenging it.

Keywords: Queen Bee Syndrome, Utopian Feminism, Neoliberal Feminism, Capitalism, Commodification

Introduction

"Caryl Churchill is arguably the most successful and best-known socialist-feminist playwright to have emerged from Second Wave feminism" (Reinelt 174). Churchill's *Owners* examines the destructive nature of power, wealth, and human ownership. The play challenges conventional notions of female success through its central character, Marion, who "earns her living by purchasing Islington properties and selling them off for profit, thus taking advantage of the area's gentrification" (Gobert 46). Rather than fostering solidarity with other women, Marion adapts to a fiercely competitive environment to preserve her privileged position. As Belle Derks, Colette Van Laar, and Naomi Ellemers observe, "The derogatory 'queen bee' label is given to women who pursue individual success in male-dominated work settings ... by adjusting to the masculine culture and by distancing themselves from other women" (458). The idea is derived from a beehive, where a single dominant female rules and prevents other females from ascending to power. Marion exemplifies this dynamic by attaining authority within patriarchal structures and consciously distancing herself from other women, using her capitalist success to reproduce the very systems of domination that once excluded her.

Marion is an Epitome of Queen Bee Syndrome

Lisa and Alec are tenants in a property that Marion purchases with the intention of reselling it. Because occupied properties are difficult to sell and often command lower market prices, their presence presents a financial liability for her. As an experienced property developer, Marion recognizes this obstacle and is determined to evict the couple as quickly as possible. What makes her behavior notable is the interpersonal context: Alec and Lisa are longtime friends of both Marion and her husband, Clegg. Furthermore, the play reveals complex, overlapping romantic histories among them. Despite these personal ties, Marion views Alec and Lisa solely as hindrances to her financial success. This practical and totally business-oriented approach to those she knows perfectly epitomizes the dynamics of Queen Bee Syndrome. The following conversation between Marion and Worsley validates this argument:

MARION: Have you been to forty-two?

WORSELY: Three times.

MARION: The basement's no trouble.

WORSELY: The basement's furnished.

MARION: Upstairs. A couple, I think with children. And an old lady [Alec and Lisa's family].

WORSELY: That's the ones.

MARION: How far have you gone?

WORSELY: Five hundred.

MARION: No luck?

WORSELY: I could manage the wife. (*Owners* 21)

This exchange highlights Marion's complete detachment from the human reality of the situation, as she refers to her old friends and their families solely by their



physical locations in the building. By asking how far Worsley has gone and evaluating the cash buyout, she treats the eviction as a tactical business exercise rather than the forced displacement of people she intimately knows. Furthermore, Worsley's comment that he could manage the wife highlights how Marion's capitalist ambitions weaponize aggressive tactics of manipulation against another woman. Instead of offering solidarity to a vulnerable, pregnant friend, Marion acts as the distant architect of her distress, proving that her rise to power depends entirely on replicating patriarchal cruelty. In addition, Marion's attitudes towards her subordinate Worsley "provides a nuanced exploration of workplace dynamics, revealing a phenomenon where women in positions of power not only embrace but also perpetuate mainstream male values" (Hu 381).

The encounter where Lisa seeks Marion's advice regarding her imminent eviction perfectly exposes the predatory nature of Marion's Queen Bee persona. Desperate and heavily pregnant, Lisa approaches Marion under the mistaken belief that their shared history will yield compassion. Lisa appeals to their past by stating that she would not have come for help if she had not thought all that was such a long time ago, adding that they all had some good times once and explaining that she does not know who else she could ask that knows about houses, "I wouldn't have come to you for help if I hadn't thought all that was such a long time ago. But we all had some good times once. I don't know who else I could ask that knows about houses" (Owners 24). This poignant appeal to past friendship and gender solidarity is immediately deflected by Marion, who chooses to view Lisa not as an old friend in crisis but as a financial liability. When Lisa asks for guidance because Marion knows about property and asks if she knows of somewhere they could go, Marion coldly replies "Not at the rent you're paying now of course" (Owners 25). When Lisa explains that Mr Worsley claims the rent is going up and tells her she might as well go, Marion offers no comfort or material aid. Instead of helping a vulnerable woman navigate the harsh housing market, Marion reinforces the systemic pressure on Lisa, silently endorsing the displacement of a working-class family to protect her own profit margins.

Marion's emotional manipulation becomes even more sinister as she ignores the psychological warfare her own company is inflicting on Lisa. Lisa confesses her terror by explaining that she tells herself Mr Worsley is just saying things to frighten her, but he does frighten her, admitting that she would not ask if she was not desperate and that "I didn't want to see you again. But I can't have a baby with the roof off" (Owners 25). Rather than offering shelter or reducing the pressure, Marion treats this profound vulnerability as a business opportunity. While Lisa stands in the room expressing her deep distress, Marion turns her back on her to discuss the building with her agent, asking Worsley if Arlington has seen forty-two yet. When Worsley responds that the buyer "like it with vacant possession. Is that her?" (Owners 26) and asks if Lisa is the tenant in question, the absolute detachment of the Queen Bee is laid bare. "It does not matter to Marion whom she ousts from the buildings she acquires or what pain she causes by her deals" (Howard 36). Marion openly participates in a conversation about stripping away Lisa's home right in front of her, demonstrating how a woman in power can completely distance herself from the suffering of her own sex to satisfy the demands of wealthy male buyers.



The climax of the scene occurs when the layer of deception is stripped away, and Lisa realizes that her old friend is the direct architect of her misery. Upon discovering Worsley in the room, Lisa asks if he knows Marion, prompting Clegg to reveal the truth: "He's Marion's employee my dear. He goes about to all her properties dealing with the tenants. Have a hanky. Blow" (Owners 26-27). The realization that Marion is the landlord driving the eviction causes Lisa to erupt in anger, shouting that she always hated Marion and calling her a horrible bitch, "You mean it's you buying the house? It's all you, Marion, is it? I always hated you, you horrible bitch, you cunt cunt cunt" (Owners 27). Marion's response to this raw emotional breakdown is chillingly clinical and patronizing, as she simply tells Lisa to "Have a cry. Have a good cry. Then we'll see" (Owners 27). By treating Lisa's intense trauma as a mere emotional tantrum that needs to be managed, Marion asserts absolute psychological and economic dominance. She plays with Lisa's emotions like a textbook Queen Bee, reducing a structural tragedy into a minor inconvenience that can be settled once the subjugated woman accepts her powerless position.

Marion's confrontation with Alec further solidifies her alignment with the Queen Bee archetype by demonstrating how she completely subordinates past personal relationships to the cold logic of financial profit. During this tense exchange, Marion explicitly asserts her economic power by telling Alec that she bought the house and confirming that Worsley acts for her. Rather than showing any warmth or remorse for displacing her former lover and his vulnerable family, she utilizes clinical legal jargon to demand vacant possession of her house. This blunt declaration strips away decades of shared history and reduces a family home to a mere commercial unit that must be emptied for market clearance. Jean E. Howard's remark is relevant to cite here:

In the character of Marion, Owners finds a focal point for its exploration of capitalist subjectivity, giving the lie to the essentialist fiction that women's maternal instincts protect the domestic sphere from the penetration of market logic, and underscoring how the drive to consume and acquire destabilizes every kind of human connection. (37)

Marion's total detachment becomes even more pronounced as she plays psychological mind games regarding her motivations for the visit. She initially claims that she only came because "Lisa suggested I came and talked to you. I can offer alternative accommodation. I wouldn't have come otherwise" (Owners 27). However, she immediately subverts this faux-generosity by admitting she would have come anyway. This shift reveals that her presence is not an act of charity or solidarity, but a deliberate assertion of dominance over those who are financially inferior to her.

The true depth of Marion's capitalistic mindset is laid bare when she explains the exact reasoning behind the purchase. She informs Alec that she "knew you were here when I bought the house. That was why. Also the property itself. Desirable investment" (Owners 27). By overlapping the presence of her struggling, impoverished friends with the corporate phrase desirable investment, Marion demonstrates that she views human beings and real estate through the same lens of commodification. Her final boast that she has a great memory for all sorts of little details highlights the Queen Bee's calculating, predatory nature. She does not recall



the past to show empathy, but rather uses her sharp intellect to keep track of human vulnerabilities that can be exploited for business leverage. Ultimately, this proves that Marion's sole focus is the extraction of profit, as she successfully reproduces the most ruthless aspects of patriarchal capitalism by treating her old friends as mere obstacles in her portfolio.

To understand why Marion adopts the predatory tactics of the capitalist market, it is necessary to examine the intense domestic oppression she faces at home within her marriage to Clegg. During a revealing exchange, Marion admires a group of performing women by noting how clever they are, "I do think these girls are so clever. I would never dare. Would I? I don't think so" (Owners 22). Clegg immediately reasserts his authority by warning her to remember her place and insulting her appearance. Clegg openly reduces these performing women to paid objects by stating "It's all right for them, it's what they do. We pay for it" (Owners 22), demonstrating the deep-seated patriarchal view that women are merely commodities to be bought and controlled. By weaponizing wartime propaganda phrases such as "loose talk costs lives" (Owners 22), Clegg attempts to silence Marion and trap her in a state of domestic submission. For the scope of this paper, this interaction serves as the critical psychological catalyst for Marion's trajectory as a Queen Bee. Trapped within a marriage that constantly degrades her and treats women as financial property, Marion chooses to survive not by fighting patriarchal oppression, but by mastering it. She internalizes Clegg's transactional mindset and projects it outward onto the free market, ultimately turning her own domestic trauma into a weapon that she uses to exploit and commodify less fortunate women like Lisa.

Rather than lifting Lisa or seeing her as an equal, Marion uses her financial success to look down on her. While trying to convince Alec to leave his family, Marion openly states that she is better than Lisa:

But you don't love Lisa more than me. Compare us, and I'm better in every way. She's not so clever. Not so attractive. To you, she's not just objectively. She's not even got a particularly nice nature. Though even not particularly nice might be nicer than me, but she's not much of a personality. She doesn't even begin to understand you. I do begin. She's not your equal, and I am. I love you more than she does. (Owners 46).

This moment perfectly highlights the Queen Bee Syndrome, as Marion uses her hard-won economic status to distance herself from the working class and assert her dominance.

By making this claim, Marion redefines the concept of human worth entirely through the lens of capital and property ownership. She does not view equality as a matter of shared gender or mutual human dignity, but rather as something that must be bought and earned through market competition. In her eyes, Lisa's domestic vulnerability and poverty make her inferior, which justifies Marion's right to step in and take whatever she wants, including Lisa's husband:

I don't care if you're mad or sane, Alec. I'm yours whether you want me or not. Have all the money and stay here too if that's what you want. Empires have been lost for love. Worlds well lost. We, men of destiny, get what we're after even if we're destroyed by it. (Owners 31)

This interaction clearly demonstrates how the Queen Bee mentality splits women along class lines. Instead of challenging the patriarchal system that keeps working-class mothers like Lisa in poverty, Marion aligns herself with the values of the oppressors by judging other women based on their financial utility. She uses her individual success as a weapon to diminish Lisa, proving that her ascension to power does nothing to liberate women as a collective group, but instead reinforces the very hierarchies that exclude them.

Marion's obsession with property and market dominance does not stop at the acquisition of physical real estate, as her capitalistic mindset naturally expands from owning buildings to owning human lives. By weaponizing the housing market to force Alec and Lisa out of their home, Marion deliberately creates the very conditions of destitution that she later exploits for her own gain. The eviction serves as the structural trap that pushes the family to the brink of survival, as evident in Lisa's statement: "I'm not bringing a baby home to this. I am not. I'd sooner kill it" (Owners 33), allowing Marion to transition from a ruthless landlord into a literal buyer of human life:

MARION: Have the baby?

LISA: I'm not bringing a baby back to this room.

MARION: I'll take it, yes.

LISA: You take it then. I never want to see it.

MARION: I'll take it then. I'll keep it.

LISA: Yes, keep it. (Owners 33)

Consequently, when Lisa reaches her absolute breaking point financially and emotionally, Marion exploits this manufactured vulnerability by using a legal contract and cash bribes to force Lisa into signing over custody of her newborn baby. The following conversation between Lisa and Marion perfectly exhibits Marion's Queen Bee Syndrome:

LISA: What does it say about the baby?

MARION: Nothing new.

LISA: What? I can't read it.

MARION: No need.

WORSELY: Sign here.

LISA: After, can I see the baby? (Owners 42)

By treating a child and a mother's labor as assets that can be bought and sold, Marion directly replicates the patriarchal system of treating people, and specifically women's bodies, like property.

This transaction represents the absolute peak of Marion's transformation into a capitalist Queen Bee. Instead of offering financial relief or maternal support to a struggling mother, Marion uses her wealth to strip Lisa of her parental rights. She views Lisa's desperation not as a tragedy to be healed, but as a perfect market opportunity to acquire a new asset. By placing a monetary value on a newborn



child, Marion turns the deeply human bond of motherhood into a cold commercial trade. Commenting on this exploitative exchange, R. Darren Gobert states:

In the manner of the capitalist economy she exploits, she co-opts the working class's productivity and manages to produce without labor of her own. Not for the first time, Marion thus claims a patriarchal position: after all, men also have children without the pain of labor. (49)

This act proves that Marion has completely abandoned any sense of female solidarity. She adopts the most abusive habits of historical patriarchy by reducing a woman's reproductive choices to a financial transaction. Rather than fighting a system that historically treated women and children as property, Marion uses that exact system to purchase the child of a less fortunate woman, ensuring her own domestic desires are met at the devastating expense of another mother's grief.

This cruel transaction is not merely a thoughtless business decision, but rather a calculated rejection of female empathy that Marion proudly internalizes. When Lisa desperately begs for her child back, Marion delivers a chilling monologue that exposes the absolute depths of her Queen Bee persona. She openly rebels against the social expectation that women must show compassion toward one another, declaring that she is meant to be kind and meant to understand a woman's feelings, wanting her baby back. However, she immediately shuts down this connection by stating that she does not and she won't. She states:

Every one of you thinks I will give in. Because I'm a woman, is it? I'm meant to be kind. I'm meant to understand a woman's feelings wanting her baby back. I don't. I won't. I can be as terrible as anyone. Soldiers have stuck swords through innocents. I can massacre too. Into the furnace. Why shouldn't I be Genghis Khan? Empires only come by killing (Owners 63).

Through this blunt refusal, Marion completely separates herself from the shared emotional realities of womanhood. "Here, Marion breaks the traditional stereotypes about women being weak and fragile. She states that everyone would expect her to be soft and understanding" (Aghasiyev 71). She chooses to view empathy as a liability that would compromise her capitalistic dominance, proving that she values market victory far above human solidarity.

Rather than seeking empowerment through a supportive or liberating framework, Marion actively models her ambition after the most violent archetypes of male history. She boasts that she can be as terrible as anyone and compares her actions to soldiers who have stuck swords through innocents, even declaring that she can massacre too and asking why she shouldn't be Genghis Khan since empires only come by killing. By aligning her property empire with historical massacres and imperial conquerors, Marion demonstrates that she has fully adopted the brutal, predatory mechanics of patriarchy. "Because of her authoritarian and dictatorial nature, she often finds herself acting in traditionally masculine positions, such as oppressing, administering, and controlling others around her" (Yunus and Kumar 329). She does not wish to destroy the structures of oppression that limit women; she wishes to master them so she can become the conqueror herself.

This terrifying declaration concludes with Marion's admission of deep personal isolation and her ultimate goal of enforcing emotional control through



financial ownership. She acknowledges her total lack of genuine human connection by stating that not one of her peers loves her, but she resolves this void through enforced possession by declaring that the stolen child shall grow up to say he does. By treating a child's love as a forced return on a financial investment, Marion cements her position as the ultimate capitalist Queen Bee. She actively rejects the utopian pursuit of true feminist liberation in favor of an imperial tyranny, ensuring that her individual ascension to power is built entirely on a trail of ruined women and commodified lives.

Marion's transactional treatment of Lisa serves as a striking critique of neoliberal feminism, an ideology that equates female empowerment with individual capitalistic success rather than collective liberation. Under this framework, a woman's progress is measured entirely by her ability to achieve financial independence and master the free market, a mindset that Marion fully embraces. Instead of viewing Lisa's poverty and pregnancy as structural injustices that demand gender solidarity, Marion treats Lisa's vulnerability as a market inefficiency to be managed or exploited. This is clearly demonstrated when Marion dismisses Lisa's desperate housing crisis by flatly stating that she cannot find alternative accommodation at her current low rent, effectively reducing a human crisis to a simple question of affordability. Furthermore, by using cash contracts to purchase Lisa's newborn child, Marion turns reproductive labor into a market asset, proving that her personal advancement directly depends on the economic subjugation of working-class women. Ultimately, Marion's approach highlights the dark reality of neoliberal feminism, showing that when empowerment is tied strictly to capital, it does not liberate women as a whole, but merely allows a privileged woman to become the oppressor of her own sex.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Caryl Churchill's *Owners* provides a harrowing critique of female empowerment when it is co-opted by capitalistic greed, positioning Marion as the ultimate epitome of Queen Bee Syndrome. Driven by the relentless domestic oppression of Clegg, Marion escapes her own subjugation not by destroying patriarchal systems but by mastering them, turning the play's ideological aporia into a site of violent capital accumulation. Through the lens of neoliberal feminism, her individual rise to power depends entirely on her ability to distance herself from vulnerable, working-class women like Lisa, transforming what should be a shared gender identity into a ruthless competitive hierarchy. By forcing the eviction of her old friends and legally purchasing Lisa's newborn child, Marion reduces reproductive labor and human relationships to mere property assets, openly modeling her ambitions after violent male conquerors like Genghis Khan. Ultimately, Marion's predatory matriarchy proves that individual success within a broken framework does nothing to achieve the utopian pursuit of true feminist liberation. Instead, her actions demonstrate that when the matriarch simply adopts the exploitative tools of the patriarch, genuine freedom is completely derailed and the cycle of structural subjugation remains tragically unbroken.

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