Caryl Churchill’s *Fen* deals with the plight of the downtrodden women of an agrarian community in East Anglia. Often considered as one of her bleakest plays with little sunshine and no hope, *Fen* forms a haunting link to the past of 150 years of the fen community. Taking up once again after *Top Girls* the oppression of women by capitalism and patriarchy, Caryl Churchill draws our attention to social injustice characterizing the life of fen women and makes a plea for a change in existing systems and structures.

*Fen*, the winner of the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize for outstanding plays by women, was appreciated for “an impressionistic, class-conscious portrait of an agrarian community” (Rich 10) and also for “dramaturgical inventiveness” (Reinelt 186). Churchill wrote this play after a workshop with Joint Stock Company in 1982. Churchill and the director, Les Waters had read Mary Chamberlain’s *Fen women : Portrait of women in an English Village* (1975). The book relates the lives of agricultural labourers in a fen village. They decided to hold a workshop in Upwell for two weeks. During this time they went into the village, talked to the people there and listened to their stories and experiences. This first-hand encounter with the people of fen developed into a play documenting their personal experiences and their dreams. Churchill recounts her experience in an interview with Emily Mann:

*Fen* is the most documentary of the plays, I suppose. We didn’t use tape recorders. We went off to stay in a village and everyone would go out each day and talk to people and make notes or remember. The actors in the group would
report back by becoming the people they met and saying the things the person had said; you could ask more questions and the actors would start to improvise and develop the character. Those of us who weren’t actors simply described what had happened. So I was left with a lot of notes and quotes and things different people had said. But never a whole speech just lines here and there. And I didn’t make any characters who were based on a single person … practically every line is something that somebody actually said to us, but it’s a composite of many different people. (Betsko and Koenig 80)

The play’s provisional title Strong Girls Always Hoeing (inspired by an 1842 agricultural report that strong girls who are always hoeing can do the work better than men and they cost only 1/6 instead of 2/.) takes an ironic dig at the male workers traditionally believing themselves to be better workers and also points out the economic exploitation of fen women.

The following dialogue between the land owner, Mr. Tweson and farm workers also supports the relevance of the provisional title:

Tewson. You’re good workers. I’ll say that for you.

Nell. Thank you very much. I’ve seen women working in my fields with icicles on their faces. I admire that.

Leading an extremely difficult life of farm workers, these women are seen busy in potato-picking, onion-grading and stone-picking in fields and cooking, ironing, mending and baby-minding at home. There is no respite from hard physical labour for them. Annie Smart, the set-designer for the original production, reflected in her set this image of incessant labour in the life of fen women. She created a single set of furrowed earth
enclosed on three sides by walls suggesting a field and a home at the same time. Signifying the constant labour of these women, agricultural and domestic, the set brought out the difficult life of these fen women.

The play begins (as the audience comes in) with a ‘boy’ from the last century, “barefoot and in rags… alone in a field, in a fog, scaring crows. He shouts and waves a rattle. As the day goes on his voice gets weaker till he is hoarse and shouting in a whisper. It gets dark” (147). The ghostly presence of the boy from the last century brings out the repressed and marginalized in the success story of capitalism. The boy, “barefoot and in rags” and “alone”, shouts but nobody hears him and “his voice gets weaker till he is hoarse” and finally his protest becomes a “whisper”. The voice of the poor and repressed is displaced and forgotten. The fog enveloping this scene conveys the invisibility of the repressed in the history of civilization. Finally, the stage becomes dark and the voice of the boy is lost, indicating the bleak, dark and ignored history of fen people.

The play opens with the speech of a Japanese businessman, Mr. Takai, in suit with camera, narrating “his” history of the fens. The presence of Mr. Takai in formal suit is in total contrast against the poor boy “in rags” from the last century. Moreover, the Japanese businessman, Mr. Takai also represents the modern capitalist trend of multi-national companies which own the fens now. In his opening speech Mr. Takai traces the history of the land to the year 1630 when “rich lords planned to drain fen, change swamp into grazing land” (147). Appreciating the investors for being “brave” and “thinking men”, Mr. Takai discredits the ancient fen people for being “wild people, fen tigers” (147) who walked on stilts and had no vision as they “wanted to keep fishes and eels to
live on” (147). Recording the resistance of fen people, he says, “Refuse work on drainage, smash dykes, broke sluices. Many problems” (147). In this fight between the rich investors and the poor fen people, the capitalists won as Mr. Takai informs us:

But in the end we have this beautiful earth. Very efficient … no wastage. This farm, one of our twenty-five farms, very good investment …. We now among many illustrious landowners, Esso, Gallagher, Imperial Tobacco, Equitable Life, all love this excellent earth.” (147)

Feeling proud of “this excellent earth” which is “very good investment”, Mr. Takai mentions no word about the poor fen people left far behind in the march of capitalism. In his enthusiasm for “excellent earth” with “no wastage” Mr. Takai has marginalized “wild people” and “fen tigers” who are “tamed” and made docile by the progress in the fen. Mr. Takai’s history of progress and development contradicts with the “reality” of the boy’s wasted life in the fen, chasing away crows from dawn to dusk, day after day. But his unconscious comment “How beautiful countryside. I think it is too foggy to take pictures” (147) reveals the fog of repressed history of the struggle of fen people still enveloping the “beautiful countryside”. The repression and sufferings of the ancient fen people continue in the lives of contemporary fen workers. And for this reason precisely the ghost of the boy in the beginning of the play refuses to disappear as we find him appearing once again at the end of the play, thus completing the cycle of poverty and repression.

Fen’s production in 1982 coincided with the return of Margaret Thatcher to power for her second innings as prime-minister and her continued support to capitalist policies of her country. Seen in this background, Mr. Takai’s speech reflects the spirit of
capitalism and Thatcher’s economic policies. Ironically, the very next scene opens with some women and a boy working in a row, potato picking down a field. Together, the image of women bent to the earth in toil immediately after the speech of Mr. Takai in the preceding scene present a critique of capitalism and Thatcherism. Janelle Reinelt quotes Elin Diamond to draw our attention to the connection between the play and the capitalist policies of Margaret Thatcher:

*Fen* grows out of a particularly depressing moment in British politics. The Falkland war of 1982 brought unprecedented popularity to the Thatcher government, which in 1983 was returned to power with a landslide majority. In bitter homage to Thatcherite economic policies, *Fen* opened in January 1983 with a speech by a ‘Japanese businessman’ who praises the ‘beautiful English countryside’ and the fens’ ‘beautiful black earth’ and all the multinationals… that own a piece of them. With this unequivocal reference to global capital fresh in our minds, we meet the fen women ‘working in a row, potato picking down a field’, an immemorial image of peasant labor. (185)

The fen women are caught in a life that offers no respite from work in fields and at home. They appear to have no exit from this mode of life. Val is the first woman in the play who plans to leave the community with her two daughters, Deb and Shona and her lover, Frank. Her wish to escape to London is thwarted by Frank who is unable to imagine himself doing anything else than farming: “what am I supposed to do in London?” (151).

Just before Val approaches Frank with her plan to go to London, we find Frank engaged in an imagined dialogue with Mr. Tewson, the owner of the farm:
But Mr. Tewson I can’t live on the money. You’d get half as much again in a factory, Frank. I wouldn’t blame you. But I remember when your dad worked for my dad and you and your brother played about the yard. Your poor old brother, eh Frank? It was great we got him into that home when your mom died. We’re like family. We’d both put up with a lot to go on living this good old life here. I hate you, you old bugger. (151)

At the end of this speech Frank hits Mr. Tewson, that is, he hits himself across the face. This monologue, imagined as a dialogue between Mr. Tewson and Frank expresses his desire to escape the fens but Mr. Tewson’s argument involving family loyalty holds him back. Frank, supposedly, hits Mr. Tewson to express his anger and frustration at no-escape situation. But in reality he is hitting himself for having been trapped in an emotional binding of family loyalty to Mr. Tewson. Seen objectively, Tewson’s reference to “family” makes the image of family repressive and exploitative. Frank’s inability to protest and really confront Mr. Tewson is brought out by this monologue. It is in this frame of mind that Frank rejects Val’s plan to escape to London. Soon his frustration and anger settle down and a sense of submission and acceptance dawns on him as he convinces Val: “He’s [Mr. Tewson] not a bad boy” (152). Frank has internalized Tewson’s arguments which keep him chained and confined to the fen.

Through Frank the playwright has raised the central issue of acceptance of injustice in the play. Most of the women characters have accepted their oppression as their fate and they have further become their own oppressors by refusing to protest, and instead buying in to the indoctrination passed down through the ages. Only two
characters in the play, Nell and Val try to break free from the misery in their own different ways.

Val’s attempt to leave the fen along with her daughters and her lover Frank proves futile. She, however, seeks some solace in a new life she intends to start with Frank. She definitely shows courage in defying the institution of marriage and family by leaving her husband and daughters behind when she starts living with Frank. But soon she realizes that she cannot live without either her daughters or her lover Frank. “This emotional impasse”, comments Sheila Rabillard, “provides a metaphorical equivalent for the condition of all the fen workers whose livelihood traps and stunts them rather than sustaining them… (2009, 92). Torn between this terrible conflict and unable to find a solution to her problems, Val contemplates religion as a solution to her problems but is soon disillusioned with the idea. She decides finally to seek release through death which ironically turns out to be incomplete solution as we find Val coming as ghost, traversing the fen.

Nell, often viewed as a “trouble maker” is the sole voice of active resistance in the play. Disliked by other women for being “abnormal”, Nell is proud of being “nobody’s right hand” and “their left foot more like. Two left feet” (179). “Funny in the head”, according to Mr. Tewson, Nell is the only woman who raises her voice against the exploitation and injustice. In scene two when Val leaves her job incomplete and goes away without giving any explanation to Mrs. Hassett, the gangmaster, she is warned by Mrs. Hassett that she would lose credit for her work done and would be fired for leaving like this. Nell interferes and asks Mrs. Hassett about Val’s wages. She is snubbed by Hassett for being interfering and threatened that she too may lose her job. Other women
on the farm try to stop Nell, “Come on Nell, let’s get on with it” but Nell retorts, “It is my business …. She treat you the same” (150). In another instance when Mr. Tewson praises women as better workers (“I’ve seen women working in my fields with icicles on their faces. I admire that” (171)) and Shirley proudly attests to this appreciation (“Better than men all right.”), Nell angrily retorts, “Bloody fools, that’s all” (171). Nell critically analyses the situation and calls those women “Bloody fools” who don’t see their own exploitation at the hands of rich landowners. She is angry at the women including herself for enduring extreme hardships for their rich masters. Nell wonders at the passivity and dead acceptance of injustice in other women and asks, “Am I crazy? Am I crazy? Am I Crazy?” (150). Other women have internalized their exploitation to such an extent that they find Nell’s protest “embarrassing”.

Nell’s single status and her “funny” masculine clothes add to her “embarrassing” ways so much so that she is believed to be a “morphrodite” and a “witch”, reminding us of “witches” in Vinegar Tom. Nell’s inability to conform to accepted ways of life makes her an object of scorn and ridicule. Having failed to play the gender roles of a wife and a mother, Nell is mocked at by Becky, Deb and Shona, the children who are growing up in a society which has fixed patriarchal norms of masculinity and femininity. Believing that “she eats little children” and “she talks to herself. That’s spells”, Becky attacks Nell with a garden hoe with Deb prodding Becky to “Kill her” (155-156). Nell retaliates by putting Shona in a cage and calls them “nasty, nasty children” (157). Nell is so dejected by her inability to bring a change in life around her that she tells the children, “You should be entirely different. Everything. Everything” (157).
But ironically Churchill makes Nell act out and represent sexual stereotypes of patriarchal ideology at the end of this scene. Nell imprisons Shona in a cage which becomes an image of woman tortured by woman. Nell, suspected to be a morphrodite, also replicates masculine stereotype with her violent and aggressive behaviour towards Shona, a female. We can see the repetition of the same sexual stereotypes in her “frightening” story where unfaithful wife and her lover are stitched together with a pitchfork by the husband. Her story once again presents the gender constructs with what is appropriate. The wife receives just punishment for being faithless and for having attempted to murder her husband. The violence of the husband against his wife becomes justified because patriarchy allows a man total rights to his wife’s body.

Another woman, Angela, finds her life so drab that she inflicts pain on her stepdaughter Becky to “feel” something. In her struggle to locate herself, Angela victimizes Becky, emotionally and physically. She forces Becky to drink boiling hot water and threatens to kill her if she makes it known to her father or anyone else. Becky’s attempt to pour out her romanticized feelings for her biological mother in a poem is mocked at : “Wouldn’t want to be the mother of a filthy little cow like you. Pity you didn’t die with her. Your dad wishes you’d died with her…” (153). Instead of understanding the dilemma of a teenaged daughter’s mind expressed in a poem about love, Angela finds it dirty and filthy. The playwright draws our attention to the fact that sometimes the burden of socially submissive behavior is eased off by women through aggression and violence exercised on those in lesser positions of power. In an attempt to feel her own pain, Angela, asks her, “Becky, do you feel it? I don’t … I have to make some thing happen. I can hurt you, can’t I? you feel it, don’t you, let me burn you. I have
to hurt you worse. I think I can feel something. It’s my own pain. I must be here if it hurts” (189). Angela is living in a society that equates violence with power. When Angela asks Becky to feel sorry for being bad, she immediately does it: “Sorry Angela, bad all through”. But Angela strokes Becky’s hair and then yanks it, telling her, “No stamina, have you? ‘Sorry Angela’. What you made of, girl?” (154). Angela hates this submissiveness of Becky as it reminds her of her own submissiveness to injustice and exploitation outside, over which she has no control. In Angela’s violent reaction to Becky’s immediate apology we can read her desperate need for protest and action against her exploiters. Pain and suffering have become an integral part of the life of these women and accordingly Angela’s pain and suffering tell her that she’s alive. Angela too is a victim of her own violence.

Anger, helplessness and frustration manifest in violence in the life on the fens. We come across numerous similar instances of violence in the play: Becky attacks Nell with a hoe, Frank hits himself (Mr. Tewson), Nell imprisons Shona in a cage, Angela forces Becky to drink boiling hot water and burns her with a cigarette, and Frank kills Val with an axe. Shirley too relates her grandmother’s story that how they used to mutilate cattle: “Go out in the night and cut a sheep’s throat or hamstring a horse or stab a cow with a fork…. She stabbed a lamb. She slashed a foal. ‘What for?’ I said. They felt quieter after that … (189). All these images of violence demonstrate that the victims of repression often victimize others. Unable to retaliate against the powerful and caught and confined in rigid social structures, they become violent towards themselves and those lower to them in power hierarchy.
These incidents of violence from Shirley’s Grandmother’s story to attack on Nell by Becky, Deb and Shona illustrate that violence is rampant across generations and Churchill emphasizes this point by placing the Becky-Nell incident immediately after Angela’s torture and threat to Becky. We find Becky repeating the same threat to Nell: “I’ll kill you. Kill you with the hoe. You’re horrible” (156). Churchill demonstrates how violence is passed on from one generation to the next.

The first of the five quotations from the fen villagers used as epigraphs to the play-text says, “It was work, work, work, it was all their lives” (144). The playwright has created Shirley to suit this image the best. She is depicted as constantly working on the fields and at home. She tells Val, “Can’t think when you are working on the field, can you? It’s work, work, then you think, ‘I wonder what the time is’, and it’s dinner time. Then you work again and you think, ‘I wonder if it’s time to go home’, and it is” (168). We find Shirley always working – mending, ironing, preparing dinner, minding a baby and so on. With no time for herself or to contemplate on her life, Shirley takes stoic pride in her ability to work long hours in extreme conditions. In scene twelve we find Shirley continuing her work in the field in sharp rain with a proud feeling of “I can” while other women have gone away. This scene opens with Shirley singing a song:

> Who would true valour see
> Let him come hither
> One here will constant be
> Come wind come weather.
> There’s no discouragement
> Shall make him once relent
His first avowed intent

To be a pilgrim. (171)

Shirley takes pride in her “true valour” and for being “constant” in all weathers. Comparing herself to an avowed “pilgrim” who faces all “discouragement” but never relents and finally achieves his goal, Shirley, it seems, is taking pleasure in her own exploitation, mistaking it for God-given hardships. Shirley presents an extreme example of the oppressed who become complacent in their exploitation and in a way acquiesce in their own oppression. In an interview to Emily Mann, Churchill tells, “There were a lot of things from one particular that went into the character Shirley, who’s always working, about pride in working hard and not giving up, …” (80). Recounting her experience to Val, Shirley says, “Same thing when I went into service. I was fifteen and I hated it, they had me for a week’s trial and I could have gone home at the end of it but I didn’t want my mother to think she’d bred a gibber. Stayed my full year” (168). Having received a legacy to be exploited, Shirley cannot think of any other way of proving herself to her mother than by working ceaselessly. Women like Shirley negate any hope or effort towards resistance and protest against their exploitation.

Shirley’s unemployed husband Geoffery demands dinner as soon as he enters home. Sipping his soup, he blames his unemployment on the Russians and the common markets. Complaining about the “Declining morals all round” (170), Geoffery is unable to adjust in the changing work scenario, as he says, “Being a horseman was proper work, but all your Frank does is sit on a tractor. Sitting down is not work” (170). Geoffery associates work with hard physical labour and violence as he comments, “All the boys want to do today … is drive their bikes and waste petrol. When we went to school we got
beaten and when we got home we got beaten again. They don’t want to work today” (169). Geoffery has internalized the exploitation to such an extent that he thinks that there can be no work without being beaten up. For him life means nothing more than mere survival as he says, “My mother was glad she could … keep us alive, that’s all” (170). Shirley and Geoffery together present an extreme image of passive acceptance of their poverty and sufferings. Geoffery’s blame on the Russians and the common-market also demonstrates his helplessness and inability to protest against a power far removed and distant.

In scene nine of the play there is a dialogue between Mr. Tewson, the master of the land and Mrs. Cade, representing the City, a big corporation. Making all calculations and bargains and ensuring that “his grandson will farm his grandfather’s acres” and he himself will have “the capital to reinvest. Land and machinery” (162), Mr. Tewson doesn’t spare even a single moment in this discussion on the terms of his bargain with the City to the thought of fen workers’ life. Instead, he says, “everything will go on the same”, revealing the sheer apathy and indifference towards the lot of fen workers.

The presence of ninety-year-old Ivy, Val’s grandmother, brings out the sad plight of fen women going through the same sufferings from one generation to the next. Recalling her life full of hardships, she tells us, “I come home late from school on purpose so I wouldn’t have to help mum with the beet. So I had to go without tea and straight out to the field. ‘You can have tea in the dark’, mum said, ‘but you can’t pick beet in the dark’. I were six then” (177). Ivy’s sad tale of lost childhood and a life of toil and struggle also reveals that any effort by fen workers to organize themselves through unions was discouraged and thwarted by capitalist masters: “Fellow [union man] came
round on his bike and made his speech in the empty street and everybody’s be in the house listening because they daren’t go out because what old Tewson [landlord] might say” (177-178).

The good old tale of Ivy holds true even today when we find Mr. Tewson suggesting to Frank to keep away from the union: “I’m not against the union, Frank. I can see the sense of it for your big newfangled farms. Not when people are friends” (151). We see the same suffering and exploitation in the life of these people as in the story of old Ivy. No wonder, little has changed in the absence of any resistance and protest by those suffering for years together.

The women in *Fen* are defined primarily by their role in the family. As grandmothers, mothers, daughters and wives, they are expected to do their duties in their families, besides contributing to the family income by working on the fields. A woman without having to play either of these roles becomes “abnormal” or “funny” like Nell. Or, women like Val who leave their children behind uncared for are “acting funny” (164). Val’s mother May reminds her, “I stand by my children. I’d never have left you, Val …. I’d go through fire. What’s stronger than that?” (160). Val, by abandoning her children, has failed according to a commonly held notion of motherhood. Val’s case demonstrates that a woman is liable to be condemned by the society for having failed to do her primary duty as a mother. Any deviation in the fixed roles of a woman has to be rejected and condemned. Frank too has left his family behind and is living with Val but he is not condemned and criticized as Val is done. Even Val, though dares to act unconventionally, yet finds herself guilty. Having been fed on the conventions of gender roles and motherhood, Val soon starts oscillating between her children and her lover Frank.
Angela’s comment on “unnatural” behaviour of Val that “She’s … acting funny. Leave her own kiddies” (164) sounds ironic in the light of her own physical and mental abuse of her daughter Becky. But her statement that “If I had my own kiddies I wouldn’t leave them” (164) subscribes to the conventional belief that biologically bound mother and children bond together. In her role as a stepmother, Angela again is subscribing to a conventional image of a stepmother. This image is reiterated in Nell’s story of her grandfather who was victimized by his father’s live-in-mistress.

Through these two instances of abusive stepmother, Churchill explores the role of social construction of gender in the behaviour of Becky and Nell’s grandfather. Becky’s extreme physical and emotional abuse at the hands of Angela doesn’t lead her into taking a step towards freedom by running away as does Nell’s grandfather when he was only ten. Becky has been brought up in a society where fen girls “never leave the village”, so escape from an abusive situation is no option, whereas Nell’s grandfather, belonging to the same social set-up, decides to leave when exposed to much milder abuse than that of Becky. These two instances point out the widely different gender roles and also the privileged position of males in a patriarchal set-up.

Through the depiction of mother-daughter relationship in *Fen*, Churchill also dramatizes the significance of mothers’ role in instilling in their children a sense of compliance with patriarchal ideology. Once again Churchill takes up this issue after *Cloud Nine* through many instances in the play where mothers become active enforcers of the dominant ideology. Val’s mother May repeatedly admonishes Val for her “nonsense” and questions her, “What you after? Happiness! Got it have you? Bluebird of happiness? Got it have you? Bluebird?” (206). Showing her strong disapproval of Val’s
affair, May tries to make her daughter realize the futility of running after “Bluebird of happiness”. Defiance of convention can never lead a woman to happiness in an orthodox society. The playwright emphasizes this issue by repeating it in Shirley’s words to her infant granddaughter: “Nothing’s perfect is it, my poppet?” (169). Spoken in response to Val’s unhappiness, Shirley is preparing the infant to grow up in a world which will give her no happiness.

Not only that, the mothers prepare their daughters for a life of struggle, drudgery and hardwork. May’s ninety-year-old mother Ivy tells us while narrating her story that how her mother put her to work when she was just eight. Similarly, Shirley too recounts how her mother instilled in her a sense of work ethic: “My mother wouldn’t let me off. ‘Just get on with it, Shirley’ ” (167). Shirley has learnt her lessons well as we find her going “from one job to another” (167) and never stopping. A mother’s role in the socialization of their daughters into capitalist ideology becomes obvious once again when we find Angela’s daughter Becky working with other women in rain and Angela admonishing her: “What you made of, Becky” (172). And Becky’s response, realizing the difficult life of fen women that “I want to be a Hairdresser” (172) shows her desire to escape the fate of all fen women. Within capitalist patriarchy a woman’s life consists of endless struggle and sufferings. Caught in this cycle of oppression and exploitation the mothers in fen continue to push their daughters towards a cursed existence as is attested by the examples of Shirley, Ivy and Becky in the play.

The women of the fen seek escape from their oppressive lives in three ways – religion, story-telling and death (Val’s choice). Nell’s narration of a long story brings temporary fictional escape from their labours. The story, supposedly narrated by Nell’s
grandfather, is believed by some to be true as he “used to swear this really happened” (164). The story, essentially a male representation of the past, records a violent murder of an adulterous couple by a vengeful farmer, the husband of the woman in the story. Nell’s grandfather, then a ten-year-old boy, witnessed this macabre murder and is bribed and threatened by the farmer to remain silent about the incident. The gory details of the murder in the story elicit no horrified response from the listeners. Instead, they find it funny. The sufferings in their own lives have hardened them to such an extent that even violence doesn’t move them. Nell’s response concerning the veracity of the story that “There’s harder things to believe than that. Makes me laugh” also conveys to us the extent to which these women have accepted the hardships and sufferings of their lives as their inescapable destiny.

Another escape sought by the women on the fen is religion. In the Baptist revival meeting attended by many women including Val, we find Mrs. Finch telling the congregation, “This is not a perfect world and we can’t be perfect in it” (174). Margaret, another member tells them, “I’ve been unhappy as long as I remember. My mother and father were unhappy too. I think my grandparents were unhappy” (174). Speaking about her life marked by physical abuse, deaths and her own alcohol abuse, Margaret says, “I want to give myself over completely to God so there’s nothing else of me left, and then the pain will be gone and I’ll be saved” (175). Margaret is trying to forget her painful past by submitting herself to the will of the lord. Through a spiritual death she hopes to enter a better world. Alice’s comment “we’re all rubbish but Jesus still loves us so it’s all right” (176) also reflects the same attitude of acceptance of sufferings as expressed by Margaret. By accepting themselves as rubbish these women justify their sufferings and exploitation.
The playwright has focused upon the oppressive and confining nature of religious principles and limitations of women’s world. By preaching the principles of ‘denial of the body’ and ‘acceptance of one’s lot’ these women reject any possibility of change. No wonder, Val who is desperate to find a way out of her sufferings rejects the spiritual solution to her problems and prefers a pill which can give her a temporary relief from her mental as well as physical sufferings as she says, “I’d rather take valium” (176).

Finally, Val opts for a well-scripted suicide which, she believed, will liberate her from all miseries. Having been unable to exercise any control over her own life, now Val seeks to exercise her power to script her own death. Literally marking her body with a pen, Val instructs Frank how and where to stab her, “Just say you love me and put the knife in and hold me till it’s over” (186). Cecilia H. Liu comments: “Unable to ‘write’ her body in the sense of representing its desires. Val literally writes ‘on’ her body …” (78). But Val’s request to Frank to kill her gently and hold her in his arms till she dies is not acceded. Instead, Frank kills her savagely with an axe and puts her body in the wardrobe. Val’s violent death demonstrates Frank’s (masculine) autonomous power over Val (feminine) who dies subject to his patriarchal authority.

Val’s attempt to escape the sufferings of her life through death doesn’t succeed in the sense that she (her ghost) walks back onstage from the other side and begins talking. She haunts the fen just the same way as many other ghosts do. Cecilia H.C. Liu explains the purpose of raising the dead Val: The answer lies I think in the analogies set up between cyclic economic exploitation, the erasure of female desire and the regime of permissible visibility in theatrical representation. (78).
Through Val’s re-emergence as a ghost Churchill extends and widens the boundaries of what can be seen and said as representation. Elin Diamond comments:

Val re-emerges not as a prophetic ghost or a misty mystified body but as a consciousness that instantiates a new theatre space… she ventriloquizes the stories of other dead, but more importantly by her bodily presence makes a space for her fellow labourers to explore and change their suffering …. (271)

After Val’s re-emergence as a ghost, she meets many other ghosts and hears their stories of repression. Val also details Becky’s nightmare in which she is trying to flee her tormentor Angela who is chasing her and by tormenting her she is trying to “feel something” (189). Becky’s final words in the play, “you can’t, I won’t, I’m not playing. You’re not here” (180) indicate Becky’s resolution to protest and stop being a victim. But one wonders whether Becky’s resolution, expressed in Val’s death-space, would ever become a reality and her desire to ‘wake up” ever realized.

After Angela’s exit, we find Nell crossing on stilts, reminding us of the “wild people, fen tigers” (147) of 1630 who resisted against the drainage of the fen carried out by the rich landlords. This image of “fen tigers” symbolic of collective resistance and opposition is brought back to life by Nell walking on stilts. She states, “I was walking out on the fen. The sun spoke to me. It said, ‘Turn back, turn back’. I said, ‘I won’t turn back for you or anyone’ ” (189). Nell’s bold declaration of liberation and a clear snub to the sun (symbolic of eternally traversing the same path) brings a hope of change in the life of fen people.

Becky’s and Nell’s last remarks may raise a hope to bring sunshine in “the dank, Thomas Hardy-hued world” (Rich 10) of the fen but the hope is raised only in Val’s
death space which lacks substantiality. Elin Diamond also sees no hope in this scene, as she says:

The death-space permits a representation of the un-presentable, what Cixous has called the ‘unheard songs’ of the libidinal (and revolutionary) female body. Yet there is no effective triumph in these songs, rather a grim awareness of the conditions that prevent their singing. (272)

Cecilia H. Liu too refuses to accept Nell’s hope as real: “In this play, the dream of another future, of breaking ideological and intertextual bonds can be characterized as hallucination” (79).

The last conversation between Frank and Val at the end of the play too suggests no hope of another future:

Frank. I’ve killed the only person I love.

Val. It’s what I wanted.

Frank. You should have wanted something different. (190)

Frank’s desire for “something different” (obviously, a desire for freedom from the life of misery and exploitation) is “named between them, never reaches the status of discourse” (Liu, 79). It remains just a hopeless wish on which the curtain is finally drawn with the appearance of the boy who scared crow at the opening of the play and the song of May.

The boy’s utterance “Jarvis, Jarvis, come and make my coffin” (190) is a repetition of the old man’s words in the ninety-year-old Ivy’s tale. The only difference is that these grim words of a hundred-year-old man are now being repeated by a young boy from the last century, emphasizing that the wish for death is now not confined to the old but the young too express the same wish. Moreover, this repetition also conveys that the
sufferings of fen workers have remained the same for over a hundred years. In another scene (scene nine) the ghost of a woman worker confronts the owner of the farm, Mr. Tewson:

We are starving, we will not stand this no longer. You bloody farmers could not live if it was not for the poor, …. Them that keep you bloody rascals alive, …. I should very well like to hang you the same as I hanged your beasts. You bloody rogue, I will light up a little fire for you the first opportunity I can make. (163)

These ghostly threats fail to scare and deter Mr. Tewson who informs her, “My father saw you. I didn’t believe him” (163). The sufferings and agony of the exploited have never moved the exploiters. The presence of a hundred and fifty-year-old ghost of a woman demonstrates that nothing has changed in the lives of fen women. Ann Wilson comments: “Ghosts are the return of voices displaced from history because the recognition of these experiences would disrupt the claim of history as progress” (165). When informed by Mr. Tewson that he was selling the farm and “everything will go on the same”, the ghost says, “That’s why I’m angry” (163). The ghost realizes that the exploitation and sufferings of fen women will continue whoever be the master, the landlords or the big corporate houses. The parting revelation of the woman ghost that “I live in your house I watch television with you. I stand beside you and watch the killings. I watch the food and I watch that makes people laugh. My baby died starving” (163) is a reminder to Mr. Tewson that past continues to haunt those responsible for the sufferings of the people of fen.

The play ends with May’s song, the same song sung earlier by the girls (Becky, Deb and Shona). Expressing the desire to become a nurse, hair-dresser, teacher or a cook,
the woman wishes to break free from the cycle of oppressive life on the fen. The song seems to contradict Val’s last comment in the play that “My mother wanted to be a singer. That’s why she’d never sing” (190). Many critics have found in May’s song a moment of hope but Churchill clearly states in her production note of the play: “May sings, i.e. she stands as if singing and we hear what she would have liked to sing. So something amazing and beautiful – she wouldn’t sing unless she could sing like that” (145). So May’s song is just a lip-sync. The beautiful voice and the desires expressed in the song remain unrealized for May. Liu’s observation on this sung and yet unsung song is significant:

“Certainly this is a kind of resistance, but it is misplaced and thus, wasted. To extrapolate from May’s position, if one cannot make the revolution in exactly the way that one wants to, she will never revolt, will never provoke change, and will never get off the fen” (75).

Thus May’s song becomes nothing more than a wishful thinking with no trace of action and resistance against the oppressive system. Moreover, May’s solo song at the end of the play, earlier sung by a group of girls in the middle of the play also conveys that there is no hope of solidarity among women against their exploitation. We see a bleak future of the fen also in the fact that, the old May’s song at the end of the play forecasts and frames a hopeless future of the young girls who will grow up, work on the fen, as they are caught in a hopeless cycle and may sing this song in their old age as their grandmother does. Their future looks like essentially the same as that of their grandmother.

Despite such a “desperately bleak ending” Janelle Reinelt admires Churchill’s “dramaturgical inventiveness in the final scenes and for insistence on the different laws
of theatrical illusion” which provide “an alternative space, almost a different play where the linearity of plot gives way to the desires and images of the Fen woman” (186). Churchill makes the dead Val walk on stage as a ghost listening to the stories of other ghosts; brings alive the dreams of Becky; makes Nell act as a fen tiger and makes May sing a song despite the fact that she couldn’t sing. Commenting upon these unrealistic modes of expression, Elin Diamond says, “Churchill in effect moves the vanishing point. She decisively alters the logic of illusion–apparatus in which women’s desires cannot appear” (qtd in Reinelt 186). Commenting further on this alternative dramaturgy of Churchill and linking it with similar inventiveness noticed in some of her other plays, Reinelt says:

This alternative closing vision breaks open the closed dramaturgy of the preceding scenes. It is a gesture which links Fen to other moments in Cloud 9 (the embracing of the two Bettys in the last scene), and the fanciful luncheon party in Top Girls. Thus Churchill refuses the finality and closure of stage realism by creating alternative theatrical fictions, parallel universes displaying a different logic and temporal scheme. These ruptures are one element of the politics of style, one of Churchill’s means of refusing the closure of representation and the tyranny of the past. (186)

Coming back to the significance of songs in the play, the girls’ song sung in scene seven not only outlines the desires and dreams of young fen girls but also expresses the sad fact of their limited vision. Even in their dreams and wishes these oppressed children of the fen do not go beyond the roles traditionally associated with women. They sing:

I want to be a nurse when I grow up

~229
And I want to have children and get married.

But I don’t think I’ll leave the village when I grow up.

I want to be a hairdresser when I grow up or perhaps a teacher.

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I want to be a cook when I grow up.

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I don’t think about what I want to be.

I don’t mind housework.

I think I want to be housewife until I think of another job.

When I grow up I’m going to be a nurse and if not a hairdresser.

I’m going to be a hairdresser when I grow up and if not a nurse. (158)

The song records the aspirations of these girls limited to the typically feminine vocations, the limited area of gender roles women are allowed to operate in by the patriarchal ideology. Liu comments: “The girls have indeed heard themselves clearly being “hailed” by the ideological and discursive structuring of their society” (75). Even their desires and wishes demonstrate their early socialization into gender specific roles. But the line “But I don’t think I’ll leave the village when I grow up” in the very first stanza of the song renders the whole exercise futile. The contradictions in the song convey this reality of their life that most likely they will “grow up”, “get married”, “have children” and work on the fen like their mothers and grandmothers.

This song, sung at two different occasions by different characters, and another one, sung by Shirley, discussed earlier, serve as effective epic device to disrupt the flow
of the action in the play. The songs make us pause for a while and ponder over the critical issues underlined in the songs. Forming an integral part of the alienating dramaturgy of the playwright, these songs expose the working of ideology.

Another Brechtian epic technique used by Churchill in *Fen* is episodic structure. The play, divided in twenty one scenes, uses this structure to unfold the story of fen women who are caught in an intricate patriarchal capitalist system of a society and leading a doomed existence. Retaining the inter-connected unity of the story, the scenes take place one after another in a continuity and yet stand independently, conveying their own meaning. For example, the opening scene with Mr. Takai’s speech has no other character and moreover, Mr. Takai neither appears in the play again nor is mentioned by any other character in the story and yet the first scene constitutes a powerful commentary on the commercialization of agricultural land and the consequent oppression of the poor working on the land.

Based on the real experiences of life of fen people and Mary Chamberlain’s historical documentation of the fen life in her book *Fenwomen: A Portrait of Women in an English Village*, Churchill planned her play as documentary. This episodic structure with twenty-one independent scenes of the life of fen workers suits the requirement of the documentary format of the play.

The set of the play too, mentioned by Churchill in her production notes, suits the demands of the play’s epic structure. The unrealistic set of Annie Smart, the set designer, captured the grim reality of the life of fen women. Enclosing a furrowed potato field with three walls of a room, the set creates a sad and grim ambience of poverty and also conveys the constant toil of these fen women, domestic and agricultural, and how
inseparable they have become in their lives. Bound to their homes and the land, these low
paid fen women are leading enclosed lives. Sheila Rabillard observes: “… as the stage set
linked the women and the land they worked, it created a spatial hierarchy, a visual
language that lifted some into power and bent others towards the soil that carpeted the
stage” (66). This is the first play out of the five we have taken up for analysis in this
thesis for which Churchill has credited the set designer for her “brilliant” work:

From the workshop and from talking to Les Waters and Annie Smart before I
wrote the play, I had some idea of what the play was like physically while I was
writing it, and certain things are essential part of its structure: no interval, almost
continuous action (the scenes following with hardly a break), all furniture and
props on stage throughout and one set which doesn’t change. In the original
production this was achieved by Annie Smart’s design of a field in a room, which
was brilliant but which I can’t claim as part of the play as I wrote it. (145)
The unrealistic setting of the play also helps the audience to realize the limitations of a
theatre, the constructed nature of the theatrical event and objectively analyze the real
issues without being swept away with the story. By blocking empathy in audience, the
unrealistic set succeeds as an alienation technique.

Another Brechtian technique employed by Churchill in this play is historification.
The play opens with the scene in which “a boy from the last century, barefoot and in rags,
is alone in a field, in a fog, scaring crows. He shouts and waves a rattle. As the day goes
on his voice gets weaker till he is hoarse and shouting in a whisper. It gets dark” (147).
Presented as a piece of history, this scene from the last century not only linked the
oppression of fen women to the past but also enabled the audience to have a better critical
perspective of the issues taken up by the playwright in her production. We have a few more instances of historification in the play: the woman ghost encountered by Mr. Tewson and the ninety- year-old Ivy’s stories of the past, the story of the fen itself, drained and developed into grazing grounds by rich landlords. The technique of historification enables us not only to establish the links between the past and the present but also allows us to analyse critically the politics of capitalism which has reduced the life of fenworkers to endless labour and poverty.

Churchill has used the technique of cross-casting once again to serve a thematic purpose. The role of the boy in the beginning of the play is played by a woman, also playing the role of Angela, Deb and Mrs. Finch. Similarly, Mr. Takai’s role is again played by a woman, Nell. By making a woman play the role of a boy, Churchill emphasizes the vulnerable and subordinate position of women and children in a family and society where power rests with male adults. The boy, bare-foot and in rags, speechless and engaged in his work of scaring crows stands closer to women in hierarchy of power. Compared with other men in the play, Mr. Tewson, the landlord, Geoferry, the husband of Shirley, Frank, operating a tractor in the fields (so in a better position than women engaged in manual work from morning till evening), the boy occupies a position nearer to women than men in the play. And this also justifies the cross – casting of the boy who appears at the end of the scene as well to emphasize the continuing sufferings of the fen women. Another purpose served by this cross–casting is to bring into focus the notion of gender as construct.

Similarly, Mr. Takai’s role is played by Nell, the only woman to raise her voice against the oppression on the fen. The presence of Mr. Takai on the fen fails to bring any
change in the miserable life of fen women and thus he remains a distant, strange and queer figure from the point of view of fen women. By doubling the role of Mr. Takai and Nell, Churchill brings in to focus the futility of Nell’s resistance and protest against their exploitation and their inability to reach the far removed Japanese conglomerate represented by Mr. Takai. The fen-tiger mentioned by Mr. Takai in his speech is enacted by Nell in the last scene when she crosses the fens on stilts. This ironical representation draws one’s attention to the logic of this cross-casting and doubling.

Churchill has distributed twenty-two roles among just six actors, each playing at least two to four roles. John Simon observes:

Five actresses and one actor … as it were, the entire population of a hamlet: the toilers on the earth, the harsh overseers who are themselves exploited, even the ultimate overlord from a Japanese conglomerate. But the subject seems more suited to a semi-documentary film. There are too many characters for us to get truly involved with any (shrewd old Brecht always managed to have a central charismatic figure or two), and played by too few actors, adding to our confusion. (77)

Simon’s objection to confusion caused by doubling and tripling of roles by actors in the play fails to take into account the fact that Churchill wanted to include as many personality types as possible to depict the various populace of fen village. Churchill avoids the fixity of characterization for this purpose.

Mark Thaker Brown comments:

“The lack of specificity and the quick, impressionistic slices of life which compose the play lead the viewer to a conviction of the truthfulness of the picture of country life it portrays. Churchill does not insist on clearly and deeply defined
characters because she does not want us to assume that these are isolated, exceptional examples of oppression under a capitalist system (45).

Thus complying with the feminist theatrical form which questions and subverts the stereotypes, Churchill has repeated her technique of doubling in this play which also serves to create defamiliarization effect on the audience and keeps the real issues foregrounded in the play.

Angela also plays the role of Mrs. Finch, an evangelist. By linking Angela, the stepmother with Mrs. Finch whom we meet in the Church, the playwright emphasizes the role played by the family and religion in supporting and nurturing the patriarchal system. Similarly, Angela also plays the role of Deb, the nine-year-old daughter of Val. When the child-abuser Angela reappears as innocent Deb, one is forced to think about the role of violence as a manifestation of power, often exercised on the weak and helpless.

We also find Val playing the role of the woman ghost from the last century. This ghost whose “baby died starving” represents the history of exploitation and oppression of fen women. By making Val double the role of the ghost we can easily establish the connection of repeated history between the two woman characters. Moreover, the ghost can also be seen as reflecting the future of Val who is desperate to escape the miseries of her life and finally commits suicide and haunts the fen as a ghost.

By doubling ninety-year-old Ivy with fifteen-year-old Becky, Churchill emphasizes the doomed future of Becky being reflected in the sad narrations of old Ivy. Despite Becky singing the girls’ song expressing her desires and dreams, we realize the futility of her desires going awry in a hopeless social and economic set-up. She will lead a life no better than that of old Ivy.
Similarly Churchill has used this device of doubling for many more characters and established a link among them either to highlight similarity among them or to create a contrast so as to make us think critically about the real issues raised in the play.

One more set of doubling demanding explanation is that of Frank, Wilson, Mr. Tewson and Geoffrey, all played by a single male actor. Mr. Tewson’s position is widely different from other male characters who are mere workers on his land. But by making Mr. Tewson sell his land to big corporation, Churchill stresses that Mr. Tewson’s position too is now subordinate to his bigger boss, the corporation. Moreover, by grouping these four male characters together Churchill has emphasized the fact that none of these men has taken any step towards the alleviation of their sufferings. Rather, Frank refuses to accompany Val to London; the unemployed husband Geoffrey just complains and demands his dinner as soon as he enters his house; Wilson, instead of protesting against the wage-cut Val may have to suffer when she leaves her job incomplete, grabs her job to earn more. Occupying a slightly better position in society than women folk of the fen, all these men constitute together and reinforce a patriarchal power that further exploits the fen women in a capitalistic set-up.

Churchill’s dramatic language characterized by the frequent overlaps, pauses, rhythmic stops and starts reveals the thoughts, meanings and motivations of her characters. *Fen*, as mentioned earlier, is a product of two week long workshop with Joint Stock Company in Upwell, a fen village. Churchill in her introduction to *Plays: Two* announces: “*Fen* is a play with more direct quotes of things people said to us than any other I’ve written”. Conducting an oral research in a fen village, Churchill tried to catch
the rhythm of their language. The epigraph of the play-text uses five quotations from fen villagers. Elaine Aston remarks:

Through talking to people, the actors learned about lives, the work and the history of the Fen community…. [Churchill argues that] researching history “offers the possibility of creating a democratic history in that it offers the means of expression for the past of ‘Common people’. *Fen* is the result of a dialogue with a community.” (65)

Churchill’s language in *Fen* successfully captures the mood of the fen people reflecting their helplessness, a sense of resignation, anger and frustration, dreams and aspirations in a pervading atmosphere of grim dejection. John A. Price traces the semiotic resemblance of Churchill to Pinter and Mamet in the following lines while associating her language to a local and global oppression:

VAL. Don’t start me. Just because you had nothing.

MAY. Don’t speak to me like that,/my girl, or it is out you go.

DEB. Don’t speak to my mum.

VAL. I’ve not been here/five minutes.

DEB. Don’t speak to my nan.

VAL. Shut up Deb.

MAY. Don’t speak to the child like that.

*(SHONA screams and runs off. Silence)*. Don’t go after her.

VAL. Don’t go after her.

MAY. Deb you go and look after your sister.

DEB. No.

*Pause*
VAL. I’d better go after her.

DEB. Leave her alone.

MAY. Leave her alone a bit, best thing.

Silence. (159-160)

[The slash (/) indicates the point of interruption by the next character.]

Price comments:

The struggle of the Fen women, their conflicts within a patriarchy, symbolized by their conflicts within a family, are representatives of Churchill’s political views – feminist semiotics. In lines two through five, notice the overlapping, broken, and interrupted rhythms; as well as the accelerated, clipped, and emotionally charged lines between the scattered, yet pervasive use of silence and pauses – theatre semiotics. (7)

We can trace many more similar examples in the text of Fen where Churchill has effectively used language to convey the predicament of the fen women.

The play can also be read to some extent from the point of view of ecofeminism. Sheila Rabillard in her essay “Fen and the Production of a Feminist Ecotheatre” observes: “Fen engages an emerging body of theory that links a socialist feminist critique with ecological politics – what has come to be called ‘ecofeminism’ ” (63). It analyses the relationship between the patriarchal oppression of women and the human domination of non-human nature. In Fen, the opening speech of Mr. Takai narrates the drainage of the fen land and converting the marshes into a cultivable land which is “very efficient, flat land, plough right up to the edge, no waste” (147). The destruction of the wild fens, the reduction of wilderness to human terms can be understood as the domination of masculine over feminine values. The play grows out of this core issue of the capitalist
domination of nature by men and the connected patriarchal domination of women by men, pointing out the commodification of both women and nature under the system of patriarchal capitalism.

The U.S. anarchist writer Murray Bookchin emphasizes the link between environmental degradation and the exploitation of human beings, arguing that better treatment of the environment can only come with the abolition of oppressive hierarchies in human society. (qtd. in Kerridge 536) The main structure of power can be seen in a hierarchical system of relationships of domination and subordination which structures relationships between people and groups within society. This pattern of relationship can be seen in the domination of fen people by Tewson, the original land owner who has leased his land to big corporations for money and exploits the fen workers to ensure profit to corporations without ever being mindful of the miserable existence of the fen workers. This pattern is further repeated in man-woman relationship in the society of the fen.

The man-women relationship is the paradigm for oppressive hierarchal relationship: that which is dominant is gendered as masculine and that which is subordinate is feminized. Just as the feminine serves the interests of the male, nature ‘sacrifices’ herself to culture. In Fen the wilderness submits to the civilizing pressure of organized agriculture.

Sherry B. Ortner in her influential essay “Is female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?” discovers that the underlying idea that woman is closer to nature is behind the subordination of women by men in various cultures (qtd. in Kerridge 538). The acquiescence of women in their own subordination can also be explained through this
idea. In *Fen* we have many women, for example, Shirley, May, Ivy etc. who are guided by beliefs that legitimize the oppression of women.

Quoting Vandana Shiva, Shiela Rebillard says:

> In *staying Alive* and more recently in *The Violence of the Green Revolution*, Shiva argues that the productive powers of both nature and women have been devalued and destroyed by the transformation from self-sustaining commons to privatized revenue-generating land dependent on monoculture, technocracy and debt. This “maldevelopment”… leaches away the essential wealth of the land – its capacity to renew itself – and destroys the basis of women’s productivity, their role in drawing the elements of human subsistence from the land, as resources are removed from their control and incorporated into a patriarchal, capitalist system of ownership and production. (63)

The argument easily sums up the predicament of fen women who are suffering the most in this system of “maldevelopment”.

Shiela Rabillard notes “a series of images that associate land with oppressed women workers, a baseline of misery figured in the conjunction of the bare horizontal line of the fields and the bodies of the women literally bent to the earth in toil” (64). She finds an inherent connection between the lives of the fen women and the fate of the land. The earth literally clings to their garments, an image emphasized by the set of the “field in a room”. The most of the males in the play are characteristically shown “above the lowest common denominator, the rows of dirt…” (Rabillard 64). Frank drives a tractor, Geoffrey never works, Mr. Tewson has a motorbike and Mr. Takai, the suited businessman is the most powerful. The farther they are from earth, the more powerful
they are. It is the fen women who exert throughout the day on the fields, and at homes doing various manual jobs and are the weakest of all.

The story of the four generations of fen women caught in the life of toil and struggle does not offer any hope of change. Commenting upon the despondent note of the play T.E. Kalem says that Churchill has composed “a moving requiem” (64). Resigned completely to an oppressive system, the fen women lack the solidarity and a collective consciousness to wage a war against the agency and ideology of their world where “the bodies and others like them are disciplined into silence.” (Diamond 273)
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