CHAPTER – 3
OWNERS

Caryl Churchill’s first full length play Owners brought her wide recognition when it was staged at the Royal Court Theatre in 1972. With its emphasis on insignificance of human values in a cruel and indifferent capitalist world, Owners set the tone for her later work. Written as a satire on unscrupulous materialism of modern world, the play is a bleak representation of capitalist society. The play is “fuelled by the urgent sense that a lot is at stake in the then ongoing struggle over whether and how the beast of capitalism would be contained… (Howard 37). It reflects the playwright’s socialist-feminist views, and questions the concept of ownership while stretching it to the ownership of people and even relationships. The play becomes a farce in its comic treatment of these issues. By inverting the conventional pattern of gender roles, the playwright not only upsets the social and sexual hierarchy but also lashes out against the dehumanizing forces of greed of capitalism. Howard observes:

“Throughout her theatre career, Churchill returns to the pathologies induced by money-lust and to the suffering caused by the dreadful disparities capitalism creates between those who own and those who owe, between the titans of the earth and those whose lives and energies are drained away by poverty and debt. Often, though not always, illnesses of acquisition are refracted through plots in which maternity goes awry” (36).

In the brief introduction to the play, Caryl Churchill writes: “I’d read Figes’ Patriarchal Attitudes not long before, … and had recently reread Orton’s Sloane, which
may have done something to the style” (4). The influence of Joe Orton on her style is also pointed out by Christopher Innes:

Her first full-length play, Owners (1972) borrows the transparent characterization of Orton’s farce, where the speakers openly express the most anti-social motivations and desires, switching their attitudes without transition. This makes it possible for Churchill to set up a graphic reversal of conventional expectations of male/female behaviour. Wives are presented as active figures, while the males are completely passive. (512-13)

Another remark of Christopher Innes on Joe Orton helps us to understand better the latter’s influence on Churchill:

His dramatic figures have no characteristics other than egoism, and all moral standards are inverted. Sexual deviation is seen as the norm, killing acceptable, and ‘a bang on the nose… human contact’. Any innocence is presented as stupidity, all authority revealed as the source of chaos; and egalitarian principles only mean that everyone is equally corrupt. (298)

Churchill’s play Owners may not employ the shocking elements of Orton’s plays but Orton’s influence on Churchill can be seen in her depiction of characters who dare to defy the patriarchal norms and behave in a most unconventional and sometimes violent way. This influence also sets the tone for her further plays, more radical and daring in their concern for feminist issues.

Kate Millett in her seminal work Sexual Politics discusses how patriarchy conditions both sexes ideologically to impose fixed gender roles upon them. Sexual politics works through a socialisation of both sexes to basic patriarchal values with regard
to temperament, gender role and status. Temperament involves the formation of human personality along stereotypical lines of sex categorisation - masculine and feminine. Sex roles are a constant and highly intricate and elaborate conduct, gesture and attitude of each sex. Millett asserts that patriarchy assigns domestic jobs and attendance upon infants to females while it allots human achievement, interest and ambition to males. Thus the limited role assigned to the female tends to confine her to biological experience. All distinctly human, rather than animal activity, is largely reserved for the man. Status, decided primarily by the operation of sex roles and temperament, gives a pervasive assent to the prejudice of male superiority and allots the female an inferior status. The inter-relationship between these three items described by Millett is that status might by designated as the political component, sex role as the sociological component, and temperament as the psychological component. With unquestionable interdependence, they form a chain. Those, awarded higher status (male) tend to adopt roles of masterhood largely because they are encouraged to develop temperament of dominance (35-36).

Churchill in her play Owners depicts the working of patriarchal hegemonic ideology and challenges and inverts the rigid gender roles through various interesting characters. Before we proceed to a critical analysis of the play, let us have a brief outline of the story.

Marion, the central character of the play is a powerful, rich property developer. She takes “a perverse pleasure in owning the lives and destinies of people under her sway” (Tučev 343). Married to a despotic and chauvinist husband Clegg, she strives to live life on her own terms. Her vitality and inner strength demonstrated in her hard work and a will to fight against all odds conflict with the traditional image of a woman as passive and weak in a patriarchal society. She invests her energy in making money.
Clegg, her butcher husband cannot tolerate the professional success of his wife and plans to murder her. He enlists Worsely, Marrion’s office assistant, in this plot. But Worsely is so preoccupied with thoughts of suicide that he never manages to do Marion in. Possessed with the need to own and control others, Marion buys the house where Alec, Marion’s former lover lives with his wife, Lisa, his old senile mother and his two sons. Lisa is forced to make a deal with Marion of her new born baby in exchange for the tenancy of the house due to abnormal passivity of her husband Alec, who does nothing and “wants nothing” (25). But soon she realizes that she couldn’t do without her child and requests Clegg to help her get back her baby. Clegg persuades Lisa to sleep with him and promises to do the needful. Worsely, in the meanwhile agrees to kill Alec as suggested by Marion when she fails to persuade Alec to divorce Lisa and marry her. Worsely sets Alec’s house on fire. Lisa escapes with the baby Worsely had secretly returned to her and Alec dies while saving the landlord’s baby.

Churchill in her introductory note of the play tells us how the characters in Owners were conceived:

I was in an old woman’s flat when a young man offering her money to move came round – he was my first image of Worsely and one of the starting points of the play. Another was wanting one character with the active, achieving attitude of ‘Onward Christian Soldiers’, the other the ‘sitting quietly, doing nothing’ of the Zen poem. The active one had to be a woman, the passive one a man, for their attitudes to show up clearly as what they believed rather than as conventional male and female behaviour. So Marion and Alec developed from that train of thought. I’d read Figes’ Patriarchal Attitudes not long before, which may have affected the character of Clegg, .....

(4).
Marion’s husband Clegg, though totally emasculated by Marion’s strength and free-will, is yet a true representative of the dominant masculine structure of patriarchy. Playing a conventional male-gender role to the hilt, Clegg displays in his behaviour a sense of superiority over women and the prejudice of straight paternalism. The play opens with Clegg’s remarks to a lady customer:


Clearly demonstrating his superiority with implications that women are ignorant, passive and incompetent, Clegg obviously doesn’t allow woman customer to speak. Her silence at this assertion of prejudiced male superiority speaks for the absence of female representation in patriarchal structure of society.

In a conversation with Worsely, Clegg takes pride in the fact that only males can be butchers, an occupation traditionally associated with males as it requires physical strength and courage: “But you still don’t see a lady butcher. Apart from the physical weakness a lady has a squeamishness which is proper in the fair sex but shameful in a man” (9).

Millett rejects a biological basis for male supremacy and declares that scientific evidence does not support this claim. Gender or sexual personality structure is overwhelmingly cultural in character as she asserts:

It is also probably irrelevant to contemporary patriarchy, where we are left with the realities of sexual politics, still grounded, we are often assured, on nature. Unfortunately, as the psycho-social distinctions made between the two sex
groups, which are said to justify their present political relationship, are not the clear, specific, measurable, and neutral ones of physical sciences, but are instead of an entirely different character – vague, amorphous, often even quasi-religious in phrasing – it must be admitted that many of the generally understood distinctions between the sexes in the more significant areas of role and temperament, not to mention status, have in fact, essentially cultural, rather than biological, bases. (28)

Simone de Beauvoir expresses similar views in *The Second Sex*. It is not upon physiology that values can be based; rather, the facts of biology take on the values that the existent bestows upon them. The life of the individual is not decided by the dictates of biology, but by the conventions of society (68-69).

The socialization of children in a family strengthens the gender bias of patriarchy. Radical feminists have raised this issue of the ideological conditioning and socialization of early childhood through which male supremacy is socially enforced. Clegg’s following remarks demonstrate this process:

We were taught to look up to my father. My mother literally worshipped him. I’ve seen her on her knees. And he would raise her up, very gracious. She knew how to give a man the right support. He had his chair. The tea was hot on the table when he came in. we never made a sound (9).

In Millett’s opinion the decisive factor is the conditioning of early childhood, of adolescence and of early youth. This socialization process is so complete and so much under male control that it dominates the marshalling of the temperamental traits to male and female. Clegg has grown up internalizing the dominance of male over female. He has seen his father exercising total control over his wife and children as the supreme head of
the family. As the fundamental instrument and the foundational unit of patriarchal society, family effects control and conformity and its sexually differentiated roles are prototypical.

Not only family but the entire culture supports masculine authority in all areas of life, leading the young male to develop dominating and aggressive impulses and the female to develop docility and passivity. Clegg’s attitude to his successful wife Marion is a typical example of male dominance and aggression as revealed in the following remarks of Clegg:

If I thought for a moment she had dishonoured me, then without hesitation or a thought of the police – *[He plunges knife into meat.]* And also into the heart of the thief. I am more an Othello than a Hamlet …. She is legally mine …. It’s very like having a talking dog, and it’s on the front page at breakfast, the radio at dinner, the television at night – that’s mine, look, that’s my clever dog. But a time comes when you say, Heel. Home. Lie down. (11)

Patriarchy considers woman to be man’s property. In Act I, Scene II when Worsely says, “A wife is a person”, Clegg emphasizes the idea of possession: “First and foremost a wife. One flesh” (36). And again in another scene Clegg asserts: “But still she’s Mrs. Clegg…. I look at her sometimes and think I am the one this powerful rich property developer swore before God to honour and obey” (11). As a true product of patriarchal ideology, Clegg believes women to be inferior and incompetent and need to be guided and led by a male figure. Clegg tells Worsely:

She had five hundred left by her dad. And I did the rest for her on a mortgage because the mortgage company was understandably reluctant to deal with a lady. She’s paid me back since of course. I would have lost the money gladly and
forgiven her and not said another word about it if only she would have stayed with painting and been content. Everything I had was hers. I always said. She only had to ask. (10)

Clegg firmly believes that a woman’s place is within the four walls of her home attending to the needs of her husband. Taking note of the fact that in the sphere of education, women are generally allotted humanist studies and not science and technology, Millett believes that it merely confirms their early socialization, instead of equipping them with early emancipatory values. Clegg’s male ego is badly wounded when Marion starts her independent property business. He would have her stay at home and do something “feminine” and “creative”, as he informs Worsely:

When Marion was in hospital they tried to tell her she’d be happier and more sane as a good wife. Combs your hair and taken an interest in your husband’s work. Find a hobby. She had her painting which was all right. Creative hobbies are very nice. I appreciate anything pretty and artistic. But she wouldn’t listen. (10)

Nataša Tucčev in her article ‘Alienated Lives: Having as a Dehumanising Mode of Existence in Caryl Churchill’s Owners’ says, “Any artistic inclination that Marion may have had could not bring her contentment in a world which degrades creativity, viewing it not as an essential human endeavour in interpreting reality, but as a ‘feminine pastime’ while simultaneously degrading femininity” (343).

Millett blames Freud for treating the female character as a static thing ordained by nature. Freud’s intent is to limit female life to the sexual-reproductive level, and also to persuade us that women live at a low cultural level because this is the only level that is possible for them (283). In her very harsh criticism of Freud’s Civilisation and its Discontent, she states:
While Freud continued to try with the notion that woman’s biological responsibility to the race impeded her intellect, he progressed to an even more negative position; together with her inherent and psychological incapacities, the female’s ‘sexual role’, the function that defines her in life and in the family … has made her not only incompetent, but hostile to intellect and high culture, a type of natural philistine”. (281-84)

In Clegg’s comments we can easily discern a male chauvinist’s antipathy towards a career woman and a clear preference for a non-working wife, confined and happy with her domestic duties which he hates to share with his wife. Patriarchy has clearly made sexual division of labour. Clegg’s refusal to look after the baby, he and Marion have forcibly taken from Alec and Lisa, can easily be interpreted on the basis of the sexual division of labour in patriarchy. He says, “A man can’t be expected to stay at home and look after a baby. He can do it, of course, because it is not difficult. Even a woman can do it easily. But it is a waste of real abilities” (54). Clegg’s refusal is deeply embedded in the values and terms of patriarchal culture which promotes sexual division of labour.

According to Millett, men’s access to financial power gives them a superior economic position (54-58). But when this position is threatened by women who earn their own money and end their dependence on men in certain matters, it incites men’s hatred towards them. In the play, Clegg feels threatened by Marion’s financial success and her economic independence leading to a subordinate position of Clegg in the family. His butcher shop is not doing well and Marion wants him to “Throw it all away. Shut the shop” (12). Alec’s ego refuses to accept this subordination and ‘humiliation’. A virulent misogynist, Clegg now hates Marion equally for her financial autonomy and her callous
disregard for him. He wants to kill her and even suggests to Worsely that he should mix “Weedkiller in Marion’s soup” to kill her. He tells Worsely that Marion “can stand on her own feet, which is something I abominate in a woman” (8). Describing his own failed ambition to Worsely in sexual terms “I was thrusting”, Clegg reminisces about his early years. Yet, despite his thrusts, Clegg fails to survive in his business. Marion’s achievements further exacerbate this predicament. He accuses her of being the cause of his sufferings. In Act 2 Scene I we have the following conversation between Clegg and Worsely:

CLEGG. Every morning, she leaves me to go to work…. And every evening, she leaves me, leaves me, leaves me.

WORSELY. Goes out?

CLEGG. Or stays in. But not with me. Not being my wife. Not paying attention…. I will chop her mind into little pieces and blanch them in boiling water. (36)

Clegg is also stung by the fact that Marion is “not being my wife” and “not paying attention”. Suspecting her loyalty to him, he even questions Worsely, “Tell me plainly do you fuck my wife? Or does she jerk you off? Or do you touch her up? Or snog? Fumble? Grope? Caress? Brush against? Or come very close to any of these” (39). On being informed that Marion has revived her relationship with her former lover Alec, Clegg asks Worsely to help him “to rid me of Alec” (39). In an attempt to get back at Alec for having sex with his wife, Clegg decides to have “an eye for an eye. A mouth for a mouth. A cunt for a cunt. Vengeance is mine. I will repay” (52). Exploiting the maternal feelings of Lisa who wants her child back now, Clegg strikes a deal with her for sex in exchange for her baby.
Feeling triumphed and avenged for having fucked Alec’s wife Lisa, Clegg also reveals his real feelings about women and exposes his misogynist and male-chauvinist mind:

LISA. I only came to see the baby …. You will do all you can do for me, won’t you?
CLEGG. Give you the baby?
LISA. That’s what it was for … I want my baby …. I want to see him.
CLEGG. I didn’t say you could get up. You won’t be suitable unless you lie flat, did you know that, very feminine and do just as your are told. On your back and underneath is where I like to see a lady. And a man on top. Right on top of the world. Because I know what you ladies like. You like what I give you. I didn’t say you mustn’t move at all. But just in response. (55)

Women are often targeted by men for sexual assault, rape or sexual violence to take revenge against their (women’s) menfolk, their fathers, brother or husbands. Clegg also displays the same sick masculine mentality and even insults Alec by boasting:

She’ told you, has she? She said she wouldn’t. Woman’s like that. Deceit is second nature. Due to Eve. But I’m too crafty for them by half. I know their ins and outs. You keep her rather short of it I’d say. Unless it was me that specially appealed to her. Yelping for more. I expect she told you…. I wouldn’t want to waste myself on something as second rate as your wife. She was quite useful. A handy receptacle. But quite disposable after. (56)

In ascribing deceit to woman as her “second nature”, Clegg is just repeating the archetypal ideas about women in patriarchal ideology which subscribes to the two leading
myths of Eve in the Biblical story of The Fall and the classical tale of Pandora’s box in western religion and culture. Millett has analysed both of these myths to reveal the bias of patriarchal attitude in connecting women, sex and sin.

In his warning to Alec about his relationship with Marion, Clegg makes it clear to him in no uncertain terms that Marion is his property and he owns her:

You make a big mistake about Marion. She’s not like other women in just one important respect. She’s mine. I have invested heavily in Marion and don’t intend to lose any part of my profit. She is my flesh. And touching her you touch me. And I will not let myself be touched. (56)

In a patriarchal society husbands regard themselves as owners of their wives, their bodies, their minds, their property and almost everything they have. As Erich Fromm writes, “In a patriarchal society even the most miserable of men in the poorest of classes can be an owner of property – in his relationship to his wife, his children, his animals, over whom he can feel he is an absolute master” (70). But ironically enough, Marion, the female protagonist is equally corrupted by this desire to own. She becomes an exploiter by subscribing to the bourgeois values of possession and acquisitiveness displayed by men in their most sexist incarnations.

Reversing the conventional gender roles, the playwright presents in Marion a complete antithesis of conventional feminine character. She deals in real estate, regarded generally a male domain. She believes in hard work and getting on, as she tells us, “I was never a lazy girl, Marion tries hard. I work like a dog. Most women are fleas but I’m the dog” (30). She defies the “passive” image of woman. Determined to earn a lot of money,
Marion really works like a dog as she eats in bed and sleeps at her desk. She believes in fighting to the end:

Everything I was taught – be clean, be quick, be top, be best, you may not succeed, Marion, but what matters is to try your hardest. To push on. Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war. That was my favourite song when I was seven. Fight the good fight …. keep on, get better, be best. Onward fight. How did man get to the moon? Not by sitting staring at an orange. Columbus, Leonardo de Vinci, Scot of the Antarctic. (30)

Inspired by the examples of male achievers, Marion doesn’t want to stop at anything. She hates failures as demonstrated in Act I, Scene I when Marion persuades her husband Clegg to “shut the shop and throw it all away” (12). It may be a sad moment for Clegg to wind up his meat shop he has been running for the last twenty five years after his father as he says, “There should be some ceremony to help. As a funeral does”. But Marion refuses to empathize with her husband and be a part of this failure. She tells Clegg, “I know very well it’s a sad moment, I can’t be a failure just to help. We will all go out together and celebrate. Commemorate. Make an occasion” (12).

Going against the essentialist position of viewing women as gentle, emotional and passive, and lacking in initiative, Marion emulates the male position of strength, aggression, violence and independence to be “free” and “equal”. Marion has imbibed these “values” from the dominant male culture. She adopts this male model of success and demonstrates all these aggressive values in her behaviour.

In Act I, Scene III, Marion treats Clegg in a strip club and during a performance by a stripper she suggests: “If you want a girl, Clegg, I’ll buy you one” (20). Showing no
usual feminine insecurity and jealousy when the husband shows unusual interest in another woman, Marion even offers to buy a girl for him. Buying and selling girls was/is a common practice in some patriarchal societies where women are considered no better than commodities. Moreover, the men buying women with their money often do it to raise their status and power in their society. Marion’s offer to buy a girl for her husband demonstrates the extent to which she has adopted values and attitudes traditionally attributed to male.

L. Althusser in his theoretical essay ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’ maintains that we are all constituted in our society as subjects-in-ideology by the Ideological State Apparatuses, whereby the ideological norms get naturalized in their practices and constitute not only our sense of the world, but also our sense of identity, of relations to other people and the society in general (294-303). Applying this theory on Marion, Natasa Tucev writes:

In terms of Althusser’s theories, Marion has failed to attain an independent identity, to become an ‘individual’. She is still a ‘subject’, a practitioner of the same ideology which has always informed her life and understanding of reality. The ideological State Apparatuses (i.e., family, marriage, educational system, health service) easily translate the energy of Marion’s original protest into socially acceptable terms, by leading her to believe that the only possible direction of ‘growth’ is from ‘being owned’ to ‘owning’, from being a victim to becoming an executioner. Marion never questions the validity and appropriateness of the ideological practices governing her life; …. From the beginning to the end of the play she is ‘acted’ by the same principal ideology of ‘having’. (344)
Churchill’s commitment to socialist ideals makes her probe the conjunction of owning and owing in this play. Led by her desire to own and possess, Marion buys the house in which her former lover Alec is staying with his wife and children. She thinks that by owning Alec’s house she can control and dictate his life. Remaining in the background, Marion sends her assistant Worsely to Alec’s house to put pressure on the family to evict the house. Lisa, Alec’s wife seeks Marion’s help to deal with this problem without realizing that it is Marion herself who wants to evict the family and possess this piece of prime property: “You mean it’s you buying the house? It’s all you, Marion, is it? I always hated you, you horrible bitch….” Unmoved by Lisa’s angry retort, Marion coolly says, “Have a cry. Have a good cry. Then we’ll see” (27). Possessed by the desire to own Alec (“If you love someone you want to keep them. I want to.”), Marion even offers money to him for severing all ties to his wife, children and his mother: “I’ll give you a thousand pounds for Lisa. For your mum. For the boys. Whatever you like to think it’s for” (28). Realizing the futility of her proposition for Alec who remains most passive and indifferent to material and worldly desires, Marion once again tells him her resolution:

“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. And everyone else with us. We split the atom. Onward. Love me”. (31)

Marion demonstrates a resoluteness which is normally associated with men; women, believed to be weak and fickle-minded, do not have it. Identifying herself with
male notion of power, Marion uses the male generic for herself: “we men of destiny get what we’re after…” (31).

Lisa Merill in her article “Monsters and Heroines: Caryl Churchill’s Women” quotes Andrea Dworkin while analyzing Marion’s character:

There is no freedom or justice or even common sense in developing a male sexual sensibility… which is aggressive, competitive, objectifying …. To believe that freedom or justice for women or for any individual woman can be found in mimicry of male sexuality is to delude oneself, and to contribute to the oppression of one’s sisters”. (12)

Lisa, in a fit of frustration over the fact that Alec was doing nothing to come out of the crisis Marion had created for them and moreover, Marion and Alec had resumed their relationship, declares, “I’m not bringing a baby home to this. I am not. I’d sooner kill it…. You can have it…. You can have the baby” (33). Marion grabs this opportunity and makes a deal with Lisa for the ownership of the child. She realizes that when she cannot own Alec, she can at least have his baby as her own, using her power of money. Lisa Merill rightly observes, “In fact, the notion that belonging to another through relationship (familial or romantic) can potentially reduce human beings to consumable objects is made manifest in the woman’s conflict over Alec and Lisa’s baby” (63). In fact this “reduction of children to utilitarian objects” (Merrill) by Marion (as well as Lisa, to some extent, as she realizes her mistake soon and demands her baby back) demonstrates her inability to have any maternal instinct and her failure to empathize with Lisa.

Marion takes the child for Clegg who wanted a son to inherit his meat shop as he did from his father. He reveals to Worsely: “I envisaged a chain. Clegg and son. I was
still the son at the time. I would have liked a son myself once I was the Clegg. But now I have no business. I don’t need a son. Having no son I don’t need a business” (9). Once the child is “owned” by Marion, Clegg reopens his meat shop with a newly found pride of paternity which always associates children (especially male) with inheritance of property. In a patriarchal–capitalist society, capitalism influences the interpretation of relationships.

Marion’s refusal to give back Lisa’s baby reveals her most inhuman and unsympathetic nature. Tučev describes her as “a monster, a kind of modern Shylock who demands a pound of human flesh as a substitute for true affection” (344). Marion tells Lisa clearly, “I know my own mind. The legal position is perfectly clear. What can there possibly be to discuss? I won’t have tears, Lisa. Clegg and I are united as the child’s parents in our opposition to any interference…. It is just your hysteria, Lisa, against the reasonableness of the rest of us…. I shall do as I like” (60). Clegg’s suggestion to help Lisa by allowing her to look after the baby during day-time is met with an angry snub of Marion: “I said I will have a nanny. Are you going against me, Clegg? It was entirely for you I got the baby. I bought him a shop for you. If you don’t like the arrangements you can go. Clear right off. It would be a delight never to see you again” (61). Feeling powerful with her power of money and suffering from no moral compunction, Marion shows no hesitation in taking away Lisa’s child and showing door to her husband Clegg who dares to suggest help to Lisa. Rightly observes Howard:

“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 material instincts provide protection from the penetration of market logic into
domestic situations, and underscoring how the drive to consume and acquire destabilizes every kind of human connection (37).

Churchill challenges the essentialist stance that women are psychologically and emotionally different from men. Their uniquely female identity is frequently described as being “more empathetic and co-operative, more connected to others and more accepting of multiple viewpoints unlike male identity, which is monolithic, authoritarian, and founded in a rationalist belief in one truth” (Tolan 323). Marion defies this description of female identity and reveals instead a heartless, cruel and ruthless persona. When plied with pleas by Alec, Lisa and even Clegg to give back Lisa her baby, she refuses with a tone of finality:

No, No no no…. Leave me if you like but you won’t get the baby. I’ll keep what’s mine. The more you want it the more it’s worth keeping …. 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. I won’t shrink. (63)

Having confessed that one of the cruellest men in history, Genghis Khan, is her role model, Marion doesn’t stop at that. She asks Worsely to kill Alec whom she couldn’t own, so he must die. Worsely makes a plan to set Alec’s house on fire and Marion likes the idea: “What a good idea. What a very nice thought” (64). Alec is killed in the fire as he walks back into the flaming house to save Mr. Arlington’s baby.
When Marion is informed about Alec’s death by Worsely, she says, “I’m not sorry at all about Alec. Or about that other baby. Not at all. I never knew I could do a thing like that. I might be capable of anything. I’m just beginning to find out what’s possible” (67). The death of Alec and the other baby makes her realize her own capacity for cruelty and symbolically also, “the last remnants of Marion’s humanity” turn into ashes (Tučev 344).

Marion’s perverse pleasure in ‘owning’ property and other people’s lives is a product of a capitalist greed which “produces an impoverished human character, which tends to alienate all physical and intellectual senses and replace them by the single sense of having” as pointed out by Erich Fromm (quoted in Tučev, 342). Marion is so degraded by her obsessive compulsion to “own” that she must “possess” the object of her desire physically. Marx explains: “Private property has made us so partial that an object is only ours when we have it, when it exists for us as capital or when it is directly eaten, drunk, worn, inhabited etc., in short, utilized in some way” (quoted in Tučev, 342).

Following her capitalistic pursuits and defiance of the patriarchal essentialism of gender roles, Marion may look like a ‘liberated’ woman. Erich Fromm in his book To Have or to Be sums up his expectations from the women’s liberation movement in following words:

The growing movement for women’s liberation is of enormous significance because it is a threat to the principle of power on which contemporary society lives—that is, if the women clearly mean by liberation that they do not want to share the men’s power over other groups…. If the movement for the liberation of women can identify its own role and function as representative of ‘antipower’, women will have a decisive influence in the battle for a new society. (192-193)
Women like Marion, instead of creating and be a part of an “antipower” against the oppressive ideology of patriarchy and capitalism, become a part of it. Tučev rightly observes: “Ironically, Marion’s own ‘act of liberation’ comes down simply to her discarding all femininity and identifying completely with the mainstream patriarchal tradition of conquest, pride and greed” (343).

Motherhood is another issue which Churchill has taken up, albeit briefly. Feminists like de Beauvoir and Shulamith Firestone have taken up the issue of “tyranny of motherhood” that makes women dependent on men. Firestone in her book *The Dialectic of Sex* has demanded the liberation of women from the tyranny of reproductive biology and the diffusion of childrearing role to society as whole, men as well as women. She welcomes new contraception devices which will liberate women from the burden of reproductive biology. This freedom will act as a solvent of the social unit that is organized around biological reproduction and the subjection of women to their biological destiny, namely, the family.

Marion doesn’t bear a child to Clegg as we know that she is “on the pill” (11) as Worsely informs Clegg who believes that Marion is infertile: “And another satisfaction of my shame is the proof that it’s she who is infertile” (11). Although Clegg wanted a son to carry on the “Chain of high class butcheries. Clegg and son”, yet Marion prefers to adopt Alec and Lisa’s baby to please her husband (11). Discarding all femininity including her refusal to bear Clegg’s child, Marion may appear to be a “liberated” woman but she still remains entrapped within the ideological constructs against which she may seem to be fighting for her own selfish reasons. Her “emancipation” is only illusory as we find her telling Clegg, “It was entirely for you I got the baby. I bought him a shop for you” (60-
61). Procuring a male descendent for her husband and thus behaving like a stereotypical wife, Marion, knowingly or unknowingly, reproduces and supports the patriarchal gender system severely criticized by feminists as women are imprisoned in it.

Reversing the conventional gender-roles, Churchill has presented Alec as a complete opposite to an archetypal male of patriarchal as well as capitalist ideology. Depicted as a completely passive and indifferent man, “one of Churchill’s first attempts to imagine an escape from market logic” (Howard 37), Alec has even stopped going to work as Lisa informs us: “He hasn’t been at work for six months. He don’t remember to eat if I don’t make him…. He just wants nothing. He seems to feel everything’s all right (24-25). Even when Worsely informs them that they will have to vacate the house, Alec doesn’t react much. While Lisa is alarmed and worried about the prospect of changing the house, Alec calmly responds: “I’m not moving…. The best thing is just ignore him…. We don’t have to do anything” (18-20). Refusing to lodge a police complaint of a recent theft in their house, Alec tells Lisa: “If he [the thief] wants the things that much, perhaps let him have them…. I don’t want them [the police] catching somebody for me” (13). Disgusted and shocked at this too generous nature of her husband, Lisa exclaims, “Someone’s got to worry to get things done”, but Alec is unmoved and just says, “What really has to be done can just be done. You worry before and worry afterwards. Most things need not be all…. Sitting here quietly. Doing nothing. The day goes by itself” (14). Refusing to ‘own’ anything, Alec almost ‘gives up’ the struggle of life as he tells Marion:

Slowly everything… fell through. Lisa, children, work – there was no point. There was not point in the things I wanted instead. There was no point in killing myself. That went on for some time. I didn’t know how to make things better. I
didn’t care if they were better or not. I didn’t know what better meant. But now the same things seem quite simple…. I’d had a lot of difficulty. Wanting things. Or seeing no point in them. And since then I haven’t. (47)

Jean E Howard finds this strange figure of Alec “Unsettling” and feels that “Churchill uses his escape from the ethic of ownership to probe the limits of that ‘freedom’” (38).

The complete passivity of Alec is interpreted by Lisa Merrill as “the embodiment of a zen mind state of tacit acceptance and complete indifference” (62). In his yin passivity, Helene Keyssar finds an alternative to the dominant western culture:

Alec is the antithesis not only of Marion but of any available male types. Educated and a skilled glazier, he holds no salaried job, not because he is unable to find outside work. But because he prefers to stay at home…. He is a man with perfect absence of desire either for property or to wield control over others. Attempts by others in the play to reveal Alec’s passivity as inherently aggressive are repeatedly thwarted. Alec retains his moral autonomy while rejecting all obligations to social convention. (204-205)

But we question the ethic of this extreme indifference of Alec when we find him disconnecting the drip of his mother in the hospital and letting her die. If Alec’s passivity amounts to complete negation of any emotion as demonstrated by him in removing his mother’s drip, it cannot be projected as ideal and desirable, although he sacrifices his own life while trying to save his landlord’s baby when their house is set on fire by Worsely. Jean E. Howard observes:
He seems to lack the ‘natural’ possessiveness that blood ties are typically taken to engender .... What, Churchill seems to be asking, is the proper antidote to atavistic ties of blood and the acquisitive drive of capitalist culture? Is an indifference to desire and blood ties a positive social good, and what are its limits? (38).

Occupying a position diagonally opposite to Marion, Alec embodies the opposition to materialism but as Alisa Soloman says, “Churchill doesn’t really side with Alec. Even as the only presented alternative to the challenged attitudes, Alec is not very attractive. We are not meant to tolerate, any more than Lisa can, Alec’s lack of desire, ambition, or self-expression” (51). It is difficult to agree with Tučev’s view about Alec: “Alec’s altruism and willing sacrifice contour a new, hopeful and encouraging map of meaning” (347).

Alec’s attitude to life may invite a philosophical debate and an existential pondering over the whole issue of ownership and capitalism but we must confine our analysis to a limited framework of feminism. Alec’s passive and indifferent attitude affects Lisa and her children the most. She is led into giving up her baby to Marion as she struggles to survive in a world ruled by money and lust. She is exploited sexually by Marion’s husband Clegg, when she seeks his help to get her baby back. Affected by Alec’s apathy and exploited by Marion’s materialism and politics of ‘ownership’, Lisa suffers the most in the play.

Churchill’s reversal of conventional pattern of gender roles questions the patriarchal essentialism of these roles and displays the new possibilities for gender roles. Showing her socialist concern for the issues of ownership and control in a capitalist
society, the playwright also raises feminist issues of personal relationship and motherhood in the play.

The play is divided in two acts with six scenes in Act I and eight in Act II. The playwright has followed the conventional pattern of dramatic scheme. Alisa Solomon observes: “As her first play, it is the most schematic and conventional. But it exhibits the clear starting point of Churchill’s search for a style that will embody her vision” (51). Since it was her first stage play, Churchill looked content with her focus on unconventional depiction of gender roles and avoided experimenting with her radical and dynamic structures and upsetting conventional forms which were to become a hallmark of her subsequent plays. With formal characteristics of a naturalistic melodrama, *Owners* provided Churchill’s “most naked and lean dramatic treatment of her socialist and feminist concern” (Solomon 51). The play, except for its new and critical perspective on patriarchal essentialism and capitalism, didn’t have anything new to offer by way of dramatic technique and use of language. Yet Churchill has put across her unconventional ideas through “macabre comic elements” and “a subtle grotesqueness of characters” (Solomon 51). We find Churchill much more confident and innovative in her handling of dramatic techniques and language in her later plays as she grows and matures as an established feminist playwright.
WORKS CITED


