CHAPTER – 4
VINEGAR TOM

Caryl Churchill’s *Vinegar Tom* (1976), set in seventeenth century England, dramatises the social, economic and political plight of women in the persecution of so-called witches, punished precisely because they were women on the margins of society. Re-examining the custom of witchcraft from a socialist feminist perspective, Churchill interrogates and challenges gender stereotypes in the brutal execution of women accused of witchcraft. Taking up the issues of class and gender in a patriarchal society, Churchill relates the witch-hunting of seventeenth century to the present day bias and oppression of women.

Churchill wrote *Vinegar Tom* in 1976 when she collaborated with a women’s theatre collective, Monstrous Regiment which encouraged women participation in all areas of theatre. Susan Todd, one of the company’s earliest members, tells us about the political intent of Monstrous Regiment:

> We see ourselves not as seeking to reproduce bourgeois ideology, but to undermine it, to challenge it … the personal is political…. In Monstrous Regiment we are engaged in trying to shift consciousness in the area of women’s relation to society... in experimentation with old forms and a search for new ones, which integrate with and reflect our perception of the world as women and the often very dislocated nature of women’s experience now. (274)

Monstrous Regiment’s political vision and agenda shaped Churchill’s perception of her own role as a writer and as a woman. *Vinegar Tom* was a product of common concern and interest in the mythology of witchcraft and historical interpretation of
seventeenth century witchcraft Churchill shared with Monstrous Regiment. In an interview with Linda Fitzsimmons Churchill speaks about her collaboration with Monstrous Regiment and how it finally shaped *Vinegar Tom*:

There was a meeting in which we talked about the fact that we were all thinking about witches, and they told me some of the books they’d read. I went off and read those and other books that I found. Then we met again, and we were all interested in women who were marginal to society being made scapegoats and seen as witches, rather than in witchcraft practices that might have been happening. (34)

Discussions with Monstrous Regiment made Churchill more objective and analytical in her attitude towards witches and she appreciated their perspective of economic hardships and the role of women in that society. In her introduction to *Vinegar Tom* she writes:

I rapidly left aside the interesting theory that witchcraft had existed as a survival of suppressed pre-Christian religions and went instead for the theory that witchcraft existed in the minds of its persecutors, that witches were a scapegoat in times of stress like Jews and blacks. I discovered for the first time the extent of Christian teaching against women and saw the connections between medieval attitudes to witches and continuing attitudes in general. The women accused of witchcraft were often those on the edges of society, old, poor, single, sexually unconventional; the old herbal medical tradition of cunning woman was suppressed by the rising professionalism of the male doctor. I didn’t base the play on any precise historical events but set it rather loosely in the seventeenth century,
partly because the social upheavals, class changes, rising professionalism and great hardship among the poor were the context of the kind of witchcraft I wanted to write about; … I wanted to write a play about witches with no witches in it; a play not about evil, hysteria and possession by the devil but about poverty, humiliation and prejudice and how the women accused of witchcraft saw themselves. (129-130)

Just as in Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*, the persecution of witches in *Vinegar Tom* can be understood as a convenient displacement of other social issues. Unlike Miller’s depiction in which women are painted as treacherous accusers, *Vinegar Tom* emphasises how the so-called witches were executed precisely because they were all marginalised women: old, poor, single, sexually liberated.

The play calls for a re-examination of the past and questions the misrepresentation of the marginalised and oppressed in accepted versions of history. Giving them a ‘voice’ through this play, Churchill makes us see the other side of the coin. Mary Daly, a radical feminist in her famous book *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* mentions four primary patriarchal strategies used to keep women mystified about their true condition. The first strategy is ‘erasure’ which means the removal of women from the historical record. Daly cites the execution of witches that does not appear in patriarchal scholarship (Madsen 164). Churchill tries to demystify the “witches” and reinterprets patriarchal versions of history by giving them a “voice”. The oppressive power structures legitimized in/by history continue to influence the present. Questioning the patriarchal interpretation and logic of “witch hunting” the playwright draws our attention to the more subtle and sophisticated ways of “witch hunting” in the contemporary times.
*Vinegar Tom* tells the story of four women who become the target of professional witch-hunters Henry Packer and his partner Goody Haskins as they arrive in the village to purge it of evil forces supposed to be working through these women. Most of them are either poor and unprotected or unconventional and a threat to patriarchal power. All of them are accused of witchcraft and ultimately hanged.

Alice Noakes, an unwed mother, the most vocal and least hesitant to fulfillment of her sexual desires expresses her unconventional morality in her dialogue with a man (with no name but a ‘gentleman’, as Churchill calls him ironically) after having sex with him in the opening chapter of the play:

**MAN.** So you think that was no sin we did?

**ALICE.** If it was I don’t care.

**MAN.** Don’t say that.

**ALICE.** You’d say worse living here. Any time I’m happy someone says it’s a sin. (135-136)

Expressing a strong desire to accompany him to London where, he tells her, “…there’s women speak out too… and they say flesh is no sin…. The men and women lie together and say that’s bliss and that’s heaven and that’s no sin” (136). Alice wishes to be liberated and free from the social taboos without ever being condemned as a sinner. When he refuses to take her along to London and instead calls her a whore, Alice refuses to accept this male definition of herself. He further questions her, “what are you then? What name would you put to yourself? You’re not a wife or a widow. You’re not a virgin. Tell me a name for what you are” (137). Alice finds herself confused as she fails all patriarchal terms used for expressing the identity of a respectable woman. The man,
on the other hand, representing the masculine power and authority gives his final verdict on her identity as “whore, whore, damned strumpet, succubus, witch” (137). And yet Alice refuses to accept herself as such.

French feminist Luce Irigaray notes that men refuse to accord to women other status than that associated with their sexuality:

Mother, virgin, prostitute: these are the social roles imposed on women. The characteristics of (so-called) feminine sexuality derive from them: the valorization of reproduction and nursing; faithfulness; modesty, ignorance of and even lack of interest in sexual pleasure; a passive acceptance of men’s ‘activity’; seductiveness, in order to arouse the consumers’ desire while offering herself as its material support without getting pleasure herself… Neither as mother nor as virgin nor as prostitute has woman any right to her own pleasure’. (186-187)

When tortured and humiliated by Packer and Goody, the witch-hunter and his assistant in their search for the marks of devil on her body, Alice yet again refuses to accept herself as a witch and says, “I am not a witch. But I wish I was. If I could live I’d be a witch now after what they have done. I’d make wax men and melt them on a slow fire…. There is no way for us except by the devil. If only I did have magic, I’d make them feel it” (175). Alice’s wish for devilish powers against the men, the gods in a patriarchal system is an expression of protest and revolt raging within her. Her anger, frustration and a desire for revenge not only reject and challenge masculine definitions and representation but also express the powerlessness of women within seventeenth century English patriarchy. Kritzer observes that Alice’s outburst “breaks the silence that has aided her oppressors through out history” and “by renouncing powerlessness even at
the price of embracing an imagined evil, Alice offers a political response to the narrative from within that narrative” (94).

The myth of witchcraft is busted in the first scene itself in a conversation between Alice and the man and the cruelty inflicted on the helpless, criminalized women victimized by the society is also highlighted:

MAN. In Scotland I saw a witch burnt.

ALICE. Did you? A real witch? Was she a real one?

MAN. She was really burnt for one.

ALICE. Did the spirits fly out of her like black bats?... Did she fly at night on a stick? Did you see her flying?

Man. I saw her burnt.

Alice. Tell then. What did she say?

Man. She couldn’t speak, I think. They’d been questioning her. There’s wrenching the head with a cord. She came to the stake in a cart and men lifted her out, and the stake held her up when she was tied. She’d been in the boots you see that break the bones. (emphasis added) (136-137)

The graphic detail of the brutal execution of a so-called witch is in sharp contrast with the imagined assumptions associated with a witch as the man says that he saw her “really burnt” but never saw her “flying on a stick at night” or “the spirits fly out like black bats” when she was burnt. Thus the myth of witchcraft is busted when Alice’s mysterious lover counters this kind of cultural fantasy surrounding witches with details of cruelty like “boots that break the bones” and “cords that wrench the head”. It makes us think seriously whether witches really existed or they were only created with assumed
characteristics out of poor, unconventional and unprotected women. Ironically enough, Alice’s desire to see the spectacle of ‘witch burning’ becomes significant for us when we see her as an object of a witch-hunt later on in her own village where “nothing ever happens here” as she tells her lover.

Her keen desire to see the spectacle of “evil women” also emphasises our own attraction for the brutal and ghastly spectacle of “evil women” created by a dangerous cultural fantasy prevalent even today in some parts of the world and as relevant as it was in the seventeenth century England. By asking us this question “Evil woman … Is that what you want to see?” in the last song at the end of the play, Churchill exhorts us to think and realize that the spectacle of “evil women” in the witch hunts of seventeenth century provided entertainment not only to them who witnessed the brutal execution of women, but also for those in the present century who “enjoy” watching them in theatres.

Alice’s neighbour Jack, a married man, on being rejected for his sexual advances towards her tries to exploit her poor economic condition for sexual gain: “Alice, I’d be good to you. I’m not a poor man. I could give you things for your boy…” (148). Failing to seduce Alice, Jack accuses her of being a witch and having removed his penis. Both ways, Alice is accused of being a witch, first for having succumbed to sexual temptation with the man in the opening scene and again for having rejected Jack’s sexual advances. Caught in a no-escape situation, Alice must pay for ‘her sins’.

Alice’s mother, Joan Noakes, is old and poor. Driven by circumstances, she has become abusive, short-tempered and even steals petty things from neighbourhood. She is called witch and held responsible for killing calves and drying up buffaloes of her neighbour Jack and his wife Margery.
When Joan’s request to Margery to give her “a little yeast” is rejected by Margery, Joan becomes abusive and curses precisely those very material possessions of Margery which give her a higher economic and social status than Joan: “Damn your butter to hell… Devil take you and your man and your fields and your cows and your butter and your yeast and your beer and your bread and your cider…” (144). Emphasising her own poor condition without the fields and cows, butter and bread, beer and cider, Joan points out that poverty makes a woman further vulnerable to oppression. Churchill’s depiction of Joan’s poverty raises the issue of class.

Joan tells her daughter Alice that “If we’d each got a man we’d be better off” (141), implying that their (Alice and Joan’s) economic and social marginalization and repression can be linked to the absence of any male protection in their lives. They are outside patriarchal control, they are more likely to be tortured and executed as witches than women with male protection of fathers, brothers and husbands. Joan’s wish for male protection in spite of the fact that her husband used to beat her expresses how vulnerable, helpless and unanchored women feel in a patriarchal system.

When the witch hunter Packer looks for devil’s signs on her body and makes her admit that she was a witch, Joan tells him that she was pregnant, obviously believing that he’d let her go. Joan’s attempt to seek escape from the clutches of Packer on the pretext of pregnancy indicates that within patriarchy a woman is valued as long as she can procreate. And the assistant witch hunter Goody’s mocking comment, “Who’d believe that?” as she is too old to bear a child illustrates that an aging woman has no value in patriarchal system and becomes a soft target of oppression. Variousy defined as “dirty old women”, “ungrateful hag” and “such a stinking old witch, Joan Noakes’ pain and
anguish is due to not only poverty and lack of male presence in her life but also her old age and she expresses it well when she tells Alice, “Where would I go? Who wants an old woman?” (141) Her acute sense of insecurity becomes a song of lament in ‘Nobody Sings’ in scene three:

Do you want your skin to wrinkle
And your cunt get sore and dry?
And they say it’s just your hormones
If you cry and cry and cry.
Oh nobody sings about it,
      but it happens all the time. (142)

Another female character, Susan, the only married woman accused of witchcraft, is in her early twenties and already has two children and is pregnant with the third. Contrasted against the fearless and independent-minded Alice, Susan is meek and submissive and draws consolation from the fact that her “wonderful husband” at least “doesn’t beat her” and fails to comprehend the extent of harm caused to her body by repeated pregnancies and miscarriages. She is led into believing that God sent pain to women as a punishment for their sin:

They do say the pain is what is sent to a woman for her sins. I complained last time after churching, and he said I must think on Eve who brought the sin into the world that got me pregnant. I must think on how woman tempts man, and how she pays God with her pain having the baby. So if we try to get round the pain, we are going against God. (146).
Churchill exposes not only the deep-seated prejudice and misogyny in the Christian doctrines which have been employed in patriarchy as a convenient tool to subordinate and oppress women but also the age-old practice of blaming the poor victim herself and allowing the oppressors to feel no pangs of conscience or any sense of guilt at their unjust wielding of patriarchal power.

Susan’s husband, instead of sharing her pain and agony of her pregnancies and miscarriages, escapes all blame, even for the act of making her pregnant and justifies her pain and sufferings both biblically and historically. Adrienne Rich rightly observes, “The woman’s body is the terrain on which patriarchy is erected” (55). As Susan seeks Ellen’s help, she wavers in her decision to abort her pregnancy. She tells Ellen, “I don’t want it but I don’t want to be rid of it. I want to be rid of it, but not do anything to be rid of it” (155). Having no courage to deal with her own body in her own way, Susan is confused and unsure of the social consequences of her decision. Ellen’s response to Susan’s fear that “If you won’t do anything to help yourself you must stay as you are” (155) can be surely understood as a wake-up call to women, the oppressed to act and resist against their exploitation.

She finally decides to drink Ellen’s potion to abort her pregnancy. But abortion and the death of her child are considered “grievous offence” against the institution of matrimony and against the right of her husband. It is always a woman who has to pay for this “crime”, as decided by male authorities and Susan is to be executed at the hands of the witch-hunters. Rich explains how patriarchy formulates rules in the interest of men: “The experience of maternity and the experience of sexuality have both been channeled to serve male interests; behaviour which threatens the institutions, such as illegitimacy,
abortion… is considered deviant or criminal” (42). Susan’s easy acceptance of her sins and justification of her sentence in following words, “I was a witch and never knew it. I killed my babies…. I’m so wicked. Alice, let’s pray to God we won’t be damned. If we’re hanged, we’re saved” (174) highlight the repressive power patriarchy exerts on the minds of all, even those victimized by the system, so much so that one starts feeling guilty and loses the power to question and even starts believing and supporting the repressive practices of patriarchy. Not only does Susan accept herself as a witch but believes the same for Alice too. Women like Susan are so easily subsumed by the powerful, dominant social order that their easy acceptance of their exploitation thwarts any attempt towards resistance by other women like Alice.

Another victim of witch hunt, Ellen, a thirty five year old midwife, carries out her “curative practices” with herbs and charms. Ellen is punished by witch hunters for practicing witchcraft since she is not a licensed doctor. Her possession of “powers … for healing or hurt” could jeopardise the male hierarchy. Janell Reinelt in her article “Caryl Churchill and the Politics of Style” aptly observes:

_Vinegar Tom_ treated the witch hunts of the seventeenth century as manifestations of a historical conjecture where the professionalisation of the health industry clashed, with midwifery and ‘cunning woman’s curative practices. Combining religious misogyny with emergent capitalism to construct poor women, unmarried women, and old women as scapegoats for this historical enactment of new power configurations, the authorities in this play confine, torture, and ultimately hang women whose unruly bodies/behaviour they cannot control”. (175)
Ellen’s single status, her curative practices demanding no monetary gain except “a little present” and her growing popularity among villagers who seek her advice on various matters seem to threaten and challenge the socio-economic order of patriarchy. Witchfinder Packer, representing patriarchy, expresses his sense of insecurity when he justifies Ellen’s execution, “These cunning women are worst of all. Everyone hates witches who do harm but good witches they go for help and come into the devil’s power without knowing it. The infection will spread to the whole country if we don’t stop it” (167). Packer’s uncanny description of power in the hands of women as “the devil’s power” and “infection” expresses insecurity of a misogynist mind as it can subvert the patriarchal binary opposition empowered men/disempowered women and so this power needs to be contained and curbed.

Ellen is one woman, besides Alice, who is ruled by reason and rationality instead of emotions. She remains completely poised and rational when Jack approaches her to find cure for his imagined emasculation by Alice. Ellen’s reasonable suggestion, however, fails to satisfy him as, in his fit of passion for Alice, he is totally unreasonable. Thus Churchill’s endowing of reason and rationality to Ellen infringes on the exclusively male domain of reason and rationality.

Ellen knew that she too would be tried for witchcraft. She plans a strategy to escape being labeled a witch:

“I could ask to be swum. They think the water won’t keep a witch in, … so if a woman floats she is a witch. And if she sinks they have to let her go. I could sink. Any fool can sink… No, why should I ask to be half-drowned? I have done
nothing. I’ll explain to them what I do. It’s healing, not harm. There is no devil in it. If I keep calm and explain it, they can’t hurt me”. (170).

Ellen’s dependence on rationality and good-sense of her persecutors as means to escape the witchcraft hysteria and gynophobic prejudice proves futile. The song “If you Float” sung at the end of Ellen’s above-mentioned speech expresses aptly the no-win situation in the binary of sink or swim, from which there is no escape:

If you float you are a witch
If you scream you are a witch
If you sink, then you’re dead anyway
If you cure you’re a witch
Or impure you’re a witch
Whatever you do must pay. (170)

Only two of the six women, Betty and Margery escape the community’s admonishing scrutiny. Betty, the rich landowner’s daughter, refuses to marry the man of her father’s choice. Her rebellion against patriarchal authority, a sure sign of non-conformity, is interpreted as hysteria rather than rebellion due to her social status as a rich landowner’s daughter. In scene six we find Betty tied to a chair and the doctor who is called to attend to her so-called sickness is ready to bleed her arm:

Betty. Why am I tied? Tied to be bled. Why am I bled? Because I was screaming. Why was I screaming? Because I am bad. Why was I bad? Because I was happy. Why was I happy? Because I ran out by myself and got away from them and why was screaming? Because I’m bad. Why am I bad? Because I am tied. Why am I tied? Because I was happy. Why was I happy? Because I was screaming. (149)
Janelle Reinelt observes: “Betty’s subjective conflicts as she tries to understand her condition are represented in circular reasoning, resembling the vicious circle in which she is caught. The doctor uses the power and logic of medicine to label her rebellion (against forced marriage) hysteria, and prescribes torture and punishment masquerading as treatment” (178). The doctor attending on her has a queer explanation of her hysteria (a woman’s weakness):

Hysteron, Greek, the womb. Excessive blood causes an imbalance in the humours. The noxious gases that form inwardly every month rise to the brain and cause behaviour quite contrary to the patient’s real feelings. After bleeding you must be purged. Tonight you shall be blistered. You will soon be well enough to be married”. (149)

The doctor’s explanation of hysteria as a product of noxious gases formed during menstruation causing female weakness sounds like a man’s indictment of woman for being a woman.

Betty easily accepts the doctor’s (patriarchal) diagnosis of her alleged feminine illness as he pathologizes the female resistance to oppressive patriarchal ideology as hysteria. She becomes easily convinced of her own illness when she tells Ellen, “But the doctor says he’ll save me. He says I’m not a witch, he says I’m ill. He says I’m his patient so I can’t be a witch” (169). The powerful patriarchal authority of the doctor replacing the familial authority finds dominant expression in Betty’s repetition of “He says” in the above speech. She finally agrees to the marriage believing that “may be I’ve been bewitched. If the witches are stopped, may be I’ll get well” (169). Accepting and internalizing the doctor’s (patriarchal) definition of her sickness, Betty finally acquiesces
to a marriage which would at least save her from the torture experienced by other women in the play. And once again we turn to Janelle Reinelt for her pertinent comment on this situation:

The contrast between the domestic situation in the landowner’s house and other scenes in which unmarried and poor and destitute (and also persecuted for witchery) etch the class distinction between forms of control exercised over women at this time. Medicine and the Church team up as powerful and intertwined agents of oppression. Churchill dramatizes these connections while also embodying the predicament of the female subject struggling to resist against the odds. (149)

Margery, another woman along with Betty, although not accused of witchcraft, yet presents the oppression of women in general. Margery, the wife of Jack, lives a life of daily drudgery and works harder and hard and struggles harder to keep her unfaithful husband happy. Instead of protesting, she suppresses her anguish and consumes herself in household chores to maintain her ‘expected’ role. Alisa Solomon in her article “Witches, Ranters and the Middle Class: The plays of Caryl Churchill” calls Margery “a model citizen” and “an automation of puritan values” and one “who has been so reduced by her cold self-righteousness that she can no longer fulfil her “womanly duties and chores” (49-55). Her anguish is expressed in the song “If Everybody Worked as Hard as Me”:

If our children’s shirts are white,
if their language is polite,
if nobody stays out late at night,
Oh, happy family,
Oh, the country’s what it is because
the family’s what is because
the wife is what she is to her man.

Nobody loves you
unless you keep your mouth shut.

Nobody loves you
if you don’t support your man. (159-160)

The song demonstrates how the submission and sacrifices of a woman are fundamental to
the smooth functioning of a family, a country and the social order. The wife’s total
submission to her husband ensures her silence against all kind of oppression: “Nobody
loves you/unless you keep your mouth shut”. Margery realizes fully that a woman’s
identity depends upon her relationship to the man, that is, her role as his wife. Women
without men, like Joan and Alice, have to suffer by their exclusion from the social set-up.
Patriarchy forces conformity and assimilation to its value structure and conformity means
survival in a misogynistic patriarchal culture. But still, women like Margery have to pay a
very high price for the male protection and inclusion into the existing social order.

Margery’s prayer to God after Joan and Ellen are hanged on a public square
constitutes an independent scene (scene 19) in the play to highlight her fears and
compromises she makes in order to survive in a patriarchal society:

Dear God, thank you for saving us. Let us live safe now. I have scrubbed the dairy
out. You have shown your power in destroying the wicked, and you show it in
blessing the good. You have helped me in my struggle against the witches, help
me in my daily struggle. Help me work harder and our good harvests will be to your glory. Bless Miss Betty’s marriage and let her live happy. Bless Jack and keep him safe from evil and let him love me and give us the land, amen. (174)

In a patriarchal society, women must act as domestic labourer without wages for the benefit of her family. Margery’s prayer to help her work harder is to survive with a husband who never hesitates to call her “a lazy woman” and “lazy slut” (145). Blessings she seeks for Betty’s marriage sound ironic because Betty doesn’t want this marriage and Margery is aware of it. In order to survive in a patriarchal set-up of the society women like Margery must, not only carry out their domestic and wifely duties sincerely but also internalise the bias and prejudice of society against marginalized women and this explains her blaming Joan Noakes of practising witchcraft on her calves and buffaloes and killing them. Andrea Dworkin in her famous book Right-Wing Women: The Politics of Domesticated Females writes: “Women internalize patriarchal values to perfect their obedience; they conform to the stereotypes, they display unwavering loyalty, they do not betray any sign of dissatisfaction or resistance to male control – all in order to avoid violence against their persons” (20). Thus women like Margery become representatives of patriarchy and capitalism. Margery belongs to the dominant class and behaves as a capitalist oppressor when she expels Joan from her house as Joan comes to her house begging for yeast. She acts as a bourgeois against Joan, a proletariat with economic failures and that shows Churchill’s interest in class analysis.

We have another woman, Goody, the assistant witchfinder, yet another example of how patriarchal power forces women to become selfish and betray other women to survive in this system. Margery and Goody, both are what radical feminists call male-
identified women who conform with and assimilate into patriarchal value structures. A widow like Joan, Goody is happy to associate herself with Packer, the oppressor rather than the poor, tortured women, the oppressed. Expressing her appreciation and allegiance to Packer who is doing a noble job of eradicating England of evil, she says:

Yes, it’s interesting being a searcher and nice to do good at the same time as earning a living. Better than staying home a widow. I’ll end up like the old women you see, soft in the head and full of spite with their muttering and spells. I keep healthy keeping the country healthy. It’s an honour to work with a great professional. (168)

Enjoying her work as “a searcher” and “earning a living”, Goody benefits from the patriarchal economic structure. Her association with Packer, the witch-hunter which keeps her “healthy” has ironically dried up all her nascent feminine qualities of heart, as becomes evident from her following monologue, full of violence:

England is too soft with its witches, for in Europe and Scotland they are hanged and burned and if they are not penitent they are burnt alive, but in England they are only hanged. And the ways of discovering witches are not so good here, for in other countries they have thumbscrews and racks and the bootikens which is said to be the worst pain in the world, for it fits tight over the legs from ankle to knee and is driven tighter and tighter till the legs are crushed as small as might be and the blood and marrow spout out and the bones crushed and the legs made unserviceable forever. (168)
Goody is the product of a subversive ideology and for her survival and self-interest she attaches herself with the oppressive powers in their subjugation of women and thus fails in her duty to other women.

Packer and Goody employ a most humiliating way of finding out witches. Using a sharp metal prod, Packer subjects these women to most shameful physical search. Churchill has pointed out in her production note: “The pricking scene is one of humiliation rather than torture and Packer is an efficient professional, not a sadistic maniac” (134). Explaining his method, to which he attaches holy sanctity so that it becomes an approved and acceptable social practice, he says, “For God in his mercy has called me and shown me a wonderful way of finding out witches which is finding the place on the body of the witch made insensitive to pain by the devil. So that if you prick that place with a pin no blood comes out and the witch feels nothing at all” (165). And they prick these women at all places and even shave their private parts for finding out the devil’s spot as Goody describes in one scene:

Devil hides his marks all kinds of places. The more secret the better he likes it ....

And a woman last week with a big lump in her breast like another whole teat where she sucked her imps.... And when I squeezed it first white stuff came out like milk and then blood, for she fed those horrid creatures on milk and blood and they sucked her secret parts in the night too. Now let’s see your secret parts and see what the devil does there. (172)

Packer spares no opportunity for these women to escape as he tells them: “Though a mark is a sure sign of a witch’s guilt having no mark is no sign of innocence for the devil can take marks off” (172). Physically abusing and humiliating a woman

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then justifying and supporting it with the help of religious and holy scriptures has always been an established and accepted practice of male authority in patriarchal system.

In the last scene of the play Sprenger and Kramer, the professors of Theology, inquisitors of heretical pravities and delegated by letters apostolic, enumerate the flaws and inferior qualities of women in answer to the question “why is a greater number of witches found in the fragile feminine sex than in men” (176-177)? The identification of the feminine with the fragile in this question itself exposes the patriarchal tendency to describe woman as the weak sex. Formed from a bent rib and so an imperfect animal, a woman, they assert suffers from “a defect of intelligence” and “a defect of inordinate passions”. Justifying the persecution of witches on the ground of natural female inferiority, they find woman “feebler in both body and mind, more credulous, more impressionable, more carnal than a man” (177). Demonstrating their rank phallocentrism, they define a woman in relation to a man. Supporting their treatise with Holy scripture and the Lives of Saints and Martyrs, the two professors make it a reading in misogyny when they wind up their speech by calling a woman “liar by nature, vain, more bitter than death, contaminating to touch and with insatiable malice and carnal lust” (177-178).

In *Vinegar Tom* Churchill has experimented with new forms like cross-casting, episodic structure and songs that continue to disrupt the flow of the action. The seven songs in the play serve as twentieth century commentary on its characters and situation and “the play’s feminist message is centralized within these songs” (Neblett 101). The songs, often dismissed by critics and theatrical reviewers as extraneous diversions, still constitute the soul of the play. Using the songs as integral Brechtian device of “defamiliarization”, Churchill not only defies the patriarchal traditions of Aristotelian...
theatrics but also furthers her feminist agenda. Janelle Reinelt observes that the song technique employed in the drama mirrored Brecht’s style by “emphasizing the possibilities for intervention and change” (1996, 44). In her production note, Churchill explains how the songs in *Vinegar Tom* can best work as alienation effects and comment upon the action in the play: “The songs, which are contemporary, should if possible be sung by actors in modern dress. They are not part of the action and not sung by the characters in the scenes before them…. But it is essential that the actors are not in character when they sing the songs” (133).

Churchill’s deliberate and conscious decision to have the singers change from seventeenth century to modern costumes breaks the smooth flow of action located in seventeenth century and brings them back to the present. The audiences accustomed to traditional form of drama obviously find this transition jarring but yet they never fail to register the playwright’s motive. Alisa Solomon’s critical observation on the inclusion of songs in the play questions this technique employed by Churchill:

The juxtaposition of these incongruous scenes bludgeons and then cajoles the audience into considering the perhaps more subtle, but equally destructive, ways in which contemporary society restricts women. Churchill’s use of songs throughout the play is not entirely successful, however. Following Brecht’s example, perhaps, the contemporary songs that are interspersed throughout the narrative are meant to make the audience think about the action. But here they are not essential to the association of the play’s scapegoating of women with the plight of contemporary women. Their inclusion seems to suggest that Churchill does not yet trust her new and developing style. (49-55)
But Gillian Hanna, one of the founding members of Monstrous Regiment, the feminist troupe with whom Churchill experienced her first collaboration to create *Vinegar Tom* explains how this technique of disruption facilitates the audience to make comparisons between the past and the present:

We didn’t want to allow the audience to get off the hook by regarding it as a period piece, a piece of very interesting history. Now a lot of people felt their intelligence was affronted by that. They said, “I don’t know why these people have to punctuate what they are saying by these modern songs. We’re perfectly able to draw conclusions about the world today from historical parallels”. Actually, I don’t believe that and, in any case, we can’t run that risk. For every single intelligent man who can draw parallels, there are dozens who don’t. It’s not that they can’t. It’s that they won’t. (qtd. in Itzin 9-10)

Churchill makes sure that the real message of the play is not lost in the story and so the songs are used to create alienation effects on the audience as they block and restrict their empathy with the characters and make them more receptive to the real message of the play. Susan Todd expresses the similar sentiments:

We didn’t want to allow the audience to ever get completely immersed in the stories of the women in the play. We wanted to make them continually aware of our presence, of our relationship to the material, which was combative, anguished. The songs had to contain what we sensed as a connection between the past and our present experience. (qtd. in Itzin 276)

Through the songs in this play Churchill makes her audience establish similarities between the past and the present, the mistreatment of the women called witches and the treatment of women within patriarchy. The same sentiment of misogyny continues even
till today, and manifests in inequality women face in different fields of life including economics, cultural and social values and institutions. The seven songs, employed by Churchill to drive home a significant feminist viewpoint, serve as signposts towards a particular end.

The first song in the play, “Nobody Sings”, traces a woman’s life from the onset of menstrual cycle to menopause, that is, from youth to old age, and connects the pain and anguish experienced by Alice and Joan to the same predicament faced by many women in the present age. The song, timeless in its appeal and relevance, has a tone of anger and depression:

I woke up in the morning,
Blood was on the sheet,
I met an old woman
Who made my blood run cold.

You don’t stop wanting sex, she said,
Just because you’re old.
Do you want your skin to wrinkle
And your cunt get sore and dry?

And they say its just your hormones
If you cry and cry and cry.
Nobody ever saw me
She whispered in a rage.

They were blinded by my beauty, now
They’re blinded by my age.
Oh nobody sings about it,
but it happens all the time. (141-142)

The song expresses “the internalized desperation of the women… who are ensnared by the patriarchal customs of judging a woman’s worth by her physical beauty and reproductive capacity” (Neblett 114). As she loses both as her age advances (evident from the angrier tone and more irreverent language), she discovers that she retains no
individual identity, other than just an abstract concept of woman. The patriarchal set-up of society recognizes no other identity of woman and this explains the predicament of women like Joan who are bereft of male attachment and past the child-bearing age, and so struggling hard to survive in this society. The eventual marginalization of the female identity results in ultimate confinement and solitude of the old age.

The second song “Oh Doctor” carries on the issue of encroachment of woman’s rights and body and also the objectification of woman in male gaze:

Where are you taking my skin?  
Where are you putting my bones?  
………………………………………….  
Why are you putting my brain in my cunt?  
You’re putting me back all back to front.  
Stop looking up me with your metal eye.  
Stop cutting me apart before I die.  
………………………………………….  
I’m wide awake, but I still can’t shout.  
Why can’t I see what you are taking out?  
………………………………………….  
What’s wrong with me  
the way I am?  
………………………………………….  
Give me back my body.  
I can see myself. (150-151)

Churchill emphasises the phenomena of female invisibility and lost identity in the repeated questionings focused on different parts of the body, implying the denial of wholeness. Robert L. Nablett in his article “‘Nobody sings about it’: In Defense of the songs in Caryl Churchill’s Vinegar Tom” observes: “Eerie resonances of gynecological examinations, Chinese foot- binding, and ritual female circumcision in tribal traditions are also present in what amounts to a savage Artaudian demonstration of the male subjugation of female emotional, physical and psychological identity” (114).
The song, preceding and succeeding the leeching scene of Betty, brings out the cruel and abusive medical practices of seventeenth century and stretches the issue to include the lack of sensitivity and the extent of encroachment and intrusion in medical practices of today. The song also contrasts the natural, harmless curative methods of Ellen, the cunning woman and the dangerous and abusive method of seventeenth century doctors. The song prepares us for the humiliation to be faced by these accused women soon in Packer’s degrading physical examinations of their genitalia in search of “the devil’s marks” by Packer and Goody. The masculine (medical) intrusion into the female body (“stop looking up me with your metal eye”) erodes her self-esteem and confidence and gives way to feelings of self-doubt and worthlessness. The singer’s repeated questions like, “What’s wrong with me the way I am?” and fervent appeals to the doctor to stop this physical investigation can also be interpreted as appeals to stop treating them as mere objects with no identity, an issue feminists have always raised their voice against.

The third song “Something to Burn”, the shortest in the play, mirrors the rising mass hysteria of Puritan society. The song with its threatening masculine tone rationalizes this mass hysteria of genocide taking place in the play. Expressing the human tendency to place the blame for his problems and faults on somebody else, the song places the women along with lunatics, blacks and jews, the worst sufferers in the history of mankind:

What can we do, there’s nothing to do,
about sickness and hunger and dying.

Find something to burn.
Sometimes it’s witches, or what will you choose?
Sometimes it’s lunatics, shut them away.
It’s blacks and it’s women and often it’s jews.
We’d be quite happy if they’d go away.
Find something to burn. (154)

Randall comments: By “placing witch-burning in the context of holocaust and genocide, Churchill forces her audience to confront the socio-economic basis of fear and prejudice” (80).

This song is preceded by a conversation between Jack and Margery, the neighbours of Alice and Joan Noakes. We find them accusing Joan of making their livestock fall suddenly ill. The song is thematically linked up with this scene:

MARGERY. It (a calf) stinks terrible.
JACK. Stink of witchcraft it is. Burn it up.
MARGERY. We must pray to God to keep us safe from the devil. Praying’s strong against witches.
JACK. We’ll pray God help us and help ourselves too.
MARGERY. She’ll see the fire and smell it and she’ll know we’re fighting her back, stinking old witch, can’t hurt us. (145)

Hiding their hatred and vengeance behind a noble and pious intention of cleansing the society of evil forces and restoring social order in their village, Jack and Margery represent the social forces scapegoating the marginalized to strengthen the patriarchal model of civilization.
In the fourth song, “If Everybody Worked as Hard as Me” Churchill demonstrates how the hard domestic labour and suppression of woman are the necessary conditions for running a happy family, society and country. Even the women, protected under the cover of a husband, are safe against the dangers of marginality only as long as they carry out their wifely duties and fulfill the expectations of a patriarchal society. Thus, the song becomes an essential manual for an ideal patriarchal society which thrives on untiring and undeviating loyalty and obedience to the family and country. The song sounds ironic in the light of the fact the Margery’s conviction in women’s sacrifices and loyalty for a “happy family” is motivated only by a strong sense of insecurity a woman feels if she fails to conform to patriarchal system and so her survival depends upon this conformity.

Oh I do all I can.

Yes, I do all I can.

I try to do what is right,

so I’ll never be alone and afraid in the night.

Nobody loves a scold,

nobody loves a slut,

nobody loves you when you’re old,

unless you’re someone’s gran.

Nobody loves you

unless you keep your mouth shut.

Nobody loves you

if you don’t support your man. (160)
Robert L. Neblett’s comment on this song substantiates the viewpoint mentioned above: “Yet again, Churchill critiques the assumptions that female beauty and self-worth must acquiesce to the desires of a community’s male-dominated cultural constructs, which threaten to silence the feminine voice if it doesn’t abide by the accepted conditions of the social norm” (117).

The fifth song “If you float” links the experiences of Ellen, the cunning woman accused of witchcraft to the women in general who are daily oppressed under patriarchy:

If you float you’re a witch
If you scream you’re a witch
If you cure you’re a witch
Or impure you’re a witch
Whatever you do, you must pay.
Fingers are pointed, a knock at the door,
You may be a mother, a child or a whore.
Any marks or deviation count for more.
Got big tits you’re a witch
Fall to bits you’re a witch
Deny it you’re bad
Admit it you’re mad
Say nothing at all
They’ll damn you to hell. (170)

The song projects women’s total entrapment within patriarchy which allows no escape from this no-choice and no-win situation. The song also identifies the silencing of
women as one prerequisite for her survival in patriarchy (“Deny it you’re bad/admit it you’re mad/say nothing at all/They’ll damn you to hell”). In this inescapable situation, her speech and silence both, lead her to the same end, i.e., death. The women who are silenced, so accepted as compliant, are pushed to the margins of society and the ones who dare to speak up, so non-compliant, are punished. The oppressive (masculine) power allows no infringement or overstepping into the exclusive male domain of patriarchy. Women are punished even for the smallest acts of resistance that hardly signify any degree of power as “Whatever you do, you must pay… They’re coming to get you…” (170). The song becomes a critique of “patriarchal logic” manipulating sign system and arbitrarily inventing and re-inventing the “signs” of woman’s “evil” doing (Aston 29).

The sixth song of the play “Lament for the Witches” follows Alice and Susan’s conversation in the backdrop of Joan and Ellen hanging on a public square. Susan, conditioned and weakened by a patriarchal system supported by religious dogmas, is led into believing that she is a witch, and so is Alice. But Alice vehemently protests against being labeled a witch and wishes to acquire devil’s powers to take revenge against a society responsible for persecuting innocent women like her mother Joan and Ellen, the cunning woman. The song following this scene becomes significant when it asks the audience, “Where have the witches gone? Who are the witches now?” And the answer provided in the song itself “Here we are” links the oppression of innocent women of the seventeenth century to the still continuing, subtler forms of oppression of women in contemporary society. The song addresses the female in the audience and reminds them that women executed as witches were as normal and no different from them. Once again
reiterating their marginalisation and oppression, the song reminds us of another song “Something to Burn” in which women are clubbed with Jews and blacks.

Look in the mirror tonight
Would they have hanged you then?
Ask how they’re stopping you now.
Where have the witches gone?
Who are the witches now?
Ask how they’re stopping you now.
Here we are. (176)

The song exhorts the female audience to see the connection between the women who were hanged and themselves as the punishment and cruelty meted out to seventeenth century women to suppress them has only changed into more covert, subtle and sophisticated methods of suppression and control in the contemporary society.

The play ends with the song ‘Evil Women’ with a number of questions directed towards the males in the audience just as the song “Lament for the witches” addresses the females in the audience. The song is preceded by the scene in which the women portraying Kramer and Sprenger, the Professors of Theology and authors of Malleus Maleficarum (or Hammer of witches) answer the question, “Why is a greater number of witches found in the fragile feminine sex than in men”? The scene, already discussed in this chapter, justifying the persecution of witches on the grounds of natural female inferiority, makes a reading in misogyny. Directly challenging the males in the audience, the singers suggest that “evil women” is essentially a male construct:
Evil Women
Is that what you want?
Is that what you want to see?
On the movie screen
Of your own wet dream
Evil women.
If you like sex sinful, what you want is us.

Do you ever get afraid
You don’t do it right?
Does your lady demand it
Three times a night?
If we don’t say you’re big
Do you start to shrink?

Satan’s lady, Satan’s pride,
Satan’s baby, Satan’s bride,

Evil Women
Evil Women
Women. (178-179)

The song suggests that the image of evil women is a mere projection of male fantasy. Finding support against female sexuality as sinful in Judeo-Christian religious doctrines, patriarchal violence as manifest in scapegoating and demonising the women can be understood as expression of male insecurity and Freudian castration anxiety against female sexuality. Witch-hunting is also one such manifestation. The history of witches and their evil power continues to feed the imaginative mystification of women as being dark, mysterious and evil in contemporary times, an issue Churchill raises in some other plays also. The song questions this cultural conditioning influencing the present attitude towards women.

Churchill’s seven songs in *Vinegar Tom*, disrupt the sequence of the narrative and give voice to the ‘silenced’ and thus strengthen the subversive tendency of feminist theatre. Through this technique Churchill shifts the focus so that a history piece about
hysteria of witchcraft acquires the universality of women’s experiences. Janelle Reinelt’s observation on significance of songs in this play substantiates our viewpoint: “Churchill intercuts her schematic historical scenes with contemporary songs which mock the proceedings and ensure that the modern parallels to contemporary sexism, ageism and capitalism cannot be ignored” (175-176).

The musical interludes of *Vinegar Tom* accomplish the feminist goal of disturbing the linear action of the play and making the muted women speak up through the action of the play.

Another feature of technique, besides the songs, is the use of cross-casting. In the final scene of the play Sprenger and Kramer, Professors of Theology, played by two women quote liberally from the book *Malleus Maleficarum* they have co-authored. Demonstrating a deeply prejudiced mind working against women, the two professors dwell upon the reasons of female inferiority and try to justify their persecution as witches. Caryl Churchill clearly stated in her production note for *Vinegar Tom*:

Kramer and Sprenger should be played by women. Originally they were played by Chris Bowler and Mary McCuskar who, as Ellen and Joan, had just been hanged, which seems to be an ideal doubling. They played them as Edwardian music hall gents in hats and tails, and some opening rhymes and jokes are theirs. The rest of the scene is genuine Kramer and Sprenger from their handbook on witches and women, *Malleus Maleficarum, The Hammer of Witches*. (134)

The technique of cross-casting used by Churchill to depict the two male professors (played by women), defies the logic of established (male) dramatic techniques. The technique of cross-gender casting, one of the key alienating-gender devices in
feminist theatre, also helps the playwright to highlight women’s alienation from their own female selves in a society ruled by patriarchy. The bitter misogynistic speech of Spranger and Kramer sounds more shocking when it comes from the mouth of women actors. The technique is successfully used by Churchill to make it doubly shocking to make us hear the muted story of the persecuted women. The technique becomes ironical not only because women play the role of the male professors and indulge in female-bashing but also for highlighting the representation of those women like Margery and Goody in the speech of professors who supported and approved the persecution of witches and became the female participants in patriarchy so that they themselves may survive in the society and also the women like Susan who have been conditioned by the patriarchal society to believe that they really deserved this punishment for the eternal sin of being women.

The play is divided in twenty one scenes of oppression, cruelty, torture and hanging of ‘witches’ resulting from patriarchal attitudes, economic inequalities and an unsympathetic religion. The playwright’s preference for an episodic structure over a traditional one conveys her need to express the women’s experiences through an unconventional means. A fixed traditional structure of five acts (Aristotelian) would not have been sympathetic to the voice of the marginalised. In the simultaneous presentation of two time periods, both distant from that of the historical narrative, the playwright further prevents the audience from any identification with the characters in the play and allows for a more serious and objective analysis of the issues raised in the play.

Language is a reflection of the culture, attitudes and mindset of a society. In a patriarchal society woman has often been given derogatory names for the ‘sins’
committed by her; man invariably escapes the admonishing and demeaning labels for the same sins. Churchill has highlighted in various scenes of her play the use of abusive patriarchal language, or rather the language of patriarchal oppression clearly expressing the prejudice, bias and inferior status of woman in such a society.

In the first scene of the play, Alice is called “whore, whore, damned strumpet, succubus, witch” (137) by the man who didn’t hesitate to have sex with her but easily abused and degraded her. Similarly, Margery, the monogamous and faithful wife of Jack, is called “Lazy Slut” by her husband. Abusing a woman for no apparent cause has been an age-old established practice in all patriarchal societies. Taking out his frustration of his sexual inadequacy, symbolized by his supposed loss of his penis, Jack abuses his wife Margery also for her inability to achieve orgasm. She is berated and made to feel guilty about this inability of hers which is expressed in the following words by Margery: “Come butter come, come butter come. Johny’s standing at the gate waiting for a butter cake” and again “It’s not coming this butter. I’m sick of it”. (143-145)

In the last scene of the play Sprenger and Kramer describe the supposed weaknesses of woman, responsible for making her a witch. Variously described as “more credulous”, “more impressionable”, “more carnal”, “imperfect animal”, “Female, that is faith minus without”, “a defect of intelligence”, “a defect of inordinate passions”, “weak memories”, “liar by nature”, “more bitter than death”, “contaminating to touch”, “insatiable malice”, woman is a bundle of deficiencies according to these two professors of Theology. The description offered by them is either in comparative degree (frequent use of the word ‘more’) or in negative prefixes or terms (underlined to
highlight). Churchill brings out the sheer misogyny, lack of respect and an absence of positive identity in the language of the inquisitors.

John A. Price in his article, “The language of Caryl Churchill: the Rhythms of Feminist Theory, Acting Theory and Gender Politics” has analysed the following conversation between Packer and Alice in the play:

PACKER. Why won’t you confess and make it shorter?

ALICE. I want my boy.

PACKER. Then you should have stayed at home at night with him and not gone out after the devil.

ALICE. I want him.

PACKER. How could a woman be filthy witch and put her child in danger?

ALICE. I didn’t.

PACKER. Night after night, it’s well known.

ALICE. But what’s going to happen to him? He’s got only me.

PACKER. He should have a father. (171)

John A. Price’s comments on this conversation take note of the feminist commentary and dramatic communiqué of Churchill:

… note the short, clipped, and emotionally restrained language of Alice compared to the longer, emotionally even and controlled language of Packer, signifying the conflict between and within the characters. The questioning pushes Alice to an emotional breaking point as she bursts forth with need and desperation in her last and longest line. Churchill’s language structure, devised, in part, from actors improvisations, provides acting clues through the semiotics of her dialogues. (2)
Elaine Aston, too, has commented upon this conversation in her book on Caryl Churchill, when she says that Alice represents the “economically deprived single mother group” and concludes that Packer’s questioning “bears a frightening resemblance to the 1990’s, crusade again ‘lone mothers’ and ‘home alone’ children by right-wing politicians” (30).

In her revisioning of the myth of witchcraft Churchill demonstrates her commitment to feminism and feminist theatre as she raises her audience to a new level of consciousness towards a socialist feminist perception of the world. This reinterpretation of the history of witch-hunting hysteria not only exposes the oppressive powers of patriarchy and capitalism against women but also represents a positive step towards women empowerment which is better achieved in her next play *Cloud Nine*. 
WORKS CITED


