CHAPTER – 6

TOP GIRLS

Caryl Churchill’s *Top Girls*, one of her most popular plays and included by *Guardian* critic Michael Bellington in his list of ten best British plays of the twentieth century (Aston 2003, 20), explores the superficial success and liberation of women, along with their underlying exploitation in a patriarchal system. The play questions the very adoption of patriarchal values by women to achieve success. In a way *Top Girls* turns out to be a critique of the feminist movement, or to be more precise, of liberal or bourgeois feminism and its principles and values.

With an entirely female cast, *Top Girls* won the prestigious Obie Award and was hailed as one of the most successful feminist plays. It was first performed in 1982 when Margaret Thatcher was the Prime Minister of England. Seen as an ‘Iron Woman’ and having ruled England for almost 15 years with her capitalist values, Thatcher’s reflection in *Top Girls*’ heroine Marlene was often discussed in the light of bourgeois feminism. Elaine Aston in her article “Telling Feminist Tales: Caryl Churchill” comments:

When *Top Girls* was performed it was some three years after Thatcher came to power (1979) and a year before her re-election for a second term in office. Already, the idea of the materially driven ‘Super-woman’, Churchill’s kind of ‘top-girl’ Marlene figure, was taking hold. But career and economic advancement consequent upon inter-and intra-sexual oppression, a kind of ‘right-wing feminism (as Churchill also termed it), does not necessarily provide a progressive way forward; can hardly, as the play shows, be equated with feminism in any positive sense at all. (2003, 21)
In an interview with Lynne Truss in *Plays and Players*, Churchill commented:

> It was also that Thatcher had just become Prime Minister; and also I had been to America for a student production of *Vinegar Tom* and had been talking to women there who were saying things were going very well: they were getting far more women executives, women vice-presidents and so on. And that was such a different attitude from anything I’d ever met here, where feminism tends to be much more connected with socialism and not so much to do with women succeeding on the sort of capitalist ladder. All of those ideas fed into *Top Girls*. (Truss 8)

Churchill’s socialist perspective on feminism questioned the go-getter attitude of bourgeois feminism which encouraged the idea of individual success at the cost of sisterhood or women’s solidarity. The ambitious women fuelled by their materialist dreams and power of success often ignored or even exploited their less-privileged sisters. The play dramatizes this dichotomy within feminism.

The play is divided in three acts, which look like three short, interwoven plays, each shedding different and raising different questions on the central theme of successful woman. The first act focuses on the life of six famous women from history, their exploitation, sacrifices and sufferings in a male set-up. The second act highlights the purely materialistic and success-oriented environment of an employment agency where women emulate ‘male values’ to survive and become successful in a highly competitive world. The third act with a homely setting, focuses on family, sacrifices and rejection of maternal instincts, the politics of selfish versus selfless creed, and questions the future of abandoned children who may never be able to reach the top.
With an all female cast, *Top Girls* easily qualified as a feminist play for the following reasons: the play is primarily concerned with silenced women, the apparently successful and famous women from history who have made many sacrifices in their lives and silenced their voices and their female experiences to gain success in a patriarchal society. Secondly, the play is essentially a reflection of women’s community drawn from different strata of society of different times in the history of the world. These women with their heterogeneous experiences in their respective ages find commonalities rooted in their gender and also in their gendered response to patriarchal set-up of the society. Thirdly, the depiction of female psychological and moral development in the play made it a favourite with different feminist groups of the time. Elaine Aston emphasizes in her study of Churchill the “intense pleasure” this play provided for women spectators (quoted in Aston 1997, 43). The popularity of the play reflects the large scale identification of the women spectators with different characters in the play. Although a few more feminist plays with exclusively female representation came but very few reached the mainstream venues and succeeded on commercial stage, as did the *Top Girls*.

A close reading of the play takes us far beyond the façade of a purely feminist drama and presents a critical examination and a reassessment of the women’s movement and its implications. Churchill’s *Top Girls* not only draws our attention to the feminist struggle for individual autonomy but also opens our eyes to its serious limitations as many feminist theorists have begun to do.

Mary Wollstonecraft in her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) deplored the position of women with limited education and their dependence on their husbands. She strongly advocated that women must work outside the home. Betty
Friedan, a liberal feminist too spoke in favour of women working outside the home and create their identity other than that of a wife and mother. Simone de Beauvoir in the chapter, “The Independent Women” in The Second Sex also suggests the same: ‘It is through gainful employment that woman has traversed most of the distance that separated her from the male; and nothing else can guarantee her liberty in practice” (173). Liberal feminism demanded for women equal access to education, equal rights in family and law but instead of opposing and dismantling the male-oriented social system it was encouraging the women to enter it and become a part of it. The unwillingness of liberal feminists to question and transform the capitalist basis of western society also implied an unwillingness to confront the patriarchal bias of capitalism itself. Elaine Aston and Janelle Reinelt agree in their article “A Century In View: From Suffrage to the 1990s”: “Caryl Churchill wrote Top Girls to question the extent to which second wave feminists were buying into Thatcher ideology to the detriment of a variety of real women” (Aston and Reinelt 14). Combining the issues of class and feminism, the play presents the ‘top girls’ who accept capitalistic structures to succeed in a patriarchal system and establish a female hierarchy just like male hierarchy so much deplored by feminists.

The play opens with a dinner party hosted by Marlene, a top executive in ‘Top Girls’ employment agency to celebrate her promotion to the post of managing director of the company. The guests are all extraordinary women from history, art or literature of different time periods. They are extraordinary, we find, in ways patriarchal ideology and history would recognize. Churchill in her “Note on characters” in Top Girls explains Isabella Bird as a nineteenth century traveller who “lived in Edinberg, travelled extensively between the ages of 40 and 70” (52). Isabella’s experiences as a traveller to
different parts of the world were way beyond the imagination of an ordinary woman confined to her home and a limited environment. Similarly Pope Joan, Churchill describes, “disguised as a man, is thought to have been Pope between 854-856” (52), a position unthinkable to women in the history of Christianity. Lady Nizo (b.1258), another guest, was a Japanese courtesan of an Emperor and later became a Buddhist nun and travelled on foot through Japan. Belonging to a family of eight generations of poets, Lady Nizo is really proud of her heritage. The fourth guest Patient Griselda is “the obedient wife” of a Marquis who demands impossible devotion and sacrifices from her. Her story is related by Chaucer in the Clerk’s Tale of The Canterbury Tales and Petrarch and Boccaccio. The last guest in Marlene’s party is Dull Gret. Churchill describes her as “the subject of the Brughel painting, Dulle Griet, in which a woman in an apron and armour leads a crowd of women charging through hell and fighting the devils” (52). All these women with their extraordinary experiences and fame join Marlene to celebrate her extraordinary success.

Marlene’s promotion to the highest position in her company, leaving behind all her colleagues, women and also men, is a singular achievement of a woman who attained it only on the basis of her individual accomplishments. She has earned her position which remains beyond the reach of the majority of women even today and thus can legitimately find inclusion in the group of extraordinary and famous ‘top girls’ at the dinner party. And yet, as their stories unfold, bringing out the heart-rending ironies of their life, the real significance of the celebrated moment is undermined. With the startling details of the sacrifices all these women have made, their life stories are an endless repetition of awful experiences: rapes, frustrations, oppression and subservience to men.
Contrasted against this group of ‘top girls’ is the silent presence of a waitress who is seen carrying out their orders and serving them in perfect silence which is yet again contrasted against the constant chatter (on top of each other) of these famous women. The waitress stands for the majority of dutiful women engaged in household chores and carrying out their duties as mothers, wives and daughters without ever being acknowledged for the hardwork in their domestic lives and always silenced if ever they dare to protest and raise a voice against the roles and duties assigned to them in a patriarchal set-up. The silent presence of the waitress instantly draws our attention to the big gap between individual success of very few chosen women and the predicament of majority of women caught up in the struggle of life in every society.

These women from different ages, and time periods of history, countries and cultures draw one’s attention to their decidedly different social classes and cultures. Although they share the same sex, their responses to their lives and circumstances are unique. Churchill attempts to demonstrate that gender issues and concerns cannot be divorced from social and culture-specific experiences. Isabella Bird, the Victorian traveller, is extremely conscious of her class and always looks down upon the religious philosophy and practices other than that of Christianity. Showing her disapproval of Buddhism and other oriental cultural practices mentioned by Lady Nijo, she says, “There are some barbaric practices in the east/Among the lower classes” (60). Similarly, she tells Nijo who is a Buddhist, “I tried to understand Buddhism … just filled me with the most profound melancholy. I do like something more active” (60). Also, her assertion, “I am of course a member of the/Church of England” (59) clearly indicates her English snobbishness and intolerance towards anything non-Christian and non-English. Marlene’s
responses in this conversation like, “Well I’m not a Christian. And I’m not a Buddhist” and again “I haven’t been to church for years” are worth noting as Marlene, representing the bourgeois feminism has only success and individual fulfilment on her mind. Seeing the disagreement among the guests on religious beliefs, Marlene says, “I don’t think religious beliefs are something we have in common. Activity yes” (60).

Although Isabella’s adventures and travel activities more commonly associated with men, have made her famous yet she strongly protests against “any suggestion in the press that (she) was other than feminine” (62). Having always travelled as a lady, Isabella is very conscious of her identity as a woman. To Joan’s revelation that she dressed as a boy when she left home, Isabella’s surprised reaction, “you dressed as a boy?” (62) shows her culture and gender-specific response. And yet Isabella’s courage and initiative to undertake various adventurous journeys and the proud achievement of having met the emperor of Morocco expressed in the words “I was the only European woman ever to have seen the Emperor of Morocco” (83) make her stand out among ordinary women. Her achievement makes her an extraordinary woman, no less than a man.

Pope Joan, the Italian woman of ninth century, flees her home in the guise of a boy to pursue theology. At a time when “women were not allowed in the library (62), Joan had no other option except to live as a boy to realize her dream. Living a materially poor but intellectually rich life, she manages to hide her true feminine identity and thus tries to overcome the double obstacle of poverty and femininity. Having lived as a boy, Joan “forgot that she was pretending” (63) and got completely alienated from her female self till she becomes pregnant sometime after she became the Pope. Her comments like “I wasn’t used to having a woman’s body/I never knew what month it was” and “ I didn’t
know what was happening. I thought I was getting fatter, but then I was eating more and sitting about,.…. The chamberlain was the one who realized.” (70) show the extent of alienation Joan had developed from her female body. In the following conversation with Joan, Marlene’s responses acquaint us with her priorities of life:

Marlene. Didn’t you think of getting rid of it?

Joan. Wouldn’t that be a worse sin then having it? But a Pope with a child was about as bad as possible.

……………………………………………………………………………………………………

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Joan. Wouldn’t that be a worse sin then having it? But a Pope with a child was about as bad as possible.

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Marlene. Other Popes had children, surely.

Joan. They didn’t give birth to them.

Nijo. Well you were a woman.

Joan. Exactly and I shouldn’t have been a woman. Women, children and lunatics can’t be Pope.

Marlene. So the only thing to do/was to get rid of it. (69)

Marlene’s statement that other Popes had children surely questions the gender based inequality meted out to a woman Pope. And again her suggestion to Joan that she should have aborted the baby draws our attention to the extremely casual and insensitive attitude of Marlene towards maternity which can cause hurdles to a successful career for women like her. She herself has aborted twice or thrice without ever feeling guilty about it. Pope Joan pays a very great price of achieving Popehood and entering the patriarchal bastion, first by losing consciousness of her female self and then losing her baby and her own life at the hands of patriarchy.
The third woman to have entered the male bastion besides Isabella and Joan is Marlene. Belonging to a working class family with a drunkard father and an abused mother, Marlene decides to completely dissociate herself from “fucking awful life” (132) as she tells Joyce, “I hate the working class … it doesn’t exist anymore, it means lazy and stupid” (139). Hating and ignoring her middle-class association, Marlene now believes in the motto “Anyone can do anything if they’ve got what it takes” (140). She tells Joyce, “I don’t believe in class” (141). Ignoring their class and cultural differences like many bourgeois feminists, Marlene celebrates the achievements of her own and other top girls, “we’ve all come a long way. To our courage and the way we changed our lives and one extraordinary achievements” (67). In this celebration of success and achievement she obviously equates individual female action with women empowerment, ignoring the millions exploited and suppressed over centuries. In her attempt to become successful and rise high in life, thus espousing the ethos of individualism, she takes no time to dump all her maternal instincts along with her daughter and adopt male values of aggression in the business world. She shows little sympathy towards her women colleagues and even suggests her clients to avoid marriage and kids for a successful career. Instead of fighting against the oppressive values of patriarchy, Marlene adopts and emulates them. Nell’s comment that “Howard thinks because he’s a fella the job was his as of right. Our Marlene’s got far more balls than Howard and that’s that” (100) points towards Marlene’s metaphoric gender transformation with “far more balls”.

All these three women achieve success, fame and recognition only when they do something ‘manly’. To achieve their respective positions, Marlene (Managing Director), Joan (Pope) and Isabella (traveler) have to give up some essentially feminine quality or
experience. Marlene has to curb her maternal instinct (abandoning her daughter and repeated abortions), Joan has to dissociate herself from her female body (“I wasn’t used to having a female body”) and Isabella has to remain single, lonely and unmarried till fifty and she dies childless and most dejected. In a patriarchal society, woman doesn’t get success unless she alienates herself from her feminine self and thus pays a very high price for reaching the top.

Forming another group in the play, contrasted against the former group are Patient Griselda and Lady Nijo. Both of them embodying “archetypal feminine qualities” accept and yield to the oppressive system (Innes 518). Patient Griselda, born in a poor rural family of England, has internalized the patriarchal norms and values to such an extent that she hardly ever questions the injustice and cruelty meted out to her by the Marquis. His high social status and position as a husband whom she “must always obey him in everything” (75) are too intimidating for poor wife Griselda. Even her poor father whose formal permission is taken by the Marquis for marriage to his daughter could never dare to say ‘no’ to the proposal of a rich and powerful man. Patient Griselda justifies the word ‘patient’ in her name or rather the word ‘patient’ was added to her name seeing the unquestioned devotion and limitless patience Griselda shows even to the most unreasonable and humiliating command of her husband. Stripped virtually of everything including the most dear thing for a mother, her children and her home, Griselda has no complaints against her oppressor, her husband except a weak mumbling line, “I do think – I do wonder – it would have been nicer if Walter hadn’t had to” (81). Her lost glory is soon restored but only at the cost of accepting her own daughter as the next wife of her husband. Conformity means survival in a misogynistic patriarchal culture. Griselda must
conform to the convention of wifely obedience to her husband. There seems to be no other choice, no alternative available to her. Andrea Dworkin observes:

[Women hang on tenaciously] to the very persons, institutions, and values that demean her, degrade her, glorify her powerlessness, insist upon constraining and paralyzing the most honest expressions of her will and being. She becomes a lackey, serving those who ruthlessly and effectively aggress against her and her kind. This singularly self-hating loyalty to those committed to her own destruction is the very essence of womanhood as men of all ideological persuasions define it.

(17)

Totally at the mercy of her oppressor, Griselda’s achievement in the form of patience and obedience or correctly speaking, wifely self-abasement, eulogized in the stories of Chaucer and Petrarch becomes ironical in this age of feminism. She may be an ideal wife on patriarchal parameters but is she a good mother, having separated her children from herself, obeying the weird instructions of her husband? Do her sacrifices and her total submission to the will of her husband really qualify her to represent an ideal of womanhood? The feminists would certainly scoff at such an impossible devotion and total elimination of her own will.

Lady Nijo, like Griselda is a product of patriarchal system of society. Belonging to a courtly class of a Japanese state, Nijo has been brought up only to become the mistress of the Emperor. Even her high class roots couldn’t save her from being victimized by the patriarchal system. Nijo too, like Griselda, yields to the system and believed that she “belonged to him”. She tells us that she did “what my father wanted”. Proud that she belonged to “a line of eight generation of poets”, Nijo is dejected as she

~177
says, “The first half of my life was all sin and the second all repentance” (57). Deprived of all her children and having lost favour with the Emperor, Nijo’s decision to become a wandering monk is guided by no spiritual inspiration but only a conventional practice of obeying one’s father. And yet unlike Griselda, Lady Nijo takes pride in her having taught a lesson to the Emperor by beating him with sticks when “he tells his attendants they could beat us too” (80) across the loins at the Full Moon Ceremony. The convention in the ceremony to “beat their women across the lions so they’ll have sons and not daughters” (80) takes a beating when Lady Nijo and other women decide to take revenge on the Emperor, the ultimate symbol of power and authority:

Lady Genki and I made a plan, and the ladies all hid in his rooms, and Lady Mashimizu stood guard with a stick at the door, and when His Majesty came in Genki seized him and I beat him until he cried out and promised he would never order anyone to hit us again. Afterwards there was a terrible fuss. The nobles were horrified. We wouldn’t even dream of stepping on your Majesty’s shadow. And I had hit him with a stick. Yes, I hit him with a stick. (80-81)

This act of revenge against the very symbol of patriarchy becomes the proudest moment in the life of Lady Nijo. Having always submitted to a servile system in patriarchy, Lady Nijo herself is surprised at her own audacity and temerity and yet she is so happy relating the incident and repeating her achievement in having “hit him with a stick”. The humiliation experienced by Lady Nijo and other ladies in the Emperor’s order to beat them is so deep and intense that they overcome (at least for sometime) their habitual tendency to always submit without any protest. Lady Nijo’s singular “achievement” is sharply contrasted against the meek and muted protest of Patient Griselda. And yet Lady
Nijo is remembered in history for being the famous courtesan of the Japanese Emperor and not for having beaten him once. This single act of audacity and rebellion shown by Lady Nijo was not enough to put her in the category of brave Dull Gret.

Belonging to the poor rural peasant class in Belgium in sixteenth century, Dull Gret stands out among this group of famous women for having given “them devils such a beating” (82). She is central to Churchill’s plea for collective action and solidarity among women. Her violent resistance against the oppression along with a group of her neighbours is actually the outcome of years of oppression and cruelty experienced by them in their personal lives: “well we’d had worse, you see, we’d had the Spanish. We’d all had family killed. My big son die on a wheel. Birds eat him. My baby, a soldier run her through with a sword. I’d had enough, I was mad, I hate the bastards” (82). Dull Gret leads a group of women, “come on, we’re going where the evil come from and pay the bastards out”. In her description of hell she emphasizes the similarity between her own village and the hell: “Hell’s black and red. It’s like the village where I come from. There’s a river and a bridge and houses. There’s places on fire like when the soldiers come” (82). The similarity of hell with her own village conveys to us the picture of cruelty and exploitation in our own world, past and present both, bleak and gruesome as the hell itself. With oppression, exploitation and violence, people are living a life as painful as life in hell.

Further, Gret’s description of a big devil, “There’s a big devil sat on a roof with a big hole in his arse and he’s scooping stuff out of it with a big ladle and it’s falling down on us, and it’s money,” (82) is unmistakably a reference to all those forces which exploit and subjugate women including the devil of capitalism which has unleashed the evil of
greed, dishonesty and cruelty. And women caught double in the forces of patriarchy and capitalism are the worst sufferers. Gret’s call for a collective action and resistance against these powers makes her extraordinary and stand apart from the rest of the famous women in the party who either submitted completely to the injustice meted out to them in patriarchal society or emulated the oppressors and tried to adopt the very qualities they should have fought against. Dull’s courageous resistance against her oppressors is heroic indeed. The two groups with the exception of Dull Gret stand united in their submissiveness to men in their lives or submissiveness to male values and male criteria of success. All of them have experienced sufferings and tribulations in a patriarchal system. Janet Brown’s comment on these top girls is very pertinent:

In fact, the apparently autonomous lives of all the diners have been predicated on a patriarchal system that simply co-opted them, and at a high price in isolation and suffering …. Despite their adventure, their privilege, and their visibility to history, these women are miserable because they are lonely and powerless pawns of the patriarchy (105).

The narratives of all these women record not only patriarchal oppression but also a desire to step beyond the conventional gender divide: Joan becomes a Pope, Nijo, a monk and Isabella, a traveller. But the achievements of all these women, including Marlene’s, with the exception of Gret, are tales of individual success with no resistance and challenges against the oppressive system.

In Act II, scene I and III, enacted in the office of Top Girls Employment Agency, Churchill takes us from the past, historical context of the oppression to the present environment of modern office, where oppression occurs on a milder and smaller scale.
Commenting on the significance of these scenes in employment agency, Janelle Reinelt says:

The short scenes in the employment agency do more than fill in the narrative background to Marlene’s central progress as a top girl. They also chart the difficulty of women bonding with each other in a competitive economic climate of the zero-sum game, where any advance of one takes something away from another, and where mistrust and lack of understanding create rifts among women who have made different life choices in a rapidly changing environment. (31)

Marlene’s adoption of masculine, capitalistic values to achieve top position in a highly competitive and materialistic business world is highlighted through her conversation with her clients and colleagues. Advocating a competitive and totally achievement–oriented attitude to her young client, Marlene suggests that she is not fighting against the present capitalistic patriarchy. Instead, she is supporting it. She assesses her client Jeanine’s capabilities on the basis of her grades at school and advises her not to mention her plan of marriage to her employees and recommends her a job that is “going to grow with the concern and then you’ll be at the top with new girls coming in underneath you”(86). When Jeanine asks Marlene about travel prospects in this new job, Marlene’s inquiry “Does your fiancé want to travel?” (86) shows the dominance of patriarchy on the life of a woman. Even today she cannot take a decision independent of men in her life. Coming from the mouth of Marlene, this question shows us that she is promulgating and strengthening an oppressive system. Although she sees herself as independent of men yet she’s “got far more balls than Howard” (100). Her cold and insensitive behaviour towards Mrs. Kidd, the wife of Mr. Howard shows that Marlene, in
her pursuit of top position and materialistic gain, has become totally inhumane. Distancing herself from other women in her office, Marlene becomes an oppressor. Bell Hooks quotes Phyllis Chesler and Emily Jane Goodman from their book *Women, Money, and Power* in which they argue in favour of women working to obtain power within the existing social structure, while remaining ambivalent about whether women’s exercise of power would be any less corrupt or destructive than men’s. But they acknowledge this possibility in their epilogue:

Women rising to relative or absolute power within the existing structure might just imitate men, and in the process become the oppressors of other people, including other women. (qtd. in Hooks 85)

Similar is the attitude of her colleagues, Nell and Win, the “tough birds” (102) whose comment on the news of Howard’s heart attack that “Lucky he didn’t get the job if that’s what his health is like” (120) shows the same insensitivity, selfish ideals and approaches as we find in Marlene. Kritzer comments:

To advance themselves, women at the agency promote society’s bleak set of givens, always urging clients to accept rather than challenge. In their internalization and support of patriarchal values, the supposedly liberated women who work in the employment agency are merely the most up-to-date examples of what *Cloud Nine*’s Act One Betty acknowledges herself to be: ‘a man’s creation’. (145-146).

In a most business–like attitude, Win, whose very name proclaims her competitive nature makes a middle-class woman realize that her commitment and devotion to her work in her company will give her nothing. And Nell tells another job-
seeker Shona to have “the guts to push through to a closing situation. They think we’re too nice. They think we listen to the buyer’s doubts. They think we consider his needs and feelings” (115). Shona’s assurance to Nell that “I never consider people’s feelings and I’m not very nice” points out the unnatural, inhumane and depraved values being pushed and promoted in a capitalistic world and all these working women feel that they cannot survive in this highly competitive business world with feminine attitude of emotion, sensitivity and care because success in our world demands the adoption of patriarchal and capitalist values. Elaine Aston’s comment in her article “Telling Feminist Tales: Caryl Churchill” also points out this attitudinal shift in working women: “… unless women, in the interests of economic and professional advancement are prepared to make sacrifices, particularly of the domestic and maternal kind, and espouse masculinist values then they do not ‘get on’ …” (2003, 22).

The ethic of care has been rejected by these ambitious women. As Kritzer also points out that Marlene’s position shows that gender based division constructs an opposition between an ethic of care and ethic of competition. The ethics of care have historically been performed by women, while the ethics of competition have structured the competitive nature of men (141). Marlene and her colleagues have shed off the ethics of care in favour of ethics of competition to survive in the ruthless business world. Thus “negating any expectation of a sisterly concern for other women, they automatically look for ‘men’ to fill the ‘high-flyer’ sales jobs” (Kritzer 145-146). This complete lack of sisterhood and solidarity demonstrated in women of employment agency certainly questions the empowerment of women based on individual success with total indifference and disregard for millions of powerless women.
Churchill has also raised the issue of age and the feminine concerns over losing physical appeal and desirability in the male gaze through many instances in the play. Louise, a forty six year old client, trying hard not to reveal her true age, is told curtly by Win that her age is “a handicap”. (105) Isabella too repeatedly mentions her age when she says, “when I was forty I thought my life was over” (61) and “There was not great danger to a woman of my age and appearance” (62/63) and “I was fifty-six years old” (66). The same concern about losing appeal and desirability in the male gaze is presented in the character of old Joan Noakes in Churchill’s Tom Vinegar.

The last Act of the play with its dialectics of feminism and socialism, dramatizes the politics of selfish versus selfless creed in the relationship between two sisters, Marlene and Joyce. A long argument between the two sisters also brings out the class tensions and political differences between them and allows Churchill “to mount her critique of a feminism without socialism” (Kritzer 147).

Joyce still lives in a small town (“I’m right there where I was” (124)) and takes care of Marlene’s daughter Angie and their old mother (“I go and see her every week”. (132)). Supporting her family by cleaning houses, Joyce tries to retain strong family ties. She never asks for any financial help from Marlene: “I’ve always said I don’t want your money” (136). She defends her father to Marlene despite his violent behaviour, saying that he worked “in the fields like an animal” (138). Maintaining her self respect, she breaks off her marriage after her husband’s repeated infidelities. In her commitment to family and community against Marlene’s self-interested individualism, Joyce represents a traditional value system. With a working-class mother image, Joyce remains economically, socially and culturally deprived, whereas Marlene succeeds and prospers.
through her ‘heartless’ and selfish life. Kritzer links Marlene’s success with Joyce’s sacrifices:

Marlene’s rise to the top has been founded upon Joyce’s willingness to take upon herself, without compensation, the ‘messy’, female-identified tasks that Marlene does not even want to talk about. Marlene’s labour in the public market-place, like that of a traditional husband, depends upon Joyce’s labour in the home for its profitability. (147)

Demonstrating a clear dislike for capitalism, Joyce says, “I spit when I see a Roll Royce, scratch it with my ring” (139). She is most critical of Marlene and her capitalist values when she says, “I’m ashamed of you, think of nothing but yourself…” (139). Kate Millett observes that the class distinctions within patriarchy often result in women fighting against one another: “One of the chief effects of class within patriarchy is to set one woman against another, in the past creating a lively antagonism between whore and matron, and in present between a career woman and a housewife (38). The contrast between the two sisters’ attitude towards life and their respective values becomes apparent in the following conversation:

MARLENE. She’s a tough lady, Maggie. I’d give her a job. She just needs to hang in there. This country

JOYCE. You voted for them, did you?

MARLENE. needs to stop whining. /Monetarism is not stupid.

JOYCE. Drink your tea and shut up, pet.

MARLENE. It takes time, determination. No more slop. /And

JOYCE. Well I think they’re filthy bastards.
MARLENE. Who’s got to drive it on? First woman prime minister. Terrifico.

Aces. Right on./You must admit. Certainly gets my vote.

JOYCE. What good’s first woman if it is her? I suppose you’d have liked Hitler if he was a woman. Ms. Hitler. Got a lot done, Hitlerina./Great adventures.

MARLENE. Bosses still walking on the workers’ faces? Still Dadda’s little parrot? Haven’t you learned to think for yourself? I believe in the individual.

Look at me (138).

Marlene’s capitalist priorities and a downright rejection of middle-class values reflect her as a selfish, isolated snob. Like the first woman Prime Minister, Thatcher whom she greatly admires, Marlene prizes individual success the most in her life and fails to appreciate her sister’s struggle and her contribution to her success. Bell Hooks’ observation in “Changing perspectives on power” can easily be used to understand Marlene’s attitude to life:

Poor and working class women did not become the role models for bourgeois white women because they were not seen by them as exercising forms of power valued in this society. In other words, their exercise of strength was not synonymous with economic power. (89)

Joyce’s ability to take her own decisions in life and lead her life the way she wants and at the same time taking care of Marlene’s daughter Angie and their old mother do not ‘empower’ Joyce with materialistic gain and a status considered important and essential for success and power, the sole objective of Marlene’s life.

The long conversation between the two sisters taking place in Joyce’s kitcher not only brings out the ideological differences between the two sisters in sharp focus but also
draws our attention to the majority of struggling women like Joyce who in their commitment to family and community are rendered ‘powerless’ and whose interests need to be incorporated in the feminist struggle.

Elaine Aston’s remarks regarding this conversation offer a valuable insight into the politics of feminism:

That Churchill chose the kitchen as the site for the play’s political debate between the Thatcherite Marlene and her working class sister Joyce is highly significant in feminist terms. As a visual echo of the 1970s feminist creed, ‘the personal is political, it signaled the on-going need for feminism to examine and to include the politics of kitchen, of the domestic, as part of the broader, epic struggle of the ‘us and them’ divide that would become a feature of British politics and class-warfare in the 1980s (2003, 22).

The play ends with Angie’s painful cry of isolation and alienation “Frightening…. Frightening” (141) winding up the long argument between Marlene and Joyce. Chronologically, the play ends in Marlene’s comment on Angie when she pays her aunt/mother a visit in her office in England: “She’s a bit thick. She a bit funny. She’s not going to make it” (120). Marlene’s rejection of her daughter as “a bit too thick” can easily be related to the “frightening” dream Angie has at the end of the play. In a market-driven, capitalistic society, only women like Marlene, ruthless, selfish and isolated can succeed. If such a top girl becomes the model and ideal of our society, the future is indeed ‘frightening’ and bleak. The play raises a very serious question regarding the success of the self-centred Marlene. If she represents the truly liberated women as conceived by the principles of feminism we really need to review the direction feminism
is taking with all its enthusiasm and commitment towards women empowerment and female liberation. We agree with Janet Brown’s point of view on the play: “If Angie, representing those children who will never be at the top of any hierarchy, has only Marlene to depend upon, then she and the society have every reason to fear” (113). Angie’s nightmare of the future draws our attention to the issues at stake in the contemporary feminist struggle for societal transformation.

The note of horror reflected in Angie’s “frightening dream” has already been struck in the last word of Joan’s speech “terrorem” (83) meaning terror at the end of Act I when all top girls, dejected, frustrated, unhappy and sad, sink in drunken disorder. The same cry of anguish we have heard in Kurtz’ final exclamation in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, “The horror! The horror!” (111). Elaine Aston warns us against the dangers posed by the Marlene kind of feminism and also points out the real issues raised by the play.

However, as *Top Girls* shows, to accept as cathartic the possibility of ‘female success’ based on egotism, cruelty, ‘death-dealing’, would mean somehow taking pleasure in Angie’s ‘frightening’ moment. What this highlights is the ‘gap’ between Churchill’s socialist-feminist commitment and the ‘new’ feminism gaining ground in the 1990s, that espouses ‘female success’ and continues to ignore the economic and class factors that militate against the idea that all women are able to ‘compete’ on an equal basis. Two key issues that emerge from the socialist feminist politics of *Top Girls* set against the material and cultural backdrop of the early 1990s are the difficulty of combining work and motherhood, and the social reality for young, disadvantaged girls, like Angie. (2003, 24-25)
Similar is the viewpoint of Jenelle Reinelt when she says:

From a family-value frame of American conservatism, Marlene can be seen to stand for all feminists, bringing the play’s point of view in 1990s uncomfortably close to the recent calls for women to stay at home with their children, seeming to support the charges that feminism has failed women by promoting the workplace to the exclusion of marriage and motherhood (181).

Finally, the play turns out to be a self-criticism of the women’s movement and calls for a reassessment of its limitations as expressed by Lou Wakefield, one of the actors in the play:

This is a feminist play in that it’s self-criticism of women’s movement…. What Caryl Churchill is doing is asking you to reassess what is happening to the popular women movement, not necessarily the intellectual feminist. Some women are succeeding and getting on very well, but it’s no good if feminism means that women get on and tread on men’s heads, or other women’s head, as hard as men ever tread on theirs. If women do get the top jobs, there’s also a job to be done in reassessing that job in feminist or humanitarian terms. (qtd. in Brown 102)

Caryl Churchill clearly demonstrates the futility of individual liberation without a simultaneous uplift and liberation of the entire class. Bell Hooks echoes the similar sentiment when she says:

Some women’s liberationists encouraged women to believe that their individual achievements of success, money, and power (especially in spheres historically dominated by men) advance feminist movement. These women need to know their success has little impact on the social status of women collectively and does
not lessen the severity of sexist oppression or eliminate male domination. Their individualism is dangerously narcissistic when it leads them to equate personal success with radical political movement. Individual achievements advance feminist movement if they serve the interests of collective feminist struggle as well as satisfying individual aspirations. (94)

Indicting the patriarchal values and ideology, Churchill also criticises the adoption of these ‘masculine’ values by women who blindly pursue their dream of successful career, little realizing that they themselves are following the same values against which they wish to prove themselves.

Churchill also highlights in her play gender oppression in the institution of marriage and motherhood. In a patriarchal system, as Churchill shows through experiences of different characters in the play, these firmly established institutions are more in favour of men than women and often cause sufferings and misery to them.

The institution of marriage, the very foundation of a patriarchal system, is questioned by Churchill for its failure to give gender equality and for being used by patriarchy for the subservience of women. Walter, Griselda’s husband, demands a promise from her before marrying her as she tells us, “I must always obey him in everything” (75). Griselda has so internalized the patriarchal traditions that she doesn’t even think of questioning them and says, “But of course a wife must obey her husband./And of course I must obey the Marquis” (75). Similar is the viewpoint of Isabella Bird, the traveler, who marries very late in her life but believes in the same convention of wifely obedience. Her revelation, “I swore to obey dear John, of course, but it didn’t seem to arise. Naturally I wouldn’t have wanted to go abroad while I was married” (75) shows her acceptance of the precondition of obedience of husband as bring
fundamental to a successful marriage. Joan’s interjection in this conversation regarding obedience expected from a woman, “I never obeyed anyone. They all obeyed me” conveys a sense of pride and achievement felt by Joan for having subverted the hierarchy. But the same statement sounds highly ironical when we realize that Joan enjoyed absolute authority only as long as she could hide her feminine identity. As soon as her true identity is revealed she is not just punished but killed for having dared to exercise power reserved for men only.

This hierarchy of power cuts across different classes and societies as Griselda reveals, “I’d rather obey the Marquis than a boy from the village” (75) and Marlene explores her class–consciousness when she tells Joyce, “What was I going to do? Marry a dairyman who’d come home pissed? Don’t you fucking tell me what to tucking do fucking” (133). And this also explains Marlene’s refusal to marriage as she believes that once married she would no longer be able to remain independent and pursue her high dreams. The marital experiences of top girls in the play serve to remind us that most of the institutions under patriarchy are based upon the subservience of women and often prove oppressive for them. We are reminded of Margery in Churchill’s play *Vinegar Tom* and how the sacrifices of a woman are fundamental to the smooth functioning of a family, a country and the existing social order so beautifully expressed in the following line of a song in *Vinegar Tom*:

Oh, the country is what it is because
the family’s what it is because
the wife is what she is
to her man. (160-161)
Churchill has also analysed another institution, motherhood through the various experiences of her characters the play. Motherhood, often termed by sexist and essentialist feminists as the most fulfilling experience in the life of a woman, turns out to be an experience of pain and loss; for some it is an experience unwanted and inconvenient. Bell Hooks in a chapter “Revolutionary Parenting” in her book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre* comments:

Motherhood is as romanticized by some feminist activists as it was by the nineteenth century men and women who extolled the virtues of the “cult of domesticity”…. This resurgence of interest in motherhood has positive and negative implications for feminist movement. On the positive side there is a continual need for study and research of female parenting, which this interest promotes and encourages…. On the negative side, romanticizing motherhood, employing the same terminology that is used by sexists to suggest that women are inherently life-affirming nurturers, feminist activists reinforce central tenets of male supremacist ideology. They imply that motherhood is a women’s truest vocation; that women who do not mother, whose lives may be focused more exclusively on a career, creative work, or political work, are missing out, are doomed to live emotionally unfulfilled lives. (136)

Between Isabella Bird who never becomes a mother in her life and Dull Gret who has given birth to ten children we have other top girls positioned variously in the middle. Dull Gret’s ten children, obviously unplanned and involuntary, can hardly be a source of happiness and fulfillment to their poor, helpless, struggling mother. Isabella who has never experienced motherhood hardly demonstrates any maternal instinct as she prefers
horses to children: “I never had any children. I was fond of horses” (72). Close to Isabella’s experience we have the experiences of Marlene and Pope Joan who do become mothers but never own their children due to certain circumstances to realize their maternal instincts. Joan is killed immediately after she delivers her child and Marlene abandons her daughter to the care of her married sister. Ironically enough, all the three characters who enter the patriarchal bastion and become famous precisely for this reason remain either childless or deprived of the experiences of motherhood.

Pope Joan’s inability to identify with her female body doesn’t make her happy and enthusiastic about being pregnant. Instead, it becomes inconvenient and a source of embarrassment as she says, “I didn’t want to pay attention. It was easier to do nothing” (70). Similarly, Marlene ignores her pregnancy till too late as Joyce comments: “You was the most stupid, for someone so clever you was the most stupid, get yourself pregnant, not go to the doctor, not tell”. (134) Marlene’s decision to abandon her child due to economic as well as social reasons and her subsequent abortions is influenced and guided by patriarchal and capitalistic forces which would not allow an unmarried mother to shoulder her responsibility and own her child and yet rise high in her career and realize her dream. This influences Marlene’s suggestion to a job-seeker that she should not reveal her married status to her employers. Women find themselves in a bind over two alternatives – one, to stay at home and look after children with no other identity except that of a wife and a mother and no independent source of income and another, to pursue capitalistic pursuits and suffer emotional alienation due to denial of motherhood. Caryl Churchill has raised this issue in an interview with Betsko and Koenig: “Of course
women are pressured to make choices between working and having children in a way that
men aren’t…” (Betsko and Koenig 82).

Just as Marlene gives up her child, although voluntarily to pursue a career, Joan
too loses her child and her own life, involuntarily to the more apparent forces of
patriarchy. For both of them, experience of motherhood becomes painful against the
forces of patriarchy and capitalism.

For Nijo and Griselda who never defy patriarchy, the experience of motherhood is
no less painful. Both of them lose their children. Nijo, a concubine is not allowed to keep
either her first child from the Emperor or the later three from her subsequent lovers for
fear of reprimand from the Emperor for her illicit love for other men. She becomes a
target of oppression both ways. Nijo cannot celebrate her motherhood as the patriarchal
system allows her to be a mistress to an Emperor but refuses her the legitimate pleasure
of motherhood. Unable to protest and having internalized the patriarchal values, Nijo
gradually loses all her maternal feelings: “My fourth child was Ariake’s too…. It was a
boy again, my third son. But oddly enough I felt nothing for him” (72). What can be more
painful and oppressive for a woman than to feel alienated from a very natural instinct of
motherhood? The only girl child Nijo delivers is reared up to become again a mistress to
the Emperor just like Nijo herself. Again, we find her as helpless and condescending to a
system as ever that she cannot save her own daughter from the clutches of an oppressive
ideology. Similar is the case of patient Griselda. She too loses both her children to the
most perverted manifestation of patriarchy. She also sacrifices her daughter to a
patriarchal tradition and participates in the subjugation of her own daughter. Shamed,
weak and meek they look against Dull Gret who attacks her oppressors when, she tells us,
“My big son die on a wheel. Birds eat him. My baby, a soldier run her through with a sword” (82). Unable to take any more, the mother in Dull Gret rises up fiercely to take on the killers of her children, as she tells us “I’ve got a sword in my hand…. Oh we give them devils such a beating”. (82) The ideal of a selfless and protective motherhood is personified in Dull Gret and is contrasted against the selfish, unnatural or weak motherhood exemplified by other top girls of the play. Patriarchy emerges as the common factor causing female oppression and subjugation in the various experiences of motherhood of these top girls.

Churchill is known for having refashioned the contemporary theatre with new concepts of subject matter. Her consistent stylistic experimentation and non-realistic theatrical techniques have often drawn the attention of critics and spectators both. The very first scene with women from the distant past attending the fantasy dinner party has a dream, surrealist quality, defying the rules of realist drama with its non-realistic presentation. One of her favourite techniques, the juxtaposition of two different fictional epochs is repeated in *Top Girls* after *Cloud Nine*. The opening fantasy of Act I Sc I differs drastically from the ordinary life in the following scenes. The first scene of the dinner party jumps to scene two where we find Marlene interviewing a client in her office in London and again to scene three where Angie and Kit are hiding from Joyce in the backyard of their house in an English town. These sudden shifts and seemingly disconnected scenes have a clear influence of Bertolt Brecht’s alienation techniques of epic theatre. Janelle Reinelt points out that British feminists including Churchill have often adopted Brechtian techniques in an effort “to make ideology visible” (qtd. in Brown
107). Similar is the view expressed by Christopher Innes in his chapter on Caryl Churchill:

Combining surreal fantasy with Shavian discussion and documentary case-histories, as well as naturalistic domestic drama (complete with kitchen-sink and ironing board), *Top Girls* breaks out of conventional methods of portraying life on the stage, and suggests new ways of seeing reality. (519)

Churchill includes in these “new ways” another technique – the disruption of chronological time to experiment yet again with new forms and also to defy the chronological pattern of traditional drama. Act III, the last of the play, takes place a year earlier, that is, earlier than the Act II. So, the story ends at the conclusion of the Act II. The full irony of Marlene’s last words, “She’s not going to make it” (120) at the end of Act II can be properly appreciated only when we realize at the end of the play that Angie is Marlene’s daughter and the significance of Angie’s nightmare expressed in her cry “Frightening…. Frightening” (141) becomes obvious. Act III, a flashback to the previous year, thus helps us to realize better the selfish, unnatural and totally self-oriented values and priorities of Marlene. Churchill in her interview to Betsko and Koenig explains her motive in this play:

What I was intending to do was to make it first look as though it was celebrating the achievements of woman and then – by showing the main character, Marlene, being successful in a very competitive, destructive, capitalist way – ask, what kind of achievement is that? The idea was that it would start out looking like a feminist play and turn into a socialist one, as well. And I think on the whole it’s mostly been understood like that (82).
This use of non-linear progression defying the conventional form of drama and used commonly in feminist theatre for its subversive quality helps Churchill to project a vision of future which is “frightening” indeed and thus question the success of liberated Marlene. The technique also allows Churchill to put in sharp focus the weakening and subsequent severance of relationship including that of a mother and daughter. The masculinization of Marlene leaves no space for solidarity among women in their fight against patriarchy. Thus, this technique of the disruption of chronological time helps Churchill to convey her feminist socialist message more clearly and effectively.

Another technique employed by the playwright to help her realize her feminist motive is doubling. Most of the characters, with the sole exception of Marlene, are doubled with one or even two other characters. The technique of doubling helps the audience to maintain their objectivity while viewing the play and avoid being swallowed up by the characters. Explaining this technique to Linda Fitzsimmons, Churchill says, “The audience can enjoy the medium and appreciate the theatricality rather than over-identifying with the characters” (16). Another advantage of this technique is to allow audience to establish connections among the different roles played by one actor and see the similarities and even dissimilarities between their characters, circumstances and their responses in different situations.

Lady Nijo is doubled with Win, an employee in Top Girls’ Employment Agency. Nijo, the Japanese courtesan, remained in the “service” of the Emperor till she fell “out of favour” and became a wandering monk. Win, with an ex-husband in jail and having supported a man for four years is now involved with a man who calls her when “his wife [is] visiting her mother” (99) and makes her “lie down in the back of the car so the
neighbours wouldn’t see [her] going in” (103). Nijo too had married lovers, Akebono and Ariake, who always tried to keep their relationship under wraps. Both of them, Nijo and Win, allow themselves to be treated as sexual objects by men, thereby raising a question: How much a woman has benefited from the sexual liberation and has it not served the interests of men more than that of women?

In another example, we find Pope Joan doubling with Louise, a middle-aged client at Marlene’s agency with twenty years of experience in a company and still stuck up in a middle position. Despite her skill and experience she doesn’t get any promotion. She is proud of having worked hard as she says, “I have had to justify my existence every minute” and “I don’t care greatly for working with women, I think I pass as a man at work” and yet “Nobody notices me” (106). Just like Joan who “didn’t live a woman’s life” (78), Louise too distances herself from women and tries to pass as a man. But both of them are denied their rightful place by patriarchy. By doubling them Churchill links the failure of Pope Joan to retain her position once her true feminine identity is revealed with the denial of promotion to experienced and efficient Louise. She also draws our attention to the fact that even after a number of centuries the patriarchal practice of keeping women in subordination of men has hardly changed. Marlene’s enthusiasm for “eighties are going to be stupendous” as she thinks “I’m going up up up” is also questioned in the light of continuing bias and denial of equal opportunity to women.

In the next set of doubling, we find Patient Griselda, Jeanine and Nell together only to highlight the differences more than the similarities between them. Patient Griselda, the classic case of sacrifice and submission to patriarchal authority appears before us as Jeanine, a client at employment agency. Marlene’s suggestions to Jeanine to
hide her plans of marriage from her employer and to consult her fiancé whether he would allow her to travel are actually the continuation of patriarchal values and discrimination against women, prevalent even after the gap of many centuries. By allowing Marlene to assess her prospects on patriarchal norms and undermine her, Jeanine comes close to Griselda in her submission to masculine authority. Contrasted against them is Nell, an executive in Marlene’s office. Fiercely ambitious and independent, Nell doesn’t want to get married for fear of its negative effect on her rising career. She stands close to Marlene in her emulation of masculine values (“Our Marlene has got far more balls”) and rejection of feminine traits of sensitivity and feelings (“They think we’re too nice. They think we listen to the buyer’s doubts. They think we consider his needs and feelings” (115)). Determined to rise high in her career, Nell, is not too happy with Marlene’s promotion as she wanted this position for herself. By making Griselda and Jeanine double as Nell, Churchill questions the so-called success of a career–woman like Nell and projects her superficial success as nothing more than an emulation of patriarchal values and in no way less slavish than submission of Griselda and Jeanine to these values.

In yet another set of doubling we find Isabella Bird, Joyce and Mrs. Kidd together. Isabella, the Victorian traveller, achieves fame for having done something generally associated with men. While Joyce and Mrs. Kidd remain confined to domestic life. Joyce earns her livelihood by performing cleaning jobs and Mrs. Kidd, with no other identity than that of Mr. Kidd’s wife, is a typical submissive housewife. Abused as she is, Mrs. Kidd has always “put [Mr. Kidd] first every inch of the way” and resembles Isabella who “swore to obey dear John”. But both Mrs. Kidd (“It’s me that bears the brunt…. And now what do I get? You women this and you women that.” (112)) and Isabella (“I tried very
hard to cope with the ordinary drudgery of life. I was ill again with carbuncles on the spine and nervous prostration.” (65)) suffer under oppressive, patriarchal regimes. Joyce’s defence of her father and her espousal of his socialist values (“Still Dadda’s parrot? Haven’t you learnt to think for yourself? (138)) find echo in Isabella’s devotion to her father (“my father was the mainspring of my life” (58)). Similarly, Joyce and Isabella, both are childless but both are emotionally attached, one to her niece and another to her sister. By doubling these three women, Churchill highlights the gender-specific experiences of these women, famous or ordinary. The playwright gives an opportunity to us to see the similarities in the struggle and oppression faced by most of them. Christopher Innes has rightly said, “As the doubling of these historical figures with modern counterparts in the subsequent play indicates, there has been no essential improvement in the female situation” (518).

Dull Gret doubles as Marlene’s daughter Angie who is “a bit thick … a bit funny” and is “not going to make it” according to Marlene’s perception of her. Dull participates the least in the long chatting scene of the dinner party except a few coarse responses (to keep you warm”, “Big Cock”, “balls”) and tells her extraordinary story in almost one go. By doubling Dull as Angie, Churchill not only relates the obvious dullness of these two characters but also gives us a hope for Angie’s future despite Marlene’s dismissal of her. Just as reticent and coarse Dull Gret leads a group of women charging through hell and fights the devil and becomes the face of mass uprising against exploitation, we expect Angie to prove Marlene wrong and become the face of collective feminist resistance against capitalism and patriarchy.
In the last set of doubling we have ordinary women like the silent waitress, carrying out the orders of the top girls in the dinner scene, Shona, a young client with many ambitions and Kit, Angie’s clever friend, who wants to become a nuclear physicist. These ordinary women, contrasted against the famous top girls, represent the struggle and aspirations of majority of women like them. Their presence with the successful and famous women makes us aware of the futility of individual success and the need for social solidarity and collective resistance. Thus Churchill uses this dramatic device to also dramatise the similarities and differences between the past and the contemporary cultures and analyse it through a feminist perspective.

Another technique employed by Churchill in *Top Girls* is overlapping speech. This characteristic style of dialogue delivery, very common in our daily conversations, has been used by Churchill effectively to her own advantage. Explaining the origin of her style, she says:

When I wrote Sleepless Nights (1979) I wanted two kinds of quarrel – the one where you can’t speak and the one where you both talk at once. When I was writing *Top Girls* I first wrote a draft of the dinner scene with one speech after another and then I realized it would be better if the talk overlapped in a similar way. Having got a taste for it I’ve gone on overlapping it in most things I’ve written since. (Shorts 1)

Churchill shows her meticulous planning in her careful choice of the points of interruption and overlap which make the dinner-party scene full of lively celebration and animated story-telling. The choice of a dinner table as the setting of the dinner scene makes the technique of overlapping speech look natural, spontaneous and most suitable.
Churchill’s explanation regarding the setting helps us to understand the appropriateness of this unique technique:

I suppose I set them around a dinner table because it is a place where you can celebrate and I wanted it to be a festive scene where they were celebrating what they’d done as well as talking about the hard times. It was to be at a level of amusing anecdotes, sharing something, entertaining each other (Goodman 238).

In her ‘Note on layout’ placed before the list of characters. Churchill explains the technique with examples from the text:

A speech usually follows the one immediately before it BUT:

1 : When one character starts speaking before the other has finished, the point of interruption is marked / .

2 : a character sometimes continues speaking right through another’s speech.

3 : sometimes a speech follows on from a speech earlier than the one immediately before it, and continuity is marked * . (52)

Throughout the play we come across these overlapping speeches which impart a peculiar quality to the play. John A. Price offers a significant insight in the use of this technique in his article ‘The Language of Caryl Churchill: the Rhythms of Feminist Theory, Acting Theory and Gender Politics’:

“Notes on layout” should be viewed by actors as a guide to characterization and for actors trained in realisms method, Churchill’s language may be one of the only footholds in the traditionally slippery slopes of postmodern drama. These
moments of “overlapping” language also signify to the actor instances of heightened conflict, where the needs and therefore, the emotions intensify (5).

Defying the traditional dialogue structures of theatre, Churchill uses this more practical style to bring out the lack of agreement among different characters, lack of patience and tolerance in some of them, rising conflicts among them and also a selfish self-centred and unsympathetic nature of some important characters in the play.

Janet Brown’s following observation reveals that the technique of overlapping speech helps to bring out the reality of these characters: “Thus isolated from other women and from family life, they are all terrible egotists who interrupt one another continually – less a community than a group of competitors” (5). And yet Churchill makes the scene cohesive by unifying their stories of suffering in the framework of womanhood.

This technique, used by Churchill very judiciously, is not just confined to Act I but extended right up to the last Act of the play. The first Act of the play with the presence of six famous women absorbs this technique so well that their constant conversation on top of each other and overlapping frequently looks/sounds natural. We easily identify the self centeredness and a tendency to score over each other in their overlapping speech. The second Act, with most of the conversation confined to two or at the most three characters, uses this technique very sparingly. But in the last Act where the long conversation between Marlene and her sister Joyce highlights the difference between the ideologies of the two sisters, this technique is used once again to the maximum. The frequent overlaps bring out the conviction of both the sisters in their own respective principles in a very effective way. The traditional structure of dialogue would not have been so effective in bringing out the mutual vehemence and disagreement
between them. Churchill’s experimentation with dialogue forms not only remains successful but also makes her stand as one of the foremost feminist playwrights who established their own canons and strengthened the experimental and subversive tendencies of feminist theatre. We agree with Lizbeth Goodman’s remark: “Churchill’s best work has been highly experimental in terms of language patterns and levels of interaction between characters, yet has been balanced by her talent for using language in eloquent as well as structurally effective ways” (237).

The play with its non-conventional structure and jarring but effective techniques criticizes the very ideology of liberal feminism and questions the individual success of top girls. The very title of the play Top Girls becomes ironic in this light. The play with its open ending calls for a rejection of principles which promote freedom and success only for selective few, ignoring the moral and social responsibility towards the majority of females in our society, especially the poor and the deprived. Churchill takes up their case in the next play, Fen.
WORKS CITED


