In the words of Elaine Aston “The kinds of questions which Churchill asks through her theatre reflect her feminist and socialist viewpoints, but allied to her interrogative political mode of writing is her experimental approach to dramatic and theatrical form. Churchill’s theatre is not just a question of politics, but a politics of style”3. Her conclusion are not final endings but a question that she leaves unanswered. "This open-ended format stimulates the audience to think about the answers rather than just identifying with or against the idea generated in the play"4.

Churchill’s main contribution to further the cause of feminists has been in broadening traditional views of gender roles. Feminist critics from areas as diverse as socialist feminism, material feminism, and cultural feminism have claimed Churchill as a representative. Part of what fuelled Churchill’s dramatisation of gender in the 1970s was the feminist climate of that decade and her interaction with other feminist writers and practitioners – in particular the socialist- feminist theatre company, Monstrous Regiment. She once asserted, “I’ve constantly said that I am both a socialist and a feminist”5. She strongly holds the view that politically engaged theatre is a vehicle for social change. Her Objections to Sex and Violence(1975) was her first play to introduce themes of feminism. In her plays traditional sexual mores, race and power relationships are examined closely and the values set up by the patriarchal society are put up for questioning. Churchill’s most important stage
successes, encompassing a remarkable range of subjects, offering provocative viewpoints, and demonstrating continual experiment with the theatrical form, occurred in the 1980s.

Churchill continues to be active as a playwright. She also continues to experiment with theatrical form. She has written several musicals and a number of plays composed of two unrelated but thematically interconnected acts, such as Blue Heart (1997) and Far Away (2000), in which the conflicts around the world and people's increasing tolerance of inhumanity are discussed. In Top Girls she has an interesting method of role assignment. An actor is assigned a particular role and then assigned one or more roles in the remainder of the play. These assignments might look arbitrary, but is in reality perfectly logical. The role assigned is on the basis of their uniting characteristics which become apparent only later. Her plays continue to question gender roles and power relationships in the society, combining political writing with personal experience.

The major theme that Churchill deals with in her works is that of gender politics imposed on individuals by the patriarchal society. Traditional sexual mores, race, and power relationships are examined closely and the values set up by patriarchal society are questioned. Churchill is also interested in time and the possibilities of change.
By laying emphasis on external restrictions of freedom, she shows how aggressive individualism can prevent constructive changes and work against the good of society as a whole. In an interview in *New York Times* she defined her themes as 'power, powerlessness and exploitation; people as longings, obsessions and dreams.'

Churchill also rejected the forms of female equality that merely transforms women into surrogate men. She draws a parallelism between colonialism and sexual oppression and demonstrates this through women who take on male roles, men who play wives and a white actor who plays the part of a black servant. By doing so, she stresses upon the artificiality and conventionality of the characters' sex and race roles. Churchill highlights the argument that changes in the "position of women are artificial because the achievements of women characters appear in two forms; they either succeed through taking roles reserved for men or embody the archetypal feminine qualities as defined by the patriarchal system". Churchill draws attention to her women characters, who in spite of their apparent rejection of patriarchal structures, remain trapped by patriarchal essentialism regarding archetypes like 'superwoman'.

*Owners* (1976) was Churchill’s first professionally produced stage play and is significant for the way in which it highlights gender and class issues that later became central to her theatre in the 1970s and 80s. ‘Ownership’ of property, people and money is dealt with through the
representation of a property owning (but childless) couple (Marion and Clegg) and their tenants (Alex and Lisa) who are raising a family in reduced poor circumstances. It seeks to overthrow the social contention that dictates that half of the human race performs nothing, but low menial tasks. In an interview to Judith Thurmen she said, “The way people think of the Irish is rather the way men tend to think of women – as charming, irresponsible, poetic creature, which in fact is the sort of stereo-type colonial rulers traditionally have of the Native. You become beautiful because you don’t have the power to be direct.”

Marion, the wife and the protagonist of the play incorporates all the patriarchal values that are traditionally the prerogative of the male. She is the embodiment of reason, success and power. Marion "moves about a lot" and has a "strong face rather than pretty",⁵ the strength here dominates her prettiness, a value generally assigned to the female sex. A rich expert property dealer, she is always in control of situations and events. She can be read as a precursor to her superwoman successor Marlene in Top Girls.

Sarah Kahn too, had stepped into the so-called male's forte. She was exuberantly active in politics. But she was differently from Marion. There the woman was still struggling in the male’s domain, but she had not discarded the matriarchal values. She was still a loving mother and a caring wife. However Marion retains none of the matriarchal values
of love, care, sacrifice, giving or nurturing. She has whole-heartedly embraced reason, power and success making them the sole guiding principles of her life.

Marion is both mentally as well as physically strong. Clegg her husband, cannot even think of having an "unarmed combat" with her, though he constantly harbors negative feeling in him. Marion echoes all the masculine values when she asserts "be quick, be top, be best" (p.30). "Onward Christian Soldiers" is her favourite song and ever to move onwards and fight for her good, is her motto in life. She has cast all her sentiments, emotions and feelings aside and has learnt not to care for others in the process. In fact, surprisingly, Marion does not have a single quality in her that was traditionally thought to be the woman's. The feminists realized this clear-cut demarcation between a male's and female's roles is to be broken if some sort of equality is to be obtained. Gilman wrote a treatise *Women and Economics* (1898) in which her main contention was that all roles a woman was permitted to play derived from her sexual functions. A man could carry on a variety of activities- build a career, enter politics and join a fraternal organisation. But a woman could only marry and have children. In effect, sex became a female's economic way of life, while "men worked to live... women mated to live...".

Marion however is a character who refuses to be compartmentalized into the chamber labeled as "feminine". She works to
live and refuses to mate to live. Very like a capitalist, who is only bothered with her own gains and achieving only her own end, she avers, "We don't shrink from blood or guilt... I see children with no shoes or socks in the houses I buy. Should I buy them socks? It would be ridiculous" (p.30). So shorn of all the moral values and so materialistic has she become, that she can go to any extent to achieve her ends, not caring an inch for the other person involved. If she wants Alec, she shall have him no matter what the cost: "I don't care if you are mad or sane Alec. I am yours whether you want me or not... We men of destiny get what we're after even if we are destroyed by it. And everyone with us. We split the atom. Onward. Love me" (I, v, p.31). The phrase "We men of destiny" points out that she has become more of a man than a woman. And then comes the assertion that one would hardly expect from a woman "I'm keeping you Alec." (p.32).

Marion is devoid of all the motherly virtues of loving, caring and nurturing yet she wants to keep the baby, for different reasons though. In fact, the baby doesn't matter much to her. To her it is just another piece of property like the houses that she buys. But she has to get it so that she can have another assurance of victory. Lisa, the true mother, is hence right when she tells her," You don't want him really. You just want to win."(p.60). All the piteous begging and all the motherly tears of Lisa are unable to change her mind. They are just able to elicit this response from Marion," I shall do as I like" (p.60). It sounds funny and yet it is true,
when Worsley tells Clegg, "If he gets kidnapped any time and you have to go and identify him you can take me. Marion wouldn't know." (p.38).

Marion is cool, callous and calculating. She is every inch a replica of a successful business executive. Here reason and calculation have replaced emotions and sentiments. Like Jimmy, she is a sadist. Very like a logician, she asks Alec to compare her with Liza and then tries to convince him that she is better for him. She is devoid of all 'feminine' qualities that patriarchy generally assigns to women - sweetness, modesty, subservience, humility etc. One cannot but recall Jimmy's speech of waddling in Alison's tears when she tells Alec, "One day I'll have the pleasure of knowing you're screaming. Even if you do it silently" (p.48). In the light of her character one can hardly believe her when she tells Alec that she loves him and that she would only call for him even if she was eighty.

Both within the home as well as outside, Marion is fully in command. She orders, dictates and metes out punishments. Clegg dares not oppose her or ignore her orders. This reversal of traditional marital roles becomes all the more defined when the wife questions, "Are you going against me." (p.61). And then the warning is sounded, "If you don't like the arrangements, you can go. Clear right off. It would be a delight never to see you again." (p.61). This surprises one because never before had one heard a woman dictating terms to her husband so authoritatively.
and never before did we see the husband so meek and submissive. The play puts forward the thesis that so called masculine and feminine values cannot be segregated into water tight compartments. They are purely arbitrary and perpetuated by the larger patriarchal value system. The French feminist Helene Cixous contributed a valuable discussion of the consequences of what she calls "death -dealing binary thought." Under the heading 'Where is She?', she lines up the following lists of binary oppositions:

Activity / passivity
Sun / moon
Culture / nature
Day / night
Father / mother
Head / emotions
Intelligible / sensitive
Logos / pathos

These oppositions correspond to the underlying opposition Man / Woman, and are imbricated in the patriarchal value system; each opposition can be seen as the negative powerless instance. The biological opposition Male / Female, in other words is used to construct a series of negative 'feminine' values which then are imposed on and confused with the female. Cixous then goes on to locate death at work in this kind of division. She shows how, for one of the terms to acquire meaning, it must destroy the other. The 'couple' cannot be left intact. In the end, victory is equated with
activity and defeat with passivity and under patriarchy male is always the victor. 'Either woman is passive or she doesn't exist.' To posit all women as necessarily feminine and all men as necessarily masculine is precisely the move which enables the patriarchal powers to define not feminity, but all women as marginal to the symbolic order and to society. Cixious showed that feminity is defined as lack, negativity, absence of meaning, irrationality, chaos, darkness - in short as a Non-Being. Here in Owners the woman has no 'feminine' values and hence is no longer a 'Non-Being'. While Marion is so completely devoid of emotions and sentiments, Worsley on the other hand is all full of them. He literally begs Marion to let go of the child "Let him go back to where he belongs. You're letting yourself go mad, Marion. I've seen you in pieces..." (p.61). After a while he 'bursts into tears' as if to complete the process of emotional breakdown. But all this generates no effect on Marion, who is past all emotions. Not ready to budge an inch, she asserts:

I think everyone had their say. None of you has any effect on me. The more you want the baby, the more its worth keeping... Everyone of you thinks I will give in. Because I'm a woman, is it? I'm meant to be kind. I'm meant to understand a woman's feelings wanting her baby back. I don't. I won't. I can be as terrible as anyone. Why shouldn't I be Genghis Khan? Empires only come by killing. I won't shrink...

(II,vi, p.63)
This long, pompous assertive, speech reveals that she is out on a voyage to discover how ruthless and terrible she can possibly be. "I can massacre too" is the constant refrain. Her ruthlessness and callousness are further evident when she is not sorry even for a moment on hearing from Worsley about Alec's death. When it is the woman in control, the men coming in contact with her are not rendered normal. Clegg has an almost obsessive desire to annihilate her and Worsley harbours the perpetual suicidal wish. Michelene Wandor voices the same concern when she says, "A powerful ... woman is matched by two men, one murderous, one suicidal, both ineffective."

The other woman in the play Lisa stands in direct contrast to Marion. Lisa is as conventionally 'feminine' as Marion is 'unfeminine'. The former is the traditional woman to whom things are done to. She is a devoted wife and a caring mother. She is a woman who can get all disturbed over a misplaced engagement ring. "My engagement ring... Help me look... It's my one and only engagement ring and it's gone." (p.13). For Lisa, her husband and her children are the only axis around which she can revolve. When her things are stolen, she finds solace in the fact, "Still I've got the boys, that's what matters. I've got you." (p.20). Like a typical traditional housewife, she is constantly on her toes to please her husband. She can see herself only in relation to her husband and is tormented constantly with the fear that she might be deserted:

ALEC: Yes you must leave me, if you want to.
LISA: I always hate it when you say that to me because what you mean is that you want to leave me.
(I, iii, p.22).

The contrast between Marion and Lisa is thus well marked, the former ordering her husband to leave if he wants to, and the latter fearing she shall be left behind by the husband. Lisa is like Alison of Look Back in Anger, who has accepted her husband as he is. Alec is passive and hasn't been to work for the last six months, yet he is acceptable. The consolation is "He is very nice to me all the time," though she fears, "I wonder if he knows who I am. I think he would be nice to anyone. I went to see the doctor about him and he gave me some pills to take myself, but that won't make Alec any better. It just makes me put up with it..." (p.24). Alec and Lisa's marriage is one of those traditional marriages where the woman is always the one making compromises. One can't help noticing the similarities between Lisa and Alison: both have molded themselves to suit the needs of their husbands without any guarantee if ever the husbands are going to change for the better. On the other hand, Marion stands in direct contrast to Lisa. In Marion's case it is the husband who makes all the compromises. Clegg becomes the child's surrogate mother. One sees him doing all the motherly chores, like looking after the baby, heating and cooling his bottles etc., while Marion is off to work. The contrast between Marion and Lisa is again brought out in Act II, Sc.ii where Marion is shown "walking about eating" where as Lisa is in a pitiable state with
"hair a mess, face a wreck, sitting in a chair crying" (p.41). Their positions too - Marion standing, totally in command and Lisa sitting - speak volumes of their attitudes. Lisa is all sentimental about the baby that she has mistakenly signed over to Marion. Her motherly emotions have seized all reason and logic from her. "I don't see that signing a bit of paper makes him hers. He is mine. His blood and everything. His looks..." (p.36). Marion on her part is unruffled about the whole affair. Least affected, she indeed has the demure of a true business executive. Callously keeping all reason intact, she tries to make it clear to the emotional mother the do's and don'ts of the law: "In a third party adoption Lisa, each party sees the third party and all emotion is thus kept out." (p.42).

This complete marginalization of Clegg by the domineering personality of Marion has an adverse effect on him. Here again the power division is in favour of one sex. Such a power division always ends with the oppressed partner hating the oppressor. Clegg is scared of Marion and hence hates her. He can see no life for himself as long as Marion is alive; therefore he is forever contemplating various devices, tools and ways to murder her. He would like to see Marion fit in the traditional role of a submissive housewife. The fear of her however refrains him from giving vent to his feelings or putting his plans into action. He says he has "every respect for the mental profession" (p.10) because he believes the psychiatrist had rightly prescribed that Marion would have been happier had she molded herself to suit her husband's life style and catered to his
demands. Marion would have endeared herself to Clegg, had she indulged only in creative hobbies, painting for example. What is thoroughly unacceptable to the male ego of Clegg, is to see a woman crossing into the threshold of the male domain and making a success of it. Initially he had invested in the first property Marion had bought and had fully recovered his money, but as he says he would not have minded losing the money if "only she would have stayed with painting and had been content" (p.10).

At heart Clegg is still the male chauvinist. He wishes to revert back to the patriarchal set-up and occupy a central place in this power politics. "She can stand on her two feet, which is something I abominate in a woman" (p.8). He fondly cherishes the image of his father up erect with his mother "on her knees" in front of him and his father at times condescending and bending to pick her up "Very gracious... He had his chair. The tea was on the table when he came in" (p.10). This nostalgia is because he himself cannot get from his wife what his father could. Also he has been deprived of the status of the giver as Marion is independent both emotionally as well as financially "everything I had was hers. I always said. She only had to ask" (p.10). Clegg would like to see Marion as a possession. He refuses to believe Worsley when the latter tells him that a wife is a mere possession like cars and horses. She is a living being:

CLEGGE: A wife's the same.
WORSLEY: A wife's a person.
CLEGG: First and foremost a wife. One flesh. Marion leaves me... and every morning she leaves me to go to work... and every evening she leaves me, leaves me, leaves me.

(II, I, p.36)

The stress on the words "leaves me" simply shows how strongly the fact of Marion leaving him to go to work has affected him. Clegg hates Marion due to her success and lack of subservience, which wipes out his masculine self-image. Clegg is an unsuccessful butcher who must eventually close his shop, in the face of competition from a nearby supermarket and his wife's career in real estate. He wants to kill the more successful Marion for being the cause of his suffering. When Worsley tells him that she's just a bit absent 'minded' Clegg murder wish comes back. "I will chop her mind into little pieces and blanch them into boiling water"(p.36). Violence therefore emerges as another control mechanism of patriarchy in terms of the formation of gender roles. As Millett argues, that violence is particularly sexual in its character and it takes the form of aggression, hatred, contempt, wife-beating, rape, and the desire to break personality. The rationale underlying this is the belief that women are inferior and dangerous. Unless women meet men's needs, they deserve to be punished, to the most severe degree if necessary.

Marion's dominance is so omnipresent and omnipotent that Clegg starts doubting his manhood. And to assert himself, he invents
various devices. He consoles himself with the thought that at least she bears his name "I look at her sometimes and think I am the one this powerful property dealer swore before God to honor and obey" (p.11). So desperate is he to find some individuality for himself that he tries to act 'manly' in front of Worsley "If I thought for a moment she had dishonored me, then without hesitation or a thought of the police ... I would have killed her"(p.11). One knows however that this is just empty bragging. He does not even have the guts to ask Marion about her affair with Alec, though he is fully aware of it. He tries to cover his meekness and asserting his worth as a man by turning an accident to look like a murder:

CLEGG: I changed a living human being into a carcass.

WORSLEY: Who was it?

CLEGG: I don't know who it was, that's not the point who it was. It was me that did it that's the point.

(II, I, p.37).

As if to assert and prove that he has all the ruthlessness intact Clegg imagines that he could change a living human being into a carcass. He has taken up butchery as a profession so that he can pride himself into believing that he is doing something a woman cannot possibly can "... you still do not see a woman butcher. Apart from the physical weakness, a lady has a squeamishness which is proper in the weaker sex, but shameful in a man..." (p.9).
Marion has alienated herself from Clegg. She is the 'desexed' figure refusing to have sex with the husband or becoming a mother. Clegg on his part avenges his wife's affair with Alec by having a very brutal kind of sex with Lisa. Clegg exhibits Freudian traits in the process. He asserts himself via his phallus. It is the weak feminine woman who becomes the scapegoat of the tussle. She becomes a willing tool because of her motherly emotions that lead to her exploitation. She agrees to it, as she has been promised that she would be able to see her baby afterwards. Ironically afterwards she is refused even that. "Nobody is responsible for what they say in the heat of passion. If I had said at the time, I love you, you wouldn't ever thought I meant it. So if I said anything, it's the same. I don't remember saying anything." (p.53). But the fact is that even if he had wanted to keep his promise he would have found it difficult so scared is he of Marion. "But if I was to give you the baby I wouldn't dare to see her again. I don't care how angry you are, it's nothing like Marion. With Marion it's like a mad person, you don't want her attention to fall on you. It's not something I'd expose myself to." (II, vi, p.54).

Patriarchy works because men have been successful in striking fear in the hearts of women. Marion has become an embodiment of the patriarchal system and hence Clegg dare not oppose her. That is why though he opposes Marion, he can give vent to his feelings only when she is not around. It is ironical to see that when the wife refuses to be bullied, the man finds his target in some other woman. With Marion
refusing to be at his beck and call, he redirects his bragging to Lisa. After the brutal sexual act, he likes to drive home the male supremacy even in sexual terms. “I didn't say you could get up. You wouldn't be suitable unless you lie flat, did you know that, very feminine and do just as you're told. On your back and underneath is where I like to see a lady. And a man on the top. Right on the top of the world. Because I know what you ladies like. You like what I give you. I didn't say you mustn’t move at all. But just in response.”(II, vi, p.55)

Here Churchill contributes to the debate which was triggered by Freud. In Freudian paradigm, female sexuality is viewed and defined in relation to or in opposition to male sexuality. Luce Irigaray, the French feminist however chooses to differ. She finds fault in the Freudian model which says that female sexuality always relates back to penis and is always coded in terms of reproduction which in turn is also linked to female pleasure and desire. Irigaray says that in this phallogocentric model, the kind of sexuality that gets privileged is one based on looking because the one sexual organ, the penis is visible. According to her, since this is based on the visual it is scopophilic. “They (girls) notice the penis of a brother or playmate, strikingly visible and of large proportions, at once recognize it as the superior counterpart of their small and inconspicuous organ, and from that time forward fall a victim to envy for the penis” Lisa is supposed to be the silent and passive partner in Freudian terms because he believed that a woman gains from being an
(sexual) object of male desire and he would like us to believe that women’s pleasure does not reside in the woman herself. In other words, men gain pleasure from sexual intercourse and women gain pleasure from emotional connection and relationship and by being a beautiful object for man’s viewing pleasure. Irigaray states that the Freudian notion of asexuality constructs a certain binary opposition. Likewise Freud, Sprenger and Kramer too hold the same views and buttress their treatise with countless authorities primarily the Holy Scriptures and the lives of saints and martyrs. They assert that woman suffer from ‘a defect of intelligence’ and a ‘defect of inordinate passions’. They reinscribe the head/heart, rational/emotional opposition that feminists have for so long attempted to re-envision. The question itself identifies the feminine with the weaker; woman becomes the fragile feminine sex, while men remain just men. Using the comparative mode ‘more credulous, more impressionable, feeble’ they demonstrate that women are being defined in relation to someone else. Who that someone else is, is obvious because Sprenger and Kramer admit their phallocentrism and say outright “She is more carnal than a man” Clegg also echoes Lundberg and Farham who believed that had been created to be biologically and psychologically dependent on man. According to them "The sex act itself constituted a paradigm for female happiness. During intercourse woman's role was passive, receptive and accepting, based on the recognition that sexual pleasure could come only from welcoming the male phallus."
The oppressor is always hated by the oppressed. Not only does Clegg hate Marion but also hates everything associated with her. So strong is the dislike that he would hardly mind setting fire to her newly acquired house of Alec. He thinks he shall somehow be able to avenge himself that way. But Alec also knows he is not Marion's equal, but her inferior. This knowledge of his inferiority surprises him, when they get identical cards from the character telling machine. Portraying Marion as independent, assertive and successful makes the difference all the more pronounced. If possible he would like to curb her freedom as far as possible. That he does not do so is simply because he cannot. His comparison of her to a 'talking dog' shocks one. It highlights man's greater desire to see woman as a mere possession: "You don't deny she is a wonder. It's like having a talking dog, and it's on the front page at breakfast, the radio at dinner and television at night - that's mine look, that's my clever dog. But a time comes when you say heel. Home. Lie down." (I, I, p.11)

Marion is the completely liberated woman. She has discarded the values traditionally thought to be feminine and learnt to move ahead in the competitive world of business and has inculcated in her all the masculine values. But the play makes one wonder if it isn't just a fantasy of a woman playwright, for such complete reversal of gender roles seem impossible in reality. But it could also be a deliberate attempt to point out that women too can be as decisive, as authoritative, as callous and as cold as men can if only they want to.
Another play that brought Churchill into limelight was *Top Girls*. Ever since it was first staged in London at the Royal Court Theatre on Dec 28, 1982, it was regarded as a unique play that talked about challenges women face in the contemporary business world and society at large. It is still regarded as a part of the canon of women’s theatre and helped solidify Churchill’s reputation as an important playwright. *Top Girls* is praised for a number of reasons. In it, Churchill explores the price of success paid for by the central character Marlene, while using unusual technique, including a non linear construction, an overlapping dialogue and a mix of fantasy and reality. It was also not without its share of controversies. Written when Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister of Britain, the play raises many uncomfortable questions about where the feminist movement was heading at the time and how smoothly were the women adapting to their changing role in society. It left its mark on theatrical practices, traditions, gender stereotypes and socio-economical ideals.

Churchill’s choice of title for the play was likewise strategic. It is a culturally available symbol that evokes numerous representations. Like the ‘Top Girls Employment Agency’ for which it was named the play’s title suggests a select few. After all as Win instructs Angie in Act two, scene three: “There are not many top ladies about.” But it must be remembered that despite the presence of Lady Nijo and the countless
references to ladies, the play is not called “Top Ladies”, a term with courtly overtones. The name *Top Girls* undermines any implication of status or power that would be associated with the phrase ‘Top Ladies’. Feminists all over have repeatedly objected to the use of the word ‘girls’ to refer to women on the grounds that it tends to represent women in narrow, diminutive, frivolous terms. Ironically, while the women in the agency may be at the top and pinnacle of their careers, the fact remains that they are only the best of the women, not the best of everyone. While they may have gone as far as it is possible for women to go, the limitation implicit in the title undermines their accomplishments. Also the word ‘top’ necessarily implies a middle and a bottom reflecting the social stratification made visible in the play’s first act, in the way some women enjoy positions of privilege in relation to others who are deprived. Later using Britain’s eminent top girl, Margaret Thatcher, as an example, Joyce demonstrates that merely having a woman in the top position does not ensure equality for all women: “What good’s first woman if it’s her?” She questions. “I suppose you’d have liked Hitler if he was a woman. Ms. Hitler got a lot done. Hitlerina. Great adventures” (p.138). Mockingly using the feminist title ‘Ms’. both to challenge Marlene’s notion that ‘female’ and ‘feminist’ are synonymous and to suggest that a female prime minister who would behave as brutally and destructively as Hitler could have a negative impact on the lives of the majority of women. Through her strategic choice of title then, Churchill relies on readily available cultural
symbols to demonstrate how throughout history Top Girls like other not so
top ones, have been consigned to and kept in their male defined places.

In *Top Girls* Churchill has sixteen characters played by seven
women to represent the different possibilities or lives a woman could live.
It opens with the most famous dinner scene which was heralded as one of
the most famous scenes in modern drama. It is also a scene of continuous
excited conversation. It is set in a London restaurant where Marlene hosts
a dinner party to celebrate her promotion as the managing director of ‘Top
Girls’ employment agency. However it is her guests that are most
interesting. They are five women from history, painting and fiction:
Isabella Bird (1831-1904) the adventurous nineteenth century Japanese
traveller; Lady Nijo (b. 1258), the medieval Courtesan who became a
Buddhist nun and travelled on foot through Japan; Dulle Greit, who as Dulle
Greit in a Bruegel painting led a crowd of women on a charge through
hell; Pope Joan the ninth century female Pope and last, but not the least,
Patient Griselda, an obedient wife out of Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tales. As the
evening continues we become engrossed with the stories of all five women
and the impending crises in Marlene’s own life.

This assembling of historical women helps recounting the
travels, intellectual accomplishments and the love affairs that have made
them ‘top girls’. These women also represent the different possibilities
that a woman can hold in today’s world and in the past. The theme is
briefed by Marlene who avers “We’ve all come a long way” (p.13) and toasts to the courage and the way these women have changed the lives of generations to follow.

Marlene can be said to represent the changing attitude women have for themselves and also the change towards them in the working place. She is a product of gender equality. She manages the scene quite well, from being a perfect hostess to ordering courses and drawing out her guests while adding her own comments on their individual stories. Her own story however raises many questions. She grew up in a struggling working class family, had a child when she was 17, but gave it to her sister Joyce, as she felt the child would hinder her professional life.

The first to arrive at the scene is Isabella Bird. The character of Isabella Bird has been taken from A Curious Life for a Lady by Pat Barr. Daughter of a clergyman she moved to live in Scotland. As a frail child, she was prescribed frequent outdoor excursions. However when she was 18, a fibrous tumour was discovered and she had to be operated upon. As a result she was bedridden for a time being. For her wellbeing, she was sent to Australia and from there to the Sandwich Islands. She fell in love with the sea, part of the reason being that she felt completely liberated, discovering “a new world” (p.8). She is in a sense a liberated woman as she rejects the proposal of Mr. Nugent – Rocky Mountain Jim- who proposed to her because she could “make scones and lasso cattle” (p.9).
She however gets married at fifty to Dr. Bishop who had a ‘sweet character’ and because she thought she owed it to him as he had tended to her sister in her last days. But she found marriage “an ordinary drudgery of life”. She was ill again with “carbuncles on the spine and nervous prostration” (p.11) The adventurer in her resurfaces again with the death of her husband and she sets off to Tibet, as she feels dull when stationary. On first glance, Isabella Bird might appear liberated. At a time when women did not enjoy much freedom, she appears rather privileged. “My father taught me Latin although I was a girl.”(p.3) and “I studied the metaphysical poets. I thought I enjoyed intellectual pursuits.” (p.3) She is widely travelled and tutored well. But in spite of these privileges, Isabella nonetheless is at heart more or less a conservative woman. Very soon she admits she had always “tried to do what (her) father wanted.” (p.3). Then she strongly repudiates any suggestions that she was anything “other than feminine”(p.8). In response to Griselda’s strange tale of marital perseverance, she says, “I swore to obey John, of course, but it didn’t seem to arise. Naturally I wouldn’t have wanted to go abroad while I was married.” (p.21) Above all, she is guilty for having spent years in self gratification. To make up, she “hurled herself into committee work and wore herself out with good causes.”(p.8).

The next to arrive on the scene is Lady Nijo (b. 1258) whose character is based on the character of Nijo in the autobiography, The Confessions of Lady Nijo. In this book Lady Nijo describes her life in
Japan between 1271 and 1306. Her life's story is that of two halves—firstly at the court and later as a vagrant Buddhist nun. Over dinner, she unravels a very interesting tale of perusal and rejection. At fourteen, she was one of the maidens passing the sake at court when the Emperor who was aged twenty nine told her father to send her to him. She didn’t want to go, but soon reconciled with the thought that she had been brought up for the Emperor. However what she could never reconcile with was taking other women to him, which was also a part of her role. “I never enjoyed taking other women to him” (p. 3), she regrets. Nijo came from a line of eight generations of poets; her father was a very religious man and a poet. On falling from the favour of the emperor, she entered holy orders just the way her father wanted her to. But she adopted religion as a kind of nothing as if she were dead already. As a nun she travelled the country on foot—she walked everyday for twenty years—following the tradition of priests, who were often vagrants. Her travels revealed her determined will. She had three lovers. One of them is the priest, Ariake. He dedicated his life to her. Nijo believed at first that the Emperor was of sweet character because he did not mind about Ariake, but soon comes to the realisation that it is rather because he no longer cared for her. One night he even sent a man to her and listened to their lovemaking from behind the screens. She depended on the Emperor’s favour and was told to abandon the three layered gown, when she incurred his displeasure. She also remembers having some babies. Her first child was the Emperor’s which died and the second was Akebano’s, who had loved her ever since she was thirteen. On
the birth of the child, he took it away from her. She recollects with regret, “It was only a girl, but I was sorry to lose it” (p.16). She later has a chance to see her child who had been adopted by Akebono’s wife and had been brought up to be sent to the palace, just as she herself had been. Her third child had been Ariake’s and she felt nothing for the child.

Nijo also remembers an incident that makes her particularly angry. She was eighteen. At the full Moon Ceremony the men make special rice gruel and stir it with their sticks. They then beat their women across the lions so that they will bear sons, not daughters. The Emperor beat them hard, which was not exceptional, but on this occasion he allowed the attendants to beat them too. In response the ladies devised a plan to attack the Emperor and beat him in return. Nijo remembers with a sort of pleasure how she beat him with a stick until he promised he would not order anybody to hit them again. There was of course a great fuss afterwards and the nobles were horrified. This is Nijo’s last, exultant memory. But Nijo’s accomplishments in life were result of strict adherence to the wishes first of her father and then of the Emperor of Japan. She judges herself at the dinner party according to man-imposed standards, especially those of her father, even her decision to wander Japan as a penitent nun:

Nijo: Oh, my father was a very religious man. Just before he died he said to me, “Serve His Majesty, be respectful, if you lose his favour enter holy orders.”
Marlene: But he meant stay in a convent, not go wandering round the country.

Nijo: Priests were often vagrants, so why not a nun? You think I shouldn’t / I still did what my father wanted.

(p.3)

Gret, true to her name, doesn’t have much to say until the end, though she makes an early entrance. She is more preoccupied with the table and the meal than anything else. She eats crudely being a stranger to sophisticated surroundings and also steals bottles and plates when no one is looking. Her relative silence adds an element of suspense up to the point when she delivers her climatic, inspirational story derived from surrealistic painting by Bruegel. She describes coming to hell through a big mouth and finding it all black and red- very similar to her own village after it had been looted and fired by the soldiers. She set about beating and fighting these devils. “I’d had enough, I was mad, I hate the bastards. I come out my front door that morning and shout till my neighbours come out and I said, ‘Come on, We’re going where the evil come from and pay the bastards out.’ And they all come out just as they was/ from baking or washing in their aprons, and we push through the street and the ground opens up and we go through a big mouth into a street just like ours but in hell.” (p.28) Gret, waving a sword, led her women, running and fighting and gave the devils a beating.
Joan is the next to arrive and excites attention, having lived a most exciting life. As Churchill explains in her note on Characters, ‘Pope Joan occupied a position which even to this day remains inaccessible to women. Disguised as a man she is thought to have been pope between 854 – 856.” She was an infant prodigy interested in theology, metaphysics and the teachings of John the Scot. She left home at the age of twelve, dressed as a boy, with a sixteen year old friend. She left because being female she was denied access to the library. The two wanted to study in Athens and as it was impossible to do so as a woman, she decides to remain disguised. She went undiscovered and was recognised as very clever. Thereafter she went to Rome as Italian men do not have beards. She studied, obsessed with the pursuit of truth. Very soon she was made the Cardinal but she fell ill ‘full of terror and regret.’ However she soon recovered and studied in pursuit of the absolute. When Pope Leo died she was elected. She enjoyed being Pope, consecrating bishops and receiving royalty. Joan nonetheless in not devoid of the guilt that plagued others. When there were natural disasters, such as earthquakes or plagues, she felt personally responsible. She might have survived happily and successfully were it not for her baby. Here she was finally exposed as a woman and “Women, children and lunatics can’t be Pope.”(p.15). So strong was her identification with the male sex that she was unable to interpret obvious signs of pregnancy. She hardly knew what was happening, not having actually lived a woman’s life. She ‘wasn’t used to having a woman’s body.’ (p.16) There is a hint of irony, when later in the play Louise (whom the same actor plays) remarks
during her interview with Win, “I don’t care greatly for working with women, I think I pass as a man at work”(p.52) “What is remarkable is Joan’s lack of outrage against the vicious hegemony of the man centered government of the church.” Rather she even joins in the condemnation of herself and her sex, saying “I’m a heresy myself”(p.6). Her baby was eventually born during the procession of all the Roman clergy on Rogation Day. She experienced labour pains, spasms, contractions and loss of breath. By the time she realised what was happening it was too late. The people thought the pope was ill, but the baby just slid on to the road. One cardinal cried, ‘The Antichrist!’ and fainted. Joan was taken by the feet, dragged out of town, and stoned to death. The baby was also killed. Later the procession always avoided the street journeyed through on the fateful day. The clergy introduced a pierced marble chair in the Chapel of the Saviour to confirm the sex of the Pope. Two clergymen made sure he was a man while the Pope retained his public dignity.

Griselda is the last one to arrive and her story begins with her marriage. She was selected by the ruling marquis, Walter, when she was fifteen on the condition that she would always obey him. At first Walter was kind, but when her first child a daughter was born, Walter explained that the people were getting restless as the child was from a woman belonging to a peasant family. So she had to obediently give up the child. Four years later the act was repeated this time with a son. All the while Griselda never complained thinking it is a test of her love. But twelve
years later she was tested again as Walter decided he must marry someone who could give him an acceptable heir. Griselda was sent home, barefoot and dressed only in a slip. Her father and everyone else were crying but she was perfectly content. Very soon she was recalled to prepare a young beautiful girl of sixteen for marriage with Walter. Just as the feast was about to begin Walter stayed behind, put his arms around Griselda who almost felt asleep with shock and said ‘this is your daughter and son.’ Griselda fainted, then cried and kissed her children. Thus Griselda takes obedience to an absurd level and acquiesces to every command from her husband and master until she has been stripped of virtually everything: her daughter, her husband and even the clothes from her body. The guests are taken aback at Griselda’s remarkable story. Like Joan, she defends the hand that oppresses her. Explaining her own reluctance to interfere when the daughter was taken from her, ostensibly to be killed, she says, “It was Walter’s child to do what he liked with.” (p.23). Marlene follows it with a particularly scathing comment on Walter and calls him a ‘monster’. This forces Griselda to rethink ‘I do think I do wonder – it would have been nicer if Walter hadn’t had to.’ (p.27)

It is interesting to note the dishes that each one orders. Their meal choices in fact reveal their personalities. Isabella Bird orders chicken which is a popular Victorian dish and so is the dessert that she orders which is apple pie and cream. Lady Nijo orders Waldorf salad which though being exotic remains a side dish. It is symbolic of the concubine
status that Nijo occupied who like the salad was never the "main dish". Dull Gret orders potatoes, that appear dull like her but are also reliable and versatile like her. Pope Joan orders cannelloni which is an Italian dish. Most significant is the order placed by Marlene. She attempts to be recognized as a "male". Rare stake is traditionally a dish men prefer. The significance in Marlene ordering two of them is to illustrate that she can be more masculine than the traditional man. More interesting is the dessert that she orders i.e. profiteroles which is a French type of cream puff. She orders by saying, "I’d like profiteroles because they’re disgusting" (p.31). It seems as if Marlene orders them to prove that she is not the one to be intimidated easily. She orders them because she can, not because she wants to. Griselda does not order anything for dinner but Marlene orders pudding for her dessert. Griselda submits to it who in life as well in choice of her meal doesn't have much say anyway.

Joseph Marohl shows how all the women at the dinner party are "able to detect areas of intolerance and sexual tyranny in the cultures of the other women present; their blind spots are the inequities of their own cultures." Joan is shocked at Griselda’s servility, "I never obeyed anyone. They all obeyed me."(p.21) but she does not comprehend "how her own denial of her sex was also a concession to anti-feminist hegemony." Isabella decries the superstition of the Church during Joan’s lifetime, but she is ignorant that the Victorian woman’s obsession with being a proper lady was another form of female subjugation. Marlene does not approve of
Nijo’s acquiescence to her rape in the Emperor’s palace, but later in the play she encourages a client to adapt herself to a certain professional image to please her male employers.

Nonetheless the depiction of these women on the stage was to say the least quite ‘unusual’. In the past women characters have been presented almost exclusively as adjuncts to men, dependent on them and limited by the rules and conventions of a male dominated world. Their dramatic roles like their roles in real life were restricted as wives, daughters, lovers, harlots, always contingent on men, rarely permitted to act or think independently. In *Top Girls* as in *Owners*, modern woman is shown to be living at a time of shifting priorities and expectations. Female roles can be challenged. Churchill is original in presenting so many different kinds of women and more important she lets them speak for themselves. The characters are ‘types’ but they are also individualised and dramatically interesting.

However though it would appear that these women are emancipated, actually they are not. All of them have been expected to fulfil certain roles, regardless of their individual temperaments. And these roles have been determined for the convenience of men. The first act thus acts as an alienation effect which makes visible the trans- historical and trans- cultural nature of this oppression of women. Nijo and Griselda are essentially sexual slaves. Joan was forced to adopt a disguise to pursue
theology and poetry. She is perfectly acceptable as a Pope before the truth is found out. The lament, 'I shouldn’t have been a woman' is thus understandable. She is not spared once her biology gives her away and is stoned to death. Isabella was expected to live the life of a clergyman’s daughter and always felt guilty whenever she attempted to break free. “How can people live in this dim pale island and wear hideous clothes? I cannot and will not live the life of a lady... Why should I? Why should I?” (p.26). Marlene’s awakening comes much later, when she sees her daughter sleeping in the office and acknowledges, after everything, very little has really changed in the world: “She’s not going to make it.” By the end of the scene, the guests have had time to ponder over their situations and what appears to be liberation at first glance, is proved to be otherwise. Now there is a feeling of resentment, boiling to a rage, which finds its finest expression in Gret’s own feminist revolution:

I’d had enough. I was mad. I hate the bastards. I come out of my front door that morning and shout till my neighbours come out and I said, ‘Come on, we’re going...’” (p.28)

Feminist themes introduced in the first act echo throughout the play. There is much “good humour, mutual congratulation and enjoyment among the group as might be expected.”’. By the end the guests, mostly drunk, are lost in personal reminiscence, and while Isabella remembers her last triumph, Joan is actually being sick. The disintegration of the party is extremely ironic. Dull Gret’s final apocalyptic vision of
collective action is set against the stage picture of a group of women no longer listening to each other.

How violence is used in patriarchy is best analyzed in *Top Girls*. The characters of the play illustrate the instances of suffering and exploitation of women through the ages. The descriptions of their lives consist of their achievements, but more of their being raped, deprived, and psychologically battered (Innes 464). The character Pope Joan, a legendary female, disguises herself as a man to be able to pursue a career and ends up serving as Pope of the Roman Catholic Church. However, she forgets what it feels like to be a woman until she gives birth to a child in public. She is stoned to death for having broken one of the patriarchal taboos and having become a pope which is one of the most precious status positions reserved for men. In Act 1, Scene 1, Joan recollects:

"I was on the horse [...] And the baby just slid out onto the road. [...] They took me by the feet and dragged me out of the town and stoned me to death “ (p.11).

Millett argues that, like other totalitarian ideologies, patriarchal ideology would be imperfect unless it had the rule of force as an ever-present intimidation. Patriarchy institutionalizes force through its legal system. Strict patriarchies back up the prohibition against illegitimacy or sexual autonomy with a death sentence. Needless to say, there is no penalty upon the male correspondent. Foucault, also, points out that if someone dares to
rise up against the hegemonic power and disobeys its laws, then direct force is exercised over the offender’s life, which generally leads to the death penalty.

*Top Girls* is no doubt a play about women, who have defined their roles in life according to their individual perception of womanhood, but this anomaly is lost in the dynamism of the conversation. Even before the first act draws to a close, we are forced to question ourselves whether these women are indeed successful. Each woman’s presence represents different female psyche and universalizes female experience. Collectively they provide an historical context for the new woman who is represented in the scene by Marlene. “History, which was traditionally dealt predominantly with men and been written by men, is here given a feminist perspective.”

As the play progresses, Marlene’s history is revealed. She emerges as the New Woman. She is a perfect rebuttal to Gender Stereotyping. Marlene has accomplished much in her life, but not without the costs. She abandoned her child as she thought it would hinder her professional advancement. She is a woman who “refuses to be tyrannized and therefore has joined the powers- that- be and, like Pope Joan seeks to be obeyed rather than to obey.” Nijo uncovers the secret significance of the promotion to managing director when she adds the phrase “Over all the women you work with. And the men.” (p.13). Marlene’s advancement
helps no one but herself, however much she would like to believe and she endorse a hierarchical system oppressive to the less fortunate women and men in her society. Ironically the waitress in the first scene does not even have a voice. She stands in stark contrast to the other women. As she does not qualify as a ‘Top Girl’ she consequently must serve those who do. Remaining silent, she is a representative of the vast majority of ordinary women who silently struggle through poverty and face oppression every day of their life. In her effort to escape the oppressor and the phallocentric system, Marlene herself has become the oppressor. Her daughter Angie, appears quite disoriented and is stupid, lazy and frightened. Churchill is very clever in displaying the differences between the characters. If Marlene represents everything that is great about the 80s for women then Joyce her sister, represents everything that is bad about this time for women. If Marlene represents success, then ironically Angie her own daughter represents the other side of the coin.

Churchill does not fail to recognize and address the unique features of gender oppression to explore the commonalities in women’s experience under the patriarchal systems. In an attempt to demonstrate the continuity of this oppression and to show how little has changed for women from the Rome of 854 to present day London, Churchill examines and challenges another of the inter-related elements of gender identified by Joan W. Scott “normative concepts that set forth interpretations of the meanings of the symbols that attempt to limit and contain their metaphoric possibilities...
that take the form of fixed binary opposition, categorically asserting the
meaning of male and female, masculine and feminine. Through the
exploration of such normative concepts as mother, father, wife and
husband, Churchill challenges gender stereotyping in an attempt to liberate
the metaphoric possibilities of both feminity and masculinity.

Then it is the women’s maternal experiences or lack thereof,
that Churchill takes in order to challenge the gender stereotype of an
inherent maternal instinct. Cherrs Kramaral and Paula A. Treicheer’s
Smazons, define maternal instinct as a concept “invented by males to
ensure that we would fulfill our procreative duties as well as assuming full
responsibilities for children per se.; Further on it is defined as ‘natural’ for
women to want to give birth, to love their children and to be willing to
sacrifice anything for their benefit.”

Of all the women in the play only Isabella Bird has not
experienced childbirth. She equates children with horses revealing a
decided preference for the latter. “I never had children. I was fond of
horses.” In contrast, Dull Gret exemplifies the maternal experience of a
vast majority of women. Lady Nijo and Patient Griselda share a similar
maternal experience: the loss of children to patriarchy. Nijo explains how
motherhood for her has been a succession of pain and loss which finally
culminates in total annihilation of all 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.” (p.17) The fact that she finds this odd is itself telling and points to the fact that how completely Nijo has internalized the patriarchal ideology. Likewise Griselda justifies Walter’s act of taking away the children again revealing the extent to which she has been interpellated by the patriarchal ideology that holds that children belong to their fathers. Pope Joan and Marlene on their part experience motherhood as nothing more than an inconvenience: Joan because she ‘wasn’t used to having a woman’s body’ and Marlene who procrastinates until it is too late to abort. Joyce mockingly reminds her “You was the most stupid for someone so clever, get yourself pregnant not to go to the doctor, not tell.” (p.80) Through these maternal experiences, Churchill makes connections between having children stolen like Nijo and Griselda, to having children killed like Joan to having to choose between children and economic security like Marlene. For these top Girls then, motherhood becomes an oppressive experience, fraught with complexities and ambiguities impacted by social and economic realities.

Thus by the time the curtain draws to a close, one realizes that the play is less concerned with the celebration of successful women, but rather questions what kind of success is this. Benedict Nightingale recognised the central questions of the play:

What use is female emancipation, Churchill asks, if it transforms the clever women into predators and does nothing for the stupid, weak and helpless? Does freedom, and feminism, consist aggressively
adopter the very values that have for centuries oppressed your sex?²¹

Angie is a helpless victim of this system. She is slow, lazy and stupid. Joyce knows that “She’s not going to get a job when jobs are hard to get.” While the successful look after themselves, there is no one to look after Angie. Similarly Mrs. Kidd highlights another dilemma of employment. She is quite out of place and uncomfortable in the office. She requests Marlene to give up her job which is quite unreasonable. She also explains how life has become even more difficult for her ever since her husband has been denied promotion. Here again the brunt of success of a select few is borne by another woman, a helpless victim.

The play ends on an unhappy note with Angie ‘frightened’ and looking for solace where there are no chances of her getting any. Thus whereas in the Owners it is the complete role-reversal that Churchill takes up, in Top Girls it is one of determining the pros and cons of women in society, especially in labour situations. Both the plays however were instrumental in demythologizing the myth of male and female roles and attributes.
Notes


12. Ibid 121.


15. Caryl Churchill, *Top Girls.* (London: Metheun, 1982) 64. All subsequent quotations have been taken from the above edition and have been incorporated in the text.


17. Ibid; 319.


