Chapter Five

The Skriker

Caryl Churchill’s experiment with theatre achieves a new dimension with the production of The Skriker in January 1994; this production was, however, in collaboration with Second Stride at Cottesloe, Royal National Theatre, London. Churchill’s new play is not a source of fantastic entertainment, rather a venture to introduce the audience to the mythic dystopic world, a brave new world haunted by unhappy and fearful fairies, bogies, warped brownies, kelpies and so on. Like Top Girls, The Skriker has developed a self-reflexive mode of questioning the legitimating procedures within feminism itself in a manner which tends to associate the multiple concepts of ‘woman’s identity’ with postmodernism. Postmodern theories have influenced feminist theatre which serves as a basis for an exploration of physical gestures and language as signifying systems. Challenging the limited boundaries of traditional drama, as well as the theatrical space, such a play incorporates dance, music, nursery rhymes, distorted utterances and other technical innovations, thereby extending the horizon of time and space where the process of signification opens up unexplored areas of experiences.

Churchill’s The Skriker (TS) does not deal with the prevalent theme of economic liberty of women; rather makes women aware of the future towards which they are approaching. The postmodern strategies of disruption of traditional myths and reconstruction of new identities have inspired Churchill to portray the picture of the distorted and fragmented world of women, a world having both social and psychological relevance. The postmodern aesthetics treats the subject as myth and the conventional grand narratives as redundant illusions. “Like Feminism, Postmodernism (in theoretical and artistic modes), has been engaged in a re-examination of the
Enlightenment concepts of subjectivity as autonomous self-determination; the human individual as defined without reference to history, traditional values, God, nation. Both have assaulted aesthetic or philosophical notions of identity as pure autonomous essence” (Waugh 208). Questioning traditional aesthetics and ideological structures is one of the preoccupations of postmodernism and feminist theatre. Following such critical trends, Churchill’s theatre semiotics raises a series of questions instead of providing concrete solution to the problematic issues treated in the play. The audience is baffled and shocked by such a performance and is instigated to get critically involved in the stage performance. In following such a process Churchill thinks in line with Theodor Adorno who says: “[a]rt is not a matter of pointing up alternatives but rather a resisting, solely through artistic form, the course of the world, which continues to hold a pistol to the heads of human beings” (80). This chapter, focusing on Churchill’s postmodern ‘politics of style’, in TS, will reveal her concern over finding out new ways of expression and representation by fusing distorted dialogue, dance, music, myth and folktales in her latest dramatic experiments. While revealing the impact of postmodernism on British feminist theatre, Churchill favours the dissolution of traditional aesthetics of theatre. The fairyland atmosphere in the play is not an escape into the world of romantic fantasies, but a venture to a veritable hell from where there is no escape. Churchill’s theatrical techniques defamiliarize the convention of illusion-making by the manipulation of sign-systems, thereby unfixing the peripheries of the real and the unreal. This play violates the traditional norms of illusion and reality, consequently giving birth to an ‘unreal reality’, which paradoxically is more real than the real. Such a performance provides a space for the perpetual deferment of conclusive meaning, creating a fluidity of traditional boundaries in the realm of theatre.
The word ‘Skriker’ in North England dialect means a person who cries. In Churchill’s play the strange mythic supranatural ‘Skriker’ is represented as damaged as the earth, trying to lure young women to a veritable hell, with the promise of fulfilling their heart’s desire. This Mephistophelean character tempting young women to a bleak destination is a wicked spirit, chameleon-like, that can metamorphose into various deceptive guises. The central character in the play, the Skriker, has been described as “a shapeshifter and death portent, ancient and damaged” (Churchill 243). The play transports the audience to the phantasmagoric ‘underworld’, a place that has been ordained for modern women. *TS* begins with the nightmarish background, the glimpses of which have already been offered at the ending of her early play *Top Girls*, where, Angie, the unacknowledged daughter of the so-called successful woman Marlene, wakes up from her nightmarish vision. She finds it ‘frightening’—an epithet for the bleak future world that the ‘top’ mothers are building up for their children. *TS* portrays Churchill’s most unsettling indictment of an incurably diseased world. The play has a complex structure of some apparently disjointed but actually interconnected episodes of everyday reality. The play is not divided into Acts or Scenes. At the same time, the play is a distortion of the ‘real’ by the fairy logic, which reveals the uncertainties and angst of the individual in the postmodern world. The blurring of boundaries signifies the instability of time and space in the fragmented lives of the individuals. Candice Amich in the essay “Bringing the Global Home: The Commitment of Caryl Churchill’s *The Skriker*”, provides a new approach to the play. She says:

Caryl Churchill’s play *The Skriker* explores the ravages and intoxications of globalization. Through the shape-shifting figure of the Skriker, who commands space and time in a manner that recalls the fluidity of multinational capital, Churchill examines the relationship between time-space compression and the fragmented subjectivities of two
women, Josie and Lily. As the Skriker invades their bodies, instantaneously transporting them through space and time, the simultaneously pleasurable and terrifying breakdown of interiority that accompanies temporal and spatial dislocation in our era of late capitalism is simulated onstage (394).

Such vision of temporal and spatial dislocation and the terror associated with it is encapsulated in the disjointed and broken language of the Skriker. The fluidity of capital is semiotically encapsulated in Lily's act of vomiting coins after her encounter with the Skriker. The female body of the unemployed mother is reproducing coins. Lily feels sick and disturbed as she cannot stop this vomiting. She fails to speak while her body produces a flow of money, the lack of which made her suffer before. Thus, the female body, functioning as a theatrical sign is transformed to a money-making machine. Through this theatrical code Churchill makes a vehement attack on the madness of capitalism that has penetrated deep into the lives of women. On the other hand, this act also links female language with capitalism. As language itself is contaminated by global capitalism, Churchill is trying to make women conscious of their use of 'language' and 'body' as weapons to disrupt phallogocentrism. The Skriker in not only a representation of destructive capitalism, but also a symbol of inner vacuity, inescapable loneliness and desperation pervading the lives of modern women.

The play juxtaposes two eras -- the ancient mythological world and the contemporary modern world. Both these worlds are pictured as horrific, shocking and damaged, -- the 'underside' of which thriving only on material greed and self-interest. The play begins with the abrupt ranting monologue of the Skriker in the underworld. Then the scene shifts to the modern world where the schizophrenic Josie is found in the mental hospital for her abnormal act of killing her baby daughter. She is suffering from a psychic breakdown. Josie's madness perhaps
exemplifies the entrapment of modern women steeped in the materialistic society from where deliverance is an impossibility. Moreover, such a heinous, abnormal act may have been prompted by the unconscious instinctive drives of a mother only to prevent her child from enduring the terrific and nightmarish future awaiting her in the contemporary world. On the other hand, Josie’s friend Lily is pregnant and has escaped from home. Throughout the play, the Skriker shapeshifts through a number of disguises, trying to tempt the two ladies to the underworld, and in the process expresses her loneliness, vacuity and unfulfilment. The Skriker endowed with supernatural powers is mostly concerned to get hold of Lily’s baby, who represents the new generation of progressive women. The Skriker herself may be a microcosmic representation of the distorted image of women at the present time, a phase when everything undergoes immense change. After much conversation with Josie and Lily, the Skriker succeeds in transporting Josie to the underworld. There she encounters mythological folkloric characters like Yallery Brown, Nellie Longarms, Jenny Greenteeth, the Kelpie, Rawheadandbloodybones, Black Annis, Black Dog, hags and other supernatural characters. Some of them have claws and hideous appearances. The boundaries of space, time and reality interfuse and interpenetrate in both the worlds. Josie is tempted by the banquet of the spirits which finally turns out to be nightmarish. The Skriker is the fairy queen in hell; dressed gorgeously, she offers Josie a glass of red wine. Being lured by material superflousness, Josie drinks it in spite of warnings from the unidentified GIRL who says:

Don’t eat. It’s twigs and beetles and a dead body.

Don’t eat or you’ll never get back…. (270).
Josie thus submits herself before the Skriker. Like Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus she sells herself to the Skriker only to be dislocated from the existing world into the horrible future. The banquet that appears to be a gorgeous feast is in reality a feast of twigs, leaves, beetles, dead body, blood and dirty water. Like Eve, who plucked the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden, Josie too is lured by the materialist temptations of the Skriker, thereby getting herself imprisoned in the underworld. After such disillusionment and horrifying experiences in the underworld, Josie is brought back to the real world. To Josie it is years that she has been in hell, though she returns to the present locale just a few seconds later. Finally, it is Lily who ventures to the underworld with the prospect of returning soon. But she finds herself trapped in the future, encountering her ghastly granddaughter in the ‘real’ world, a metaphoric hell from where there is hardly any prospect of return.

To encapsulate the tragic predicament of women within the limited span of a play, Churchill successfully employs myths and folklores to demystify what is said or accepted and what remains unspoken or repressed in the representations of traditional theatrical performance. The ‘myth’ associated with the Skriker is not simply a reference to classical mythology, or to fairy stories ending with assurances of living ‘happily everafter’. In line with Roland Barthes’s concept of ‘myth’, it can be said that myths signify the complex system of images and conventions framed by the society to perpetuate and authenticate its own meaning. Roland Barthes in his *Mythologies* (1972) and *Elements of Semiology* (1967) deals with the concept of myth. Myths are symbolic of the accumulated knowledge of the society, the ideologies operating within the social framework. Myths provide interpretative archetypes for deciphering the meaning of the world where we inhabit with a view to exploring the present through the past. Terence Hawkes says:
However, myth is peculiar in that it invariable functions as a second-order semiotic system constructed on the basis of a semiotic chain which exists before it. That which had the status of a *sign* (i.e. the 'associative total' of signifier and signified) in the first system becomes a mere *signifier* in the second (107).

Roland Barthes has called 'myths' metalanguage because it is a second-order language used to interpret the first-order language. Terence Hawkes further says “There is also a reverse situation in which the sign of a prior signifier-signified relationship becomes the signified of a further one. In this case, the second-order system becomes a metalanguage in respect of the semiosis which it studies” (109-110). Myth is a process of signification in which we find the pattern of the signifier, the signified and the sign. Barthes postulates:

> But myth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it; it is a second-order semiological system. That which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second. We must here recall that the materials of mythical speech (the language itself, photography, painting, posters, rituals, objects, etc), however different at the start, are reduced to a pure signifying function as soon as they are caught by myth (*Mythologies* 114).

In performing a signifying function myth “hides nothing and flaunts nothing: it distorts; myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion” (Barthes, *Mythologies* 129). Myth distorts reality and naturalizes it, thereby transforming history into nature. Barthes even argues that the ‘orders of signification’ called denotation and connotation combine to produce ideology in the form of myth, which has been described as a third order of signification. Denotation means the use of
language to mean what it says. But connotation is the literary use of language that means something different from what is said.

. . . the first system is then the plane of denotation and the second system. . . the plane of connotation. We shall therefore say that a connotated system is a system whose plane of expression is itself constituted by a signifying system: the common cases of connotation will of course consist of complex systems of which language forms the first system (this is, for instance, the case with literature). (Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* 89-90).

Connotation, producing higher order of signification, generates new meanings. Myths, functioning as signifying system, operate through codes and serve the ideological function of naturalization, thereby revealing the subtext in the process of signification.

In *The Skriker*, fairy logic and myth contribute to the signifying process. The play goes against the traditional domestic stories brightened by good fairies to bring about a magical happy-ever-after ending, and instead, gives way to a nightmarish world of chaotic disorder. The play is on one level a contradictory variation of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* with the feeling of disharmony between the natural and the supernatural. The juxtaposition of the fairy logic and supernatural characters and the speaking human characters in the contemporary world blurs the gap between the real and the unreal. The mythical figures who haunt the play are those evil spirits who are supposed to victimize and torture children: Rawhead and bloodybones, is a terrifying nursery goblin who frightens children by dragging them into marlpits or locks them in dark lockers; Kelpie is another superhuman creature, half man and half horse; Jennie Geenteeth, and Nellie Longarms are water monsters who drown children into ponds; and Black Annis, a goblin who eats animals and young children. The horrifying dead child who sings of her mother, who killed her and baked her in a pie to be eaten by the family, metaphorically alludes to
Josie's act of murdering her baby daughter. In this play blood-seeking fairies come out of British folklore and up from the underworld to quench their blood-thirst and to destroy the stable order. Such a fairyland shatters the veil of illusion regarding the construction of traditional myths, thereby disrupting the accepted normal codes of conduct by 'laying bare' the underlying void, terror and vacuity in the contemporary world of women. The audience is introduced to a real world devoid of all illusions. On the other hand, the Skriker's obsession to get hold of Lily's baby reveals her desperate hankerings for motherhood that has been denied to her. The Skriker too desires to be recognised and valued as she tries to exert forcefully her supernatural powers to trap women. The complex fluidity in the character of Skriker is evident in the various disguises that she assumes. She takes the shape of helpless unfortunate beings like an old woman asking for affection, a young motherless child, and even inanimate objects. She even becomes the part of a sofa on which Josie and Lily sit, implying their entrapment and submission to the all-controlling power of the Skriker. Through her magic, the Skriker commodifies Lily's body. The body gains the power to produce wealth but fails to sustain and nourish a progressive progeny. Again, on the contrary, such shapeshifting may be a devious device to entangle victims in her deceptive network of worldly temptation. Her ability to shapeshift and to appear and disappear is a sign of her power and at the same time, hints at her unfulfilment and inner barrenness. This dichotomy between appearance and disappearance indicates the interconnections between the two worlds -- the contemporary and the mythological. The result is the denaturalization of everyday reality moulded through distortion of history and contemporary events. The appearance of the Skriker and her activities, the depiction of the other characters are signifying codes that acquire the dimension of 'myth'. In TS 'myth' functions as a theatre semiotics that denaturalizes the operation of the social codes which are assumed to be natural. It reveals the invisible
operations of the ideological forces by decoding them. Roland Barthes in *Mythologies*, elaborates his view of signification or hypostatization to analyse the working of ideologies as cultural forms. Myth can be a signifier of a level of connotative signifieds. Critical examination of the play from such a perspective will in turn open up new connotations suggesting the necessity for social change. The Skriker myth signifies that the modern world is chaotic and damaged though it appears to be progressive. "In a sense *TS* extends the possibilities of the death-space by letting Churchill bring back her own familiars: Lily, the pregnant innocent woman (*Owners*), Josie, the baby-killer (*A Mouthful of Birds*), random encounters in the park (*Cloud Nine*)" (Diamond 99). Josie and Lily, representatives of the deprived class, are in no way better than Joyce or Angie in *Top Girls*, as their final predicament is not only bleak but horrific and shocking. They are advancing towards a poisoned and damaged space caused by war, drought, AIDS, toxic waste, in which 'nature', which has always been a comfort to people as long as they exist is not available any more. Women like the mother-earth, have become spiritually sterile, no longer endowed with the power of nourishment and nurture, but rather destructive in their attitudes. The play opens with the psycho-neurotic Josie, a mother who has killed her baby instead of caring and looking after it. The Skriker too, assuming the guise of a motherless child, expresses her helplessness and need of affection and care for life-sustenance. Finally, the play ends with the grotesque image of Lily's future generation in hell as she is abruptly snatched away from her "rock a bye baby gone to the treetop"(290) and pushed into the damaged era. Lily's visible maternal body and her experience of pregnancy are symbolically distorted in her ultimate experience in the underworld:

**JOSIE:** What happened to me is like that. As big as that is to you. I promise.

**LILY:** But it happened in no time at all.
JOSIE: Yes. But where I was it was years (277).

Through such cross-talks and overlapping dialogues, Churchill shocks the audience. The picture of damaged motherhood as signified throughout the play brings out the anxieties of women in the 1990s, a phase when women are at greatest risk, while heading for a bleak future of their own making. Failing to connect socially, women remain alienated from each other and absorbed in their own world of self-interest and material gain.

II

TS, like Traps and Icecream, is an exploration of the interfusion of illusion and reality. Churchill’s theatre encodes the postmodern interplay of the imagined and the real through cinematic operations of sign-systems where we encounter demons and mortals coexisting almost casually in the contemporary world. The world of art that Churchill has created shows the exchange of sign-commodities in a simulated domain. In a sense, TS traces the history of women in relation to the social and political sphere, focusing on the equivocal nature of ‘reality’ and the inequalities of social status. Churchill ventures to cross the boundaries of conventional realistic or naturalistic drama, to acquaint the spectators with the image of their lives distorted by rapid commercialization. The illusory, make-believe theatrical setting of the play is not entertaining, but shocking. The prevailing commodification of human lives and the social inequalities are generated not only by gender discriminations, but also from within the world of women themselves. TS offers to question the workings of social codes, rather than merely presenting a series of situations and problems along with simplified solutions which the spectators will appreciate.
As a postmodern play, TS relates closely to Baudrillard’s idea of the ‘disappearance of the real’. Baudrillard is concerned with a postmodern world of simulacra irresistible hyperrealizing itself. “Baudrillard opens the way for the reductionist vision of postmodernity contained in his most recent writings where the real implodes and disappears in the ideology or hyperreality of the image” (Gottdiener 50). Baudrillard developed Roland Barthes’s idea about the higher order sign functions — the ‘myths’. For Baudrillard media has so pervaded our everyday life with the ideological myths of advanced capitalism that reality itself does not exist. We are all trapped in a hyperreality which is defined as a universe of images. According to Baudrillard, we have passed from the real to the hyperreal and our understanding of reality comes from a culture based on images. Like Lyotard, Baudrillard observes that we have entered a new postmodern era of simulations governed by information and signs and a new cybernetic technology. “According to Baudrillard signs no longer correspond to, or mask, their ‘real-life’ referent but replace it in a world of autonomous ‘floating signifiers’; there has been an implosion of image and reality’. This implosion[...], leads ‘into the simulated non-space of hyperreality’. The ‘real’ is now defined in terms of the media in which it moves” (Selden 205). The demarcation between simulation and reality implodes, and along with this collapse, the very experience of the real world disappears. With simulation there are models of a real without origin or reality; a hyperreal. The hyperreal denotes the generation of a world without a real origin.

...the word ‘hyperreal’ is used to signify more real than real, where the real has been produced by the model. Hyperreality is the state where distinctions between objects and their representations are dissolved, and one is left only with simulacra (Barry 26-27).

The ‘real’ becomes hyper (i.e. more) so that there remains no way left to return to the previous state of less real than the hyper. The ‘real’ implies an origin, continuity and rationality. Therefore
its disappearance is a distortion of the world order. Every image operates as a second or higher-order sign function of mythical proportions.

In this context Suzanne Moore has elaborated the concept of ‘hyper-representation’ and anxiety in her commentary on advertising in the British media in the late 1980s. She analyses the postmodern as follows:

a time when signs—both visual and linguistic—are no longer monogamous with what they refer to in the ‘real’ world. They have instead started to copulate madly with each other, producing potential meaning everywhere. In this ‘loss of the real’, these illegitimate meanings are no longer anchored by the morality of one-to-one representation, float off to produce endless simulations, images of images, fakes of fakes—the past is there to be reinvented because surface reveals not depth, just more surface (qtd.in Aston 88).

Thus postmodernism is a culture of hyper-representation where objects lose their authenticity and become indefinitely reproducible and representable as commodities. In “The Murder of the Real”, Baudrillard says that the murder of the real is not symbolic, but an extermination. He further explains it as follows:

Here it is both literal and more metaphorical. “Ex-terminis”: it means that all things (and all beings as well) pass beyond their own end, beyond their own finality, where there is no reality anymore, nor any reason for being, nor any determination. Extermination means that nothing is left, no trace, not even a corpse. The Real has purely and simply disappeared. In our virtual world, the question of the Real, of the referent, of the subject and its object, can no longer be posed. (Baudrillard, *The Vital Illusion* 61-62).
Reality is disappearing not because of its crisis, but of its excess (emphasis mine). It is a paradoxical state of too much reality. We are going beyond the problematic of alienation and lack, not knowing exactly what is taking place. In this puzzling situation, we are never exactly real for one another, not even real to ourselves.

In TS what one can identify is the presence of an anxiety of “the loss of the real, the loss of identity and culture in the artifice of the postmodern western world” (Aston 88). The world of TS is a representation of an unreal realm where magic, fear, violence and damage coexist with a recognizable world of everyday. Such coexistence generates an image of a world without any real origin. Fairy tales have turned nightmarish and the Skriker is more endowed with supernatural powers than an ordinary human being. The grotesque image of the Skriker from hell and her encounter with the earthly women show the fusion of the reality and fantasy. The space and time frame that Churchill exposes is beyond the real, rational world. Churchill breaks the sequential pattern of time, space and reality by juxtaposing the underworld existence with the present life of contemporary women. The presence of the other superhuman or subhuman characters also contributes to the creation of an unreal reality. Trapped by the Skriker, Josie is taken to the underworld and tempted by the evil spirits to the banquet of dirty things, shocking the character as well as the audience. The banquet has been described as follows:

It looks wonderful except that it is all glamour and here and there it’s not working—some of the food is twigs, leaves, beetles, some of the clothes are rags, some of the beautiful people have a claw hand or hideous face. But the first impression is that of a palace. SKRIKER is a fairy queen, dressed grandiosely, with lapses (268-269).

The grand feast appears to be a fantastic venture, but, is frightening as Josie gets imprisoned in the underworld for limitless span of time, while to Lily she never left the room. She thus appears
to be a victim of schizophrenia to her friend, Lily. Ultimately it is Lily who is lured to the underworld. When she returns she is rather shocked by the image of her grotesque granddaughter generations after:

Lily appeared like a ghastly, made their hair stand on endless night, their blood run fast. ‘Am I in fairyland?’ she wondered. ‘No’, said the old crony, ‘this is the real world’ whirl whir wh wh what is this? Lily was solid flash. If she was back on earth where on earth where was the rockabye baby gone the treetop? Lost and gone for everybody was dead years and tears ago, it was another cemetery, a black hole hundred yearns. Grief struck by lightning. And this old dear me was Lily’s granddaughter. What a horror storybook ending (290).

The appearance of Lily instills a sense of horror. The incomplete expression reveals that such a terrible, nightmarish experience is beyond the scope of verbal description. The breaking of syntactical order, repetition of sounds, parts of speech and punctuation, bring in association of strange experiences. It breaks down normal order of response. The reduction of words from ‘whirl’ to ‘wh’ finally leads to the formulation of the shocking question: ‘what is this?’ It reveals a search for one’s entity and reality. Ironically, such a search ends in shock and disillusionment. In this alien world what remains is ‘grief’ and that too is so intolerable as if ‘struck by lightning’. The expression ‘horror storybook ending’ connotes that reality affects us more terribly than a fantastic horror story. One cannot distinguish between the ‘real’ and the ‘unreal’ in the present dystopic world.

In TS, there is not only a blurring of the distinction between reality and representation, but also a detachment from the reality itself. The audience is transported to the domain of hyperreality. There is the construction of a model of a real world without any original
framework. The hyperreal world that Churchill creates in the play is more real than the real, the truer than true. Illusion no longer prevails; it is truth that finds free expression. Baudrillard asserts: “Illusion is no longer possible. It has always braked the real, but now no longer holds; and we are witnesses to the unfurling of the real in a world without illusions.[. . . .] This conjugation has been realized under the sign of the hyperreal, ecstatic form of the real” (Fatal Strategies 71). The characters in the play never know what is exactly taking place. In such a confusing state, they are neither real to others, nor to themselves. The existence of the Skriker in the present world and her encounter with the two women do not appear to be illusory; rather more real and true. This state of hyperreality baffles the audience as they remain wondering about the uncertainty of reality and the disastrous, deceptive world which women are creating for themselves. Like the Theatre of the Absurd, in this play also the audience sees characters and virtual reality in constant flux, devoid of any motivation. Martin Esslin in his The Theatre of the Absurd (1991) says that “Instead of being provided with a solution, the spectator is challenged to formulate the questions that he will have to ask if he wants to approach the meaning of the play” (416). The assembled image offered by the play is of a grim, absurd future awaiting woman which is not quite far off. Fantasy and reality juxtapose providing a glimpse of the frightening and dreadful world that women are about to inherit. Like Angie and Joyce in Top Girls, Josie and Lily are the representatives of the abandoned, schizophrenic and disempowered working-class women who are unconsciously carried off to the horror-stricken hellish future. Churchill’s aim is to question the basic propositions of feminism and womanhood itself by mirroring the truth that women are regressing into a world of global chaos. Both Lily and Josie like Doctor Faustus are tempted by the Mephistophelian Skriker who ultimately drags them to hell. Neither of the two women has the scholarship or ambition like Doctor Faustus, but has to face a more bleak future
from where there is no escape. The representation of these shocking and painful experiences of
women disturbs the audience thoroughly. They in turn are forced to get involved intellectually
and psychologically into the stage performance as such scenes challenge and expose the
conventional depiction of myths and fantasy that end happily with a promising future. By
disrupting the illusion of reality and constructing a hyperreal world, the audience is introduced
into a world more real than the real, where real and unreal merge.

It would be relevant to point out here that the progress of technology (film, TV and
advertising) has led to a loss of the distinction between reality and illusion, surface and depth. In
TS the audience is provided with a glimpse of the postmodern world constituted by a series of
projected images which blurs the difference between the real and the unreal. The Skriker
disguised as an American woman asks Lily to explain the workings of television. Lily in her
broken utterances tries to recapture the images bouncing off the satellite and the formation of
pictures on the television screen:

LILY: catch it and this changes it back into the picture/ and it's not a solid thing, it's all
dots

SKRIKER: But how for fuck's sake?

LILY: and lines if you look, I can't help it. If it's on the other side of the world they
bounce it off a satellite yes I'm explaining satellite which is a thing a thing they put up in
space ok, they it up I'm explaining that too and it's going round like a star, stars don't go
round, like a moon but it looks like a star but moving about you sometimes see it at night,
and it bounces off the satellite/ all right—(255).
The mechanical operation of the television is a sign that disguises the fact that there is no corresponding reality underneath; everything is an image, a hyper-representation and all is surface without depth. Lily's description of the mechanism of television, in a somewhat complex manner, reveals the process of the fusion of the real and the unreal.

In *TS* Churchill introduces the audience to a new postmodern culture dominated by the hyperreal, where all oppositions disappear and dissolve while reappearing in simulated forms. Such culture is a site of a collapse of all boundaries and distinctions between appearance and reality and all other binaries upheld by philosophy and dominant culture. This move towards hyperreality marks an end of all finalities—history, reality, meaning and even the society itself.

III

Caryl Churchill's use of language in *TS* reveals her experimentation with postmodern dramatic techniques. The connotative language which she employs as a sign-system to criticize the social and political status of women shatters the phallogocentric model. Plays like *TS*, *Hot Fudge* and others show that Churchill is moving away from words to focus more on the language of performance. Such a language-structure disrupts the traditional linear progression of the plot thereby revealing the dramatist's affinity with the dramatists of the Absurd. Utilizing an incoherent yet rhythmic language, Churchill's work vehemently challenges and ridicules the stereotype representation of women in theatre.

In the Theatre of the Absurd there is an articulation of man's search for a comprehensive modality in which he can face a universe that has become disjointed, directionless and absurd.
Though apparently unrealistic, this theatre, therefore, offers a truer picture of reality from the perspective of an individual's consciousness. Unlike the conventional theatre, absurd theatre emphasizes poetical elements of verbal expression and the image-based elements of non-verbal expression, thereby presenting in totality a tangible, concrete, poetic image of the reality of man's experience. Such a theatre developed its unique vocabulary to express what language is incapable of putting into words. The dystopic picture of the world of women as portrayed in TS reveals the absurdity of women's existence in a world where there is a devaluation of purpose and ideals. Martin Esslin says that "The Theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition; it merely presents it in being -- that is, in terms of concrete stage images" (25). In TS these stage images constitute a network of powerful sign-systems that disrupt and subvert the orderly domain of patriarchal codes of performance. The deformed appearance of the Skriker, and her linguistically distorted opening monologue which has been often described as 'a massive mouthful of words', semiotically prefigure the nightmarish ending of the play: The Skriker says:

Heard her boast beast a roast beef eater, daughter could spin span spick And spun the lowest form of wheat straw into gold, raw into roar, golden Lion and lyonesse under the sea, dungeonesse under the castle for bad mad sad adders and takers away. Never marry a king size well beloved. Chop chip pan chap finger chirrup chirrup cheer up off with you're making no headway (243).

Such fluidity of language breaks the conventional mode of language structure employed for the representation of women. Moreover, the deformed appearance and damaged language of the Skriker is a schizophrenic breakdown of the normal codes of language revealing the violence of the Skriker and also her desperation and helplessness. She desires to be loved, wanted, cared and
recognized in the human world, while her shapeshifting power makes her invisible and instills a
sense of crudity and horror that alienates all sorts of human relationship. As in Absurd plays, the
language employed by Churchill in this play reveals the "inadequacy of the rational approach by
the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought" (Esslin 24). While referring to
the idiom of Absurd theatre, Esslin points out that there is a tendency towards "a radical
devaluation of language, toward a poetry that is to emerge from the concrete and objectified
images of the stage itself" (26). Such language-pattern leads to "Verbal nonsense" (328) and
"deflation of language" (337). In TS there is also much devaluation of language that eventually
leads to a wide gap between language and reality, resulting in the disappearance of the real itself.
Even the conversation between the two women, Josie and Lily, is disjointed and abrupt. The
women seem to get locked in their own respective worlds of unfulfilment, thereby failing to
communicate with each other meaningfully. Such a language-structure, breaking down the
normal order of sequential language, opens up pluralities of meanings and significances,
constructing a rhythmic verbal language of its own. The disjointed utterances of the characters
symbolize the fragmented and deformed lives ordained for women:

LILY. Josie, listen. I'm going to run away. But I'll write and tell you where

I am, all right? I'm going to London.

JOSIE. I won't hurt your baby.

LILY. Of course not, I don't think that.

JOSIE. If you'd got any sense you would. But you'd be wrong.

Pause
Are you going then?

LILY. No.

Pause (249).

The use of short and brisk monosyllabic words, the special types of talks and cross-talks suggest that communication or connection is quite impossible in the world of gross materialism. Such broken utterances are the outcome of the release of hidden fears and repressed aggressions buried deep in the human unconscious. The audiences are supplied with a series of disjointed signs which they are supposed to organize into a pattern so that the women can have a glimpse of the disintegrated world repressed within their own selves. This postmodern strategy of schizophrenic fragmentation subverts the obsession with an impossible ideal and absolute reality.

Like Pinter, Churchill employs the technical devices of verbal contradiction, disjunction as well as repetition of words and gestures. There remains an underlying rhythm and tone that reflect the thought-processes of the ‘speaking subject’ in the menacing dramatic situation. Churchill’s attitude and stylistic devices reveal a marked change in the modes of dramatic presentation.

As in Vinegar Tom, in TS also Churchill makes use of music and dance to shatter the conventions of dramatic form with the intention of exploring ‘counter-cultural’ feminist style of performance. Music and dance, functioning as myths, offer a critical perspective to the plays. Incorporation of music and dance in drama is a convention. From Sophocles to Brecht, music and dance have gained variable significances. To Aristotle, melody is one of the six vital parts of Tragedy. While defining Tragedy, Aristotle speaks of ‘language with pleasurable accessories’. He further describes it: “Here by ‘language with pleasurable accessories’ I mean that with
rhythm and harmony or song superadded” (Aristotle 35). In classical drama melody was a source of aesthetic pleasure. The choric songs also provided vital information to the audience about the past events, present situation and future predictions. Thus melody was an integral part of the drama that contributed to its theme and aesthetic beauty. But melody, dance or rhythm acquired new significances in postmodern drama. In the plays of Churchill, music and dance, the powerful theatrical devices, challenge the technical conventionality of theatre. These strategies constitute a network of powerful sign-systems that disrupt and subvert the ordered domain of patriarchal codes of performance controlled by the working of ideologies. Churchill makes use of the postmodern aesthetic of plurality and heterogeneity of meanings and significance by the insertion of songs, dance and fantasy. In TS the continuous dance of the Passerby breaks down the boundaries of reality and also the make-believe mythological world of the characters. Moreover, the dance of the Green Lady with a Bogle disrupts the empathic involvement of the audience with the stage performance. The gesture of Yallery Brown playing music, The Man putting cloth and bucket from one place to another, the shouting of a derelict woman-- all contribute to the disruption of the logical flow of the action, thus shattering the veil of logic and reality on the stage. The real and the unreal fuse together and transport the audience to the hyperreal. Such technical strategies encourage a critical response of the spectators and alienate them from being emotionally involved in the stage performance. The conventional familiar objects are turned into signs that are often striking and shocking. This process of defamiliarization through ‘distancing’ creates new meanings by encouraging renewed interpretations and possibilities of social changes. Defamiliarization is most prominent in the linguistic deformation of the Skriker. The incoherent, rhythmic, long monologues of the Skriker break logical order of language. Churchill’s linguistic play has captured ‘the memory’, rather than the visual language of performance5. This
fragmented, illogical structure has often been associated with Joycean narrative, but Churchill herself likened the Skriker’s damaged language to the schizophrenic breakdown of language, the language which the Skriker is not entirely in control of. The distorted and deformed appearance of the Skriker encodes the distorted language she uses. The Skriker says:

Revengeance is gold mine, sweet. Fe fi fo fumbledown cottage pie Crust my heart and hope to die. My mother she killed me and put Me in pies for sale away and home and awayday. Peck out her eyes Have it. I’ll give you three wishy washy. An open grave must be fed up You like dust in the sunlight of heart. Gobble gobble says the turkey turkey key to my heart, gobbledegook de gook is after you. Ready or not here we come quick or dead of night night sleep tightarse.

Such incoherent but rhythmic and fluid language subverts the phallogocentric discourse. The exuberance of the Skriker is a flow of her unconscious drives constituting a rhythmic pattern of its own. This language captures the ‘semiotic’, thereby, moving beyond the organized ‘symbolic’ pattern of language. Harsh, cacophonous and crude expressions like—‘revengeance’, ‘peck out her eyes’, ‘my mother she killed me’, and so on,—not only suggest the barren, painful lives of women, but also reveal the combined violence of colloquial, slang and mutilated words to shock the audience. This language used thus shatters all norms of order and coherence, giving vent to hidden desires. The language signifies the feminine body, the exuberance and genuine emotions, free from all artificial restraints. Churchill is in favour of a woman’s language that challenges their repression in respect of class, gender and sex by voicing their stories of subjugation. Churchill’s theatre is a signifying process which is transgressive, disruptive, poetic and revolutionary.
Julia Kristeva in her *Revolution in Poetic Language* focuses on 'speaking beings'—those who not only use language but are constituted through their use of language framed for them. While taking into account the historical dimension of literary works, Kristeva critically analyses the role of the subject, a heterogenous entity, in the production of language. Kristeva asserts that a speaking subject is an entity split between the conscious and the unconscious, the cultural and the natural, the mind and the body, thus making language plurisignificant and unfixed. Language is discursive, a dynamic signifying process. This signifying process has two modes—the 'semiotic' and the 'symbolic'. She does not deal with the structural approach to semiotics as a common concept of science of signs. She focuses on 'the semiotic' (emphasis mine), a component of the signifying process that operates through language.

Distinguishing between 'semiology' or 'structuralism' on the one hand and 'semiotics' or 'semanalysis' on the other, Kristeva maintains that structuralism, by focusing on the 'thetic' or static phase of language, posits it as a homogeneous structure, whereas semiotics, by studying language as a discourse enunciated by a speaking subject, grasps its fundamentally heterogeneous nature (Moi 24).

Kristeva prefers 'semanalysis' to 'semiotics'. Semanalysis evaluates language as a signifying process and 'symbolic' is the ordered, coherent mode of signification which represents the masculine. It is the language of power, control, propriety, aligned with patriarchal cultural functions that signal the father's name and his prohibitions. It is the language of authority. The child when initiated into the cultural codes of language comes to subjectivity in relation to the symbolic functions of language. The learning of the symbolic order of language compels an automatic submission to patriarchal codes and rejection of the pre-oedipal space of the mother-child bond. On the contrary, 'semiotic' includes the extra-verbal way of expression that
encapsulates the psychosomatic drives and physical energy. The 'semiotic' is associated with the female body—the body of the mother. The free-floating sea of the womb of the mother is the site of the pre-oedipal experiences of the child. This space of mother-child bonding has been called the 'semiotic chora'. The semiotic originates from the pre-oedipal unconscious field; it is instinctual and incoherent. “The semiotic can thus be understood as pre-thetic, preceding the positing of the subject . . . . Though discrete and disposed, the chora cannot be unified by a Meaning, which, by contrast, is initiated by a thesis, constituting . . . a break” (Kristeva, Revolution 36). The discourse which is, disorderly, fluid, expressing the open unrepressed flow of liberating energy constitutes the semiotic. Such a discourse stands outside the convention and threatens the rational order of masculine speech. The semiotic originates in the unconscious as revealed in the incoherent babbles of a baby before getting introduced to the symbolic, linguistic framework. Kristeva states:

Discrete quantities of energy move through the body of the subject who is not yet constituted as such and, in the course of this development, they are arranged according to various constraints imposed on this body—always already involved in a semiotic process—by family and social structures. In this way the drives, which are “energy” charges as well as “psychical” marks, articulate what we call a chora: a nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motality that is full of movement as it is regulated (Revolution 25).

A disorganized, prelinguistic flux of movements, gestures, sounds, and rhythms lay the foundation of semiotic materials which remain active beneath the mature linguistic performance of the adult. The semiotic and the symbolic are inseparable in the signifying process. Kristeva says:
... the two trends just mentioned [semiotic and symbolic] designate two modalities of what is, for us, the same signifying process. We shall call the first "the semiotic" and the second "the symbolic." These two modalities are inseparable within the signifying process that constitutes language, and the dialectic between them determines the type of discourse (narrative, metalanguage, theory, poetry, etc.) involved; in other words, so-called "natural" language allows for different modes of articulation of the semiotic and the symbolic (Revolution 23-24).

Discourse with semiotic dimension is fluid, poetic and also subversive, facilitating a radical social change. "Poetic language" introduces the subversive openness to the semiotic against the closed symbolic order. When the semiotic is released in the symbolic, it results in linguistic play. Jacques Lacan states that conventional language is symbolic and masculine. It represses unconscious drives as it conforms to patriarchal ideologies. Therefore, when a woman speaks, she places herself in the position of a man. To express their repressed selves, women have to speak and write in a different language, free from patriarchal constraints. This subversive language of women provides new ways of interpretation. This results in 'jouissance', an immense pleasure at their ability to rupture the rational order of speech and give voice to their silence. Leon S. Roudiez quoted Kristeva in the introduction to Revolution in Poetic Language: "[...] literary practice is seen as an exploration and discovery of the possibilities of language; as an activity that liberates the subject from a number of linguistic, psychic and social networks; as a dynamism that breaks up the inertia of language habits and grants linguists the unique possibility of studying the becoming of the significations of signs" (2-3). The discovery of new possibilities of language subverts conventional practices, thereby questioning dominant ideologies. The postmodernist theories of Baudrillard also deal with the semiotic/symbolic opposition. To Baudrillard, the symbolic is a sign of transparency, obligation, i.e., presimulacral.
But he dissociates the symbolic from its association with well ordered societies and relates it to the abstract, opaque world of codes. “the orders of simulacra serve as a reminder that the symbolic has passed into the semiotic, thus gaining a kind of fatal independence from the concrete relationship between persons it once, for Baudrillard, so transparently sealed” (Genosko xx). Baudrillard critically interrogates the symbolic order in a world of simulacra. Helene Cixous, while speaking about women’s writing, asserts that women should destroy and break the norms of masculine writing. Women’s imagination is beautiful, so her desires must overflow through her stormy writings. Through the medium of writing the repressions of women can be perpetuated. Women should write as women because writing is the locus of subversive thoughts, suggesting possibilities of change. Cixous in her essay, “The Laugh of Medusa” (1976), asserts:

Write, let no one hold you back, let nothing stop you: not man; not the imbecilic capitalist machinery, in which publishing houses are the crafty, obsequious relayers of imperatives handed down by an economy that works against us and off our backs; and not yourself. Smug-faced readers, managing editors, and big bosses don’t like the true texts of women—female-sexed texts. That kind scares them (281).

Through the medium of writing women will get back their strength, their desires and pleasures, which have been snatched away from them by the society. A woman should break her silence by bursting out in torrent of words.

Caryl Churchill, influenced by Kristeva and Cixous, writes in a language that surpasses the regulations of phallocentric system. The incoherent, overlapping and broken language subverts ‘masculine’ symbolic order and creates new alternatives for women. A closer scrutiny of the Skriker’s language in the play will reveal that the exuberance of the Skriker is a flow of the semiotic or unconscious drives constituting a rhythmic pattern of its own. It disrupts the
closed, rational, phallogocentric order by promoting the fluid, unstable ‘female’ language. The practice of feminine writing cannot be theorized or coded, but its operation can come to stay when it can overcome phallocentric discourse. The Skriker elucidates Lily’s story in such a rhythmic pattern of language:

SKRIKER: So Lily in the pink with a finnyanny border was talking good as gold speaking pound coins round coins pouring roaring more and more, singing thinking counting saying the alphabetter than nothing telling stories more stories boring sore throat saw no end to it fuckit buckets and buckets of bloodmoney is the root of evil eye nose the smell hell the taste waste of money got honey to swallow to please easethe sore throat so could keep on talking taking aching waking all night . . . (253).

The language in which the characters speak is incomprehensible and incoherent. It is poetic and revolutionary as the ‘semiotic’ flux dominates over the symbolic. The unrestricted flow of words, almost like nursery rhymes, is a release of the semiotic into the symbolic order resulting in linguistic play. The uses of compound words connote multiple layers of meanings. The expression ‘bloodmoney’ suggests the evils of capitalism in the contemporary world. The words ‘aching waking all night’ offer a grim picture of the painful lives of women. In spite of their apparent progress their subterranean traumatic experiences, sleeplessness and restlessness are concretized. The uncontrolled torrents of words of the damaged Skriker spring from the unlimited resources of repressed internal desires and drives. The dialogue breaks through the norms of rational speech resulting in heterogeneity of meanings. Even the pattern of verbal language as expressed through the continuous rhythmic monologues of the Skriker, and the discontinuous, broken statements of the two women, Josie and Lily, the pauses, overlapping words—all contribute to Churchill’s theatre semiotics. Functioning as a sign-system, these
technical devices reveal the repression of desires of women and the sense of unfulfilment pervading their lives. Analyzing from the context of the semiotic linguistic play, the literary text of TS can be called a ‘genotext’\(^\text{10}\). Julia Kristeva differentiates between ‘genotext’ and ‘phenotext’ in her book *Revolution in Poetic Language*. The difference between the semiotic and the symbolic reveals the process of the manifestation of semiotic dimension and women discourse in a text:

Designating the genotext in a text requires pointing out the transfers of drive energy that can be detected in phonematic devices (such as the accumulation and repetition of phonemes or rhyme) and melodic devices (such as intonation or rhythm), in the way semantic and categorical fields are set out in syntactic and logical features, or in the economy of mimesis (fantasy, the deferment of denotation, narrative, etc.). The genotext is thus the only transfer of drive energies that organizes a space in which the subject is not yet a split unity that will become blurred, giving rise to the symbolic. Instead, the space it organizes is one in which the subject will be generated as such by a process of facilitations and marks within the constraints of the biological and social structure. (Kristeva, *Revolution* 86).

Thus, the genotext reveals the semiotic drives and energy. The signifying process includes both the genotext and the phenotext. TS reveals the prominence of the genotext as it disrupts the authenticity of symbolic order by exposing the unconscious drives and energy through the use of words, music, dance, an interplay of sounds and pauses, and the use of horror myths. As already mentioned before, the theatre semiotics of Caryl Churchill contributes to the ‘loss of the real’ testifying to the postmodern axiom that the ‘real is the impossible’. It appears that the linguistic pattern attempts to capture the real and the truth, but Churchill deliberately shows that truth and
reality cannot be grasped though it can be approached. The fading of the distinctions between the real and the unreal, truth and fantasy, give rise to another reality that appears to be more real than the real. The words of the Skriker and the glimpse of the shocking future of women fuse together to provide an image of the image of the real world (without original copy) detached from the real world where we inhabit. Churchill’s theatre functions as a ‘signifying process’ which is transgressive, disruptive, poetic and revolutionary. The disruptive aspect of signification opens up enough scope for new interpretations. The style of performance or production of this play challenges the conventional dramatic forms making women conscious of their own material demands which captivate them, leading them finally to the path of gradual degeneration and damage.
Notes


2. Baudrillard’s influential work, Simulations (1981 Trans. 1983) explores the depthless world of unreflecting images where truth is just another illusion. The word ‘simulacra’ means ‘an image, representation or copy.’ We now live in a world in which representations precede, and indeed create, that which they represent. Baudrillard substitutes for representation the notion of simulation.

3. Paul Taylor, a reviewer of The Skriker, has described the linguistic deformation of the Skriker as ‘a massive mouthful of words’ in Independent, 29 January 1994. This expression describes the long monologues of the Skriker characterized by spontaneous, disorderly and broken words generating a rhythmic pattern of sounds.

4. Churchill’s theatrical style has been defined by Gillian Hanna as a ‘counter cultural’, feminist style of performance in Feminism and Theatre, Theatre Papers. 2.8 Dartington, Devon: Dartington College, 1978. The expression refers to the variety of technical devices employed by Churchill to explode the conventional norms of stagecraft. The order and regularity of conventional theatrical forms have been challenged by such subversive technique.

5. Malcolm Rutherford’s review in Weekend Financial Times, January 29-30, 1994 states that Churchill’s linguistic play caught ‘the memory, rather than the visual language of
performance.’ It points out that the play appeals to the intellect of the audience for critical inspection.

6. The *Late Theatre*, BBC2, January 1994 marked Skriker’s fragmented language as Joycean. The expression ‘schizophrenic breakdown of language’ refers to the psychic yearnings and complexities of the Skriker.

7. Julia Kristeva in *Revolution in Poetic Language* explains ‘semiotic’. In the Greek sense ‘semiotic’ means “distinctive mark, trace, index, precursory sign, proof, engraved or written sign, imprint, trace, figuration” (25). The etymological significance is only an archaeological embellishment which is also unconvincing. The two modalities—the *semiotic* and the *symbolic* are inseparable within the signifying process that constitutes language.

8. The term *chora* has been taken by Julia Kristeva from Plato’s *Timaeus*, a term meaning ‘receptacle’. Plato describes it as “an invisible and formless being which receives all things and in some mysterious way partakes of the intelligible, and is most incomprehensible.” To Kristeva *chora* denotes an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases. The “semoite *chora*’ is no more than the place where the subject is both generated and negated, the place where his unity succumbs before the process of charges and stases that produce him” (Kristeva, Revolution 28). The speaking subject is engendered as belonging to both the semiotic *chora* and the symbolic device; this accounts for the split in the speaking subject.

9. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva speaks of ‘poetic language’. In the introduction to this book, Leon S. Roudiez says that “her aim is to investigate the workings of ‘poetic language’ as a *signifying practice*, that is, as a semiotic system generated by a speaking
subject within a social, historical field” (1). This phrase coined by the Russian Formalist, Ossip Brik, who founded the Society for the Study of Poetic Language, stands in opposition to spoken language or language whose basic purpose is communication. Roman Jakobson says “Any attempt to limit the domain of the poetic function to poetry, or to restrict poetry to the poetic function would only amount to an excessive and misleading simplification” (1). To Kristeva, poetic language is neither a deviation from the norm of language nor a sub-code for the linguistic frame. It “stands for the infinite possibilities of language, and all other language acts are merely partial realizations of the possibilities inherent in poetic language” (Kristeva, Revolution 1)

10. Kristeva analyses her notion of ‘genotext’ in Revolution in Poetic Language. The genotext is the potentially disruptive meaning which is not the subtext. Genotext, even though it can be seen in language, it is not a structural linguistic approach. “It is, rather, a process, which tends to articulate structures that are ephemeral (unstable, threatened by drive charges, “quanta” rather than “marks”) and nonsignifying (devices that do not have a double articulation)” (Kristeva, Revolution 86). Thus genotext is related to language’s underlying foundation. The term ‘phenotext’ is used to denote language that serves to communicate, which linguistically can be described in terms of ‘competence’ and ‘performance’. It follows the rules of communication and presupposes a subject of enunciation and an addressee. The signifying process includes both genotext and phenotext.
Works Cited


