Conclusion

A study of semiotics of Churchill’s theatre attempts to focus on her unconventional stagecraft which exposes the ideological codes at work in the production of symbolic meanings on stage and in the society. The semiotics of Churchill’s theatre, including puzzling and contradictory theatrical devices, invites the audience to oppose to the dominant codes of sex and gender in terms of cultural and social signs. She is concerned with the process how the social constructions are naturalized and finally absorbed in the dominant discourse. The theatrical performance unmasks the ideological interpretation of production, reproduction and procreation. The dramatic world of Churchill is topsy-turvy where everything absolute and normative is subverted and mocked. By inverting hierarchies, Churchill’s plays interrogate the constructions of femininity, showing how women are taught, judged, punished and covertly socialized by patriarchal norms. Her plays do not deal with prevalent themes of economic liberty of women; rather they seem to question the kind of liberty that women achieved within the patriarchal domain. Thus, a semiosis of Churchill’s theatre reveals how her innovative dramatic strategies challenge the patriarchal norms of theatre and, at the same time, provide a prismatic view of the dystopic world towards which women are approaching. The semiotics of theatre therefore enables the audience to interpret the stage signs thereby connoting multiple layers of meanings. These theatrical complications in Churchill’s theatre make theatre potentially one of the richest and most rewarding areas in exploring the interplay of society, culture and the individual.

Churchill’s Workshop or Collective Theatre provides women, from all sections of the society, enough scope to speak in their own voice about their repressed desires. She gives much prominence to the interplay among characters, actors and audience. The anti-authoritarian
strategies denaturalize the performance in order to induce alienation-effect. Stylistically complex, the plays engage the audience intellectually, distancing them from the stage performance. “Theatrical action is made explicitly representation rather than identification, and the actor has a double role on stage as both character and actor/demonstrator” (Fortier 31). The actor does not ‘become’ the character, rather ‘demonstrates’ the role which signifies the artificiality associated with the performance. The characters thus become metatheatrical characters and the plays become metaplays by foregrounding the fictional aura associated with the performance. By incorporating non-linear chronology, episodic scenes, historicization, music and dance, cross-casting and multiple casting Churchill disengages the emotional attachment of the audience while exposing the theatrical illusion. The non-linear chronology and episodic scenes, set in different historical periods not only disrupt stage illusion but also represent the collision and interaction of forces in the society itself. The intellectual participation of the audience is required to interpose his judgement. The juxtaposition of different historical periods weaves the past, present and future in a single thread. This process of historicization as in Vinegar Tom, Cloud Nine and Top Girls deconstructs and reconstructs the history of women where they have been silenced and rendered passive. By creating critical distance from the historical events, she points to the relevance of the position of women to the present time. Music and dance are not ‘pleasurable accessories’ in Churchill’s plays, rather they reveal the subtext or signify the hidden meanings within the text. These devices obstruct the spontaneous flow of the plot thereby functioning as disruptive strategies. Loren Kruger while analyzing the significance of the songs in Vinegar Tom says: “The songs, on the other hand, reduce this historical determination and potential for change to the claim that women are always already trapped by patriarchy. What we are left with is the static image of feminine victimization” (55). The device
of cross-casting, a powerful stage sign in *Cloud Nine* and *Vinegar Tom*, reveals that each of the characters has deliberately imposed on them a social role that exploits them and limits the possibility of re-making themselves in their own liberated way. The stage role distorts the gendered reality that imposes a false sense of self. Churchill “remains committed to the search for new representational forms, new strategies for encoding the body, new ways to organize the sex/gender relations we live in” (Silverstein 20). The strategy of multiple-casting in *Top Girls, Cloud nine* and *Vinegar Tom* shatters all notions of fixed identity showing the individual as a congregation of multiple selves. The various signs of performance including costume, gesture, words and expressions acquire the dimension of social ‘gestus’ as these indicate social positions and relationships. “The social gestus does not arise from an identity, a phenomenological closeness to being and doing; it is a role, one we agree or are forced to adopt” (Fortier 30). To Churchill the costume (as in *Top Girls* and *Cloud Nine*) is a social ‘gestus’. It is a socially significant gesture that reveals power relations in the society. Barthes says “The costume is nothing more than the second term (the signifier) of a relation which must constantly link the work’s meaning (the signified) to its ‘exteriority’” (Fortier 30). Thus costume enables the reading of the social role the character performs. By employing such unconventional strategies, Churchill debunks social constructions of gender, race, sex and even age. “The ease with which these actors transform themselves and the degree to which the audience accepts these characters, compellingly illustrates how ultimately artificial such categories are” (Laris 301). The artificiality of the performance invites audience participation.

In traditional theatre the ‘female body’ has always been constructed as an object for masculinist desire. Jill Dolan says, “The female body is not reducible to a sign free of connotation. Women always bear the mark and meaning of their sex, which inscribes them
within a cultural hierarchy" (qtd. in Geis 169). In *Vinegar Tom* Churchill shows the process how the female body has been transformed to a site of exploitation and torture when it poses a threat to patriarchal codes. Moreover, the speaking body on stage in Churchill’s plays distorts such objectification of female bodies as sex objects. Churchill transforms the docile female body to a potential object that can challenge masculine norms. The language of performance follows rhythms and intuitiveness natural to women. The women characters in the Second Act of *Cloud nine*, like Betty, Victoria and Cathy, use language to give voice to their body. They speak in their own rhythm and fluidity. Such language is essentially ‘poetic’ as it reveals the dominance of the ‘semiotic’ over the ‘symbolic’. This contributes to Churchill’s ‘female writing’ that ventures to recapture the repressed erotic desires of the unconscious. Simon Trussler says “… the ‘feminine’ quality of her writing may have simply to do with dialectic replacing conflict, and open-endedness being preferred to climax” (Fitzsimmons 6). On the contrary, the broken, overlapping dialogue signifies the broken lives of women trapped in the materialistic world.

This dissertation also concentrates on Churchill’s startling theatrical techniques which blur the distinction between the real and the unreal. By fusing past and present, fact and fantasy, Churchill transports the audience to the realm of ‘hyperreality’. In *Top Girls*, the real does not efface itself in favour of the imaginary; it effaces itself in favour of the more real than the real. The destructive image of the skriker from hell and her encounter with contemporary helpless women introduce the audience to the hyperreal. The striker myth, absurd language and damaged appearance represent a whole ruined world pervaded by murderous impulses, abandonment and lack of sustenance and succour. “The fact that Churchill repeatedly structures her plays [the four plays discussed here] around women who are victims of violence, perpetrators of it, or both, demonstrates that violence is a central concern of her work” (Evan 268). The plays of Churchill
show different responses to violence. Violence can create a crisis; it can also create the potential for positive change.

This research project has taken up semiotics as a suitable discipline to critically evaluate Churchill’s ability to invent an original theatrical world for women. The dissertation focuses on Churchill’s subversive theatre that enlightens the audience about the world around him, a world which is social and changeable. The plays provide a critique of the world as naturally or ideologically perceived. Churchill’s theatre “does not merely reveal its artifice, it makes that artifice a part of the work that the audience must make-sense of” (Counsell 105). Churchill’s theatrical experiment is still in progress. Such a creative process has built up a potential forum for women where they can encounter their true selves.
Works Cited


