Chapter Two

Vinegar Tom

As stated earlier, Caryl Churchill’s plays offer configurations of women’s struggle for survival. Vinegar Tom (VT) dramatizes one of her special preoccupations, i.e. persecution of women, as here in the form of condemnation to death, not for any act of crime, or of rebellion, but on some baseless allegations which can never be proved. Caryl Churchill’s VT was staged by Monstrous Regiment, a feminist theatre company, on 12 October 1976 at the Humberside Theatre, Hull. The play was directed by Pam Brighton and music by Helen Glavin. The Women's Liberation Movement enabled Churchill to come into contact with Monstrous Regiment. Scum is the first production of this theatre company. Caryl Churchill’s VT is the second production of Monstrous Regiment. The play was performed in London at the ICA Theatre on 14 December, 1976. The play was first published in Theatre Quarterly Publications, London in 1978. Michelene Wandor included VT in Plays by Women: Volume one (1982). This play has been included in Churchill’s Plays:One (1994).

In her play VT, Churchill exposes the ruthless persecution of women, accused of witchcraft in the seventeenth century England. The myth of witchcraft has been devised to mask the underlying power relations through the dominant discourses of religion, sexuality and economy. The concept of the ‘witch’ has been constructed and manipulated by patriarchy to use it as a deadly weapon to ostracize women as the ‘other’ or condemn them as the incarnation of evil. The construction of the ‘witch’ myth is a result of sexual politics operating in the patriarchal society. The malign image of the witch and the process of witch-hunting have been targeted at women to render them passive and powerless. By connecting the politics of sexuality with the
history of witchcraft in the seventeenth century England, Churchill complicates and challenges the traditional representation of historical facts. What Churchill says in the Afterword to VT is indispensably the argument of her feminist theatre:

"I wanted to write a play about witches with no witches in it; a play not about evil, hysteria and possession by the devil but about poverty, humiliation and prejudice, and how the women accused of witchcraft saw themselves" (39).

The women condemned as witches were old, poor and belonged to the marginalized sections of the society. In VT Churchill shows that witchcraft is only a trope to castigate women and assert the superiority of masculine power. ‘Woman’ is a sign constructed by the dominant culture. In the same manner, ‘witchcraft’ is also a sign appropriated by the male-dominated society to subjugate and torture deprived women. In the play VT, Churchill de-constructs these signs to unmask hidden ideologies and re-interpret traditional history. Thematically and technically Churchill breaks and recreates the prevalent sign-systems of the society devised to repress women under the guise of witchcraft. The title, Vinegar Tom refers to a cat-like animal. It was the common belief of the time that witches had certain pets serving as their agents. Shakespeare made use of this belief in his portraits of witches. In Shakespeare’s Macbeth the three witches had their familiars -- Graymalkin (a cat), Paddock, Harpier and hedge-pig. In VT Joan Noakes, a poor woman accused of witchcraft, has a pet, Tom cat, which was believed to be “her familiar sent her by Satan” (Churchill 10). In VT, Margery believed that Tom cat, an agent of Noakes brought about the disaster in their dairy farm. The title of the play, therefore acquires symbolic connotation. It reveals that common, everyday issues were manoeuvred to castigate women as witches.
VT is a play of twenty-one scenes including seven songs. The play is set in a village in England in the seventeenth century, a period when witchcraft and witch-hunts were very common in England. Churchill’s Fen (1983) is also divided into twenty-one short scenes, each of them revealing the enforcement of social norms devised to retain power structures. This play is set in 1970s, a phase when British politics created a depressing situation. Though Fen and VT are set in different historical periods, “each play investigates economic subjugation and female oppression: each shows the impossibility of heterosexual love. . . ; each condemns religion as destructive ideology” (Diamond 92). In the background of Thatcherite economic policies and global capitalism, the fen women working hard in the potato fields represent the image of women as peasant labours. “The ironic juxtaposition of businessmen and laboring women, multinational financing and a cash crop of potatoes, is a gestus for the double alienation of women” (92). These two plays reveal that in spite of economic and social changes, the position of women has remained unchanged from the seventeenth century up to the present times. Women are doubly oppressed—by their class and by their gender. This never-ending cycle of exploitation has been carried forward from one generation to another.

The dramatic action of VT is interrupted by the incorporation of modern songs. The technique of juxtaposing seventeenth century history with contemporary songs has been criticized as problematic and incongruous in terms of dramatic forms. While commenting on the new feminist dimensions in Churchill’s VT, David Zane Mairowitz² says that -- “the playtext is not strong enough to withstand the breaking of its rhythm and antagonism of the musical interludes” (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 33). He further says that the representation of women as an oppressed community has not been elaborated dramatically, rather obstructed by the interruptive songs. Micheline Wandor though appreciates VT as ‘an impressive feminist play’³, is of the view
that the fusion of the different art forms requires critical analysis as it cannot be explained in simplified terms. The Production Note explains the various reactions to the play when first performed:

The play received a very interesting reaction. It gathered a different, perhaps more feminist/women's audience than *Scum*. Some men in particular were upset by it. [...] With this they were definitely placed outside the experience of the female characters. Some people felt accused by the songs, which in their manner of presentation-- as well as in the lyrics and music-- were direct and uncompromising. It wasn't our intention to make people feel accused or blamed in a simplistic way, but neither did we want to let them off the hook, or allow them to distance themselves emotionally from the events of the play because they were distant historically. At the other end of the spectrum we were accused of being heterosexual, some women found the male/female love making of the first scene offensive. This was the company's first taste of critical reaction to our politics from other women, as it was very chastening (*Plays by Women* 42).

In spite of much criticism Churchill ventures to go beyond boundaries and explore those fields normally forbidden to women. What is interesting is that in *VT*, Churchill is intentionally moving away from the traditional norms of stagecraft in order to experiment with the possibilities of feminist style of performance. Churchill further ventures to explore the exploitation and subjugation of women collectively as a different class. In doing so she no longer stages a male/female hero/antihero as the central figure of the dramatic action. In *Owners*, Churchill makes Marion, a strong masculine woman, a central character of the play. But *VT*, being a woman-centered play concentrates on the struggles and protests of the women community. The women characters form a polyphony of voices that subverts the misogynistic attitude of the society. A feminist approach to theatre semiotics critically concentrates on the socio-cultural
codes and its implications associated with 'woman'. 'Woman' has been constructed as a man-made sign for perpetuating patriarchal norms. In Churchill’s theatre women are provided with a potential space where they can express themselves in their own way while subverting the patriarchal appropriation of theatrical norms.

Indeed of writing plays as an individual dramatist, Churchill is more attracted to collaborative enterprise. The new collaborative strategy takes new turn in her later plays with Joint Stock Theatre Company, Second Stride and Out of Joint. She has collaborated with the choreographer Ian Spink for the production of dance-theatre A Mouthful of Birds. Plays like The Hotel and The Skriker are cross-disciplinary works performed in collaboration with different theatre companies. In traditional commercial theatre women played stereotyped role models of mothers, wives, sisters of the major male characters. There has been a tendency to relegate women to secondary levels of importance in commercial theatre. In contrast to commercial theatre, the collective theatre gives women chances to share the responsibility for decisions, to get involved in the entire theatrical process. The collective enterprise is a political process that opposes the dominant ideologies of a capitalist, racist and sexist society. In contrast to the individualism and concentration of money on the authority in commercial theatre, the collective enterprise provides a space for fulfillment of personal needs of the individuals as well as a forum to challenge authorial control in theatre. Churchill’s semiological language of the theatre serves as a sign-system critiquing the social and political status of women, while simultaneously communicating meaning between the stage and the audience. Churchill’s encounter with Monstrous Regiment and other theatre companies expanded her personal thoughts to a vast political and feminist field. She, therefore, felt exhilarated when she came to know about the interest of Monstrous Regiment in staging a play on witchcraft. As she herself says, the two
books—*Witches, Midwives and Nurses* (1973) by Barbara Ehrenrich and Deirdre English; and Alan Macfarlane’s *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (1971) inspired her in writing *VT*. To Churchill, the collaborative enterprise was a new experience. She enthusiastically asserts:

> All this work had been completely solitary – I never discussed my ideas while I was writing or showed anyone anything earlier than a final polished draft. So this was a new way of working, which was one of its attractions. Also a touring company, with a wider audience; also a feminist company – I felt briefly shy and daunted, wondering if I would be acceptable, then immensely happy and stimulated by the discovery of shared ideas and the enormous energy and feeling of possibilities in the still new company. (*Plays by Women* 39).

Their discussion on marginalization of women and the process of exploiting poor women as witches opened up new areas for critical survey. The meetings and rehearsals with the theatre company made playwriting more interesting and innovative. Such a collective enterprise voiced repressed experiences of women in history. While experimenting with theatre, Churchill re-writes history by unveiling the hidden facts behind the mask of witchcraft.

Just as the implications of the term ‘woman’, the word ‘witch’ can also be approached as a sign constructed by patriarchy. The word ‘witch’ seems to denote etymologically ‘one that knows’ (*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*). It is historically both masculine and feminine; indeed the Anglo-Saxon word ‘wicca’, to which the English word is to be traced, is masculine alone. Since the thirteenth century the word ‘witch’ has been used to denote a woman who has formed a compact with the Devil or the evil spirits, by whose aid she is able to cause injury to living beings and to things. The term ‘witchcraft’ means in modern English the arts and practices of such women. The word ‘witch’ occurs twice in King James Version, in *Exodus*
22:18 and in Deuteronomy 18:10. Malleus Maleficarum written in 1486 by two Dominican Inquisitions, Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger is a handbook for procedures and treatment against witches. It is a fascinating study of the authors’ misogyny and sexual frustration. This book became the ‘bible’ of those secular courts which tried witches. The title of this book suggests that the gender of the witches is feminine.

Witch-hunts and persecution of witches increased during the sixteenth-seventeenth century. Scholars and historians have explained the causes for the witches being feminine. Women have been considered to be morally and mentally inferior to men. The female sex was weak towards Satan and vicious towards other human beings. William Perkins observed that “the woman being the weaker sexe, is sooner entangled by the devils illusions with this damnable art, then [sic] the man” (qtd.in Macfarlane168). Again John Stearne observed that women were “commonly impatient, and being displeased more malicious, and so more apt to revenge according to their power and thereby more fit instruments of the Deville” (11). Thus witches were an embodiment of evil and abnormality. They were thought to be in relation with the devil and dark forces. Witches were considered to be females because of the conventional gender roles of nurses, midwives and housekeepers. They took active part in childbirth, collected herbs for cure. In such activities they played subservient roles. They were nurses, lacking the potency of the doctors.

Our subservience is reinforced by our ignorance, and our ignorance is enforced. Nurses are taught not to question, not to challenge. “The doctor knows best”. He is the shaman, in touch with the forbidden, mystically complex world of Science which we have been taught is beyond our grasp. Women health workers are alienated from the scientific
substance of their work, restricted to the “womanly” business of nurturing and housekeeping—a passive, silent majority (Ehrenrich and Deirdre English 3).

They were believed to possess special power to induce love, hatred, infertility or impotency. Witchcraft was considered to be a supernatural act in which women gained power from the devil in order to cause harm or injury to others. The female capacities like childbearing and lactation associate them with changeability and disorder. They constitute uncontrolled dangerous forces of the society. Old-aged and middle-aged widows, poverty-stricken young helpless women were often victimized as witches. Such illiterate, miserable and helpless women who begged from door to door were considered malicious, jealous and revengeful. In the Afterword to VT Churchill says:

I rapidly left aside the interesting theory that witchcraft had existed as a survival of suppressed pre-Christian religions and went instead for a theory that witchcraft existed in the minds of its persecutors, that ‘witches’ were a scapegoat in times of stress like Jews and blacks. I discovered for the first time the extent of Christian teaching against women and saw the connections between medieval attitudes to witches and continuing attitudes to women in general. The women accused of witchcraft were often those on the edges of society, old, poor, single, sexually unconventional; the old herbal medical tradition of the cunning woman was suppressed by the rising professionalism of the male doctor (39).

Women were tortured and persecuted in order to compel them to confess their evil practices. Confession by the accused was an ideology structured to suppress and control women. It forced them to accept the patriarchal verdict and means of social control. Public confession was followed by severe punishment — both physical and mental torture. The ‘evidences’ and ‘confessions’ of the witches were procedures of politicizing gender roles. The ‘evidences’ were
just common facts of everyday life that can never logically justify the possession of dark power by women. Behind the mask of witchcraft remains the fact of torture, exploitation and merciless murdering of innocent miserable women. The accused women were pricked with pins in their organs and made to bleed. They were often burnt alive. Christian theology often propagated the predominance of female witches:

The divine laws of the Ancient Jews, possibly collected by Moses around 1250 BC, contains the rules that witches must be killed (Exodus 22:18), that equally those employing a spirit should be stoned to death (Leviticus 20:27), and that generally diviners and prophets where to be killed (Deuteronomy 13:5). However, we do not know whether or how these laws were enacted (Behringer 47-48).

The Biblical story of the temptation of Eve by the devil laid the foundation of the misogynistic view of witchcraft. Moreover, Malleus Maleficarum and Witches' Hammer encouraged persecution of witches. These books were ratified and followed by Christian theology.

The Christian tradition from the very beginning incorporated the ancient fear of women. For the Greeks, Pandora let evil into the world from her jar. The Fathers of the Church debated whether all sin entered the world through Eve or whether the demons originally fell because they lusted after the daughters of men. Janua diaboli – “the gate by which the Devil enters” – was a patristic epithet for woman. The fear of women in Christianity was heightened by the suspicious attitude that most of the Fathers took toward sexual relationships: virginity was the most desirable state, and woman was the temptress turning man away from perfection. Woman was more carnal, more concerned with material things; her lust and her greed turned man’s eyes from the path to heaven (Russell 283).
Social politics and religion played a great role in castigating women as ‘evil’. The economic crisis and physical weakness of the underprivileged women made them easy tools in the hands of their social superiors.

Critical books on witchcraft provide new dimensions to the history of witches. Reginald Scot’s *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584) proposed that supernatural power of witches did not exist. Caryl Churchill’s reading of Alan Macfarlane’s *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (1971) provides her enough scope to delve deeper into the real history of witchcraft. Macfarlane concentrates on the persecutions of witches in three villages of Essex County, England between 1560 to 1680. He provides statistical data from ecclesiastical and secular trials of witches concentrating on the issues of gender, age, and social status of the accused. Jeffery Burton Russell’s *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (1972) concentrates on the process how Christianity encouraged witch-hunts. He believes that severity of the witch-hunts was directed to those who tried to resist the authority and power of the church. Therefore, women and Jews were the major targets for the persecution of the witches. In the book *Lewd Women and Wicked Witches: A Study of the Dynamics of Male Domination* (1992), Hester Marianne asserts that the witch-hunts in sixteenth and seventeenth century in England were specifically targeted at women because the male-dominated society in a time of change felt that persecuting woman was the only way to make them passive and submissive. Influenced by the psychoanalyst Melanie Kleen, Deborah Willis in her book *Malevolent Nature* (1995) relates the maternal traits of witches to her malevolent power. Old-aged, post-menopausal women were considered to envy motherhood and childbirth; therefore they became the easy target of witchcraft. Their inability to mother a biological child suffers; as a result she uses her maternal instincts to nurture the devil. Infertility and barrenness also contribute to the accusations of women as witches. Evelyn Heinemann in
Witches: The Psychoanalytical Exploration of the Killing of Women (2000) argues that the brutal persecution of women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries can be analyzed in terms of the unconscious psychology of the persecutors. Freud, interested in the phenomenon of witchcraft and magic, interpreted witch-believes and women’s encounter with devils as forms of neuroses.

From the above survey it can be said that witchcraft was a complex social practice in England during the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries. Various socio-political and psychological causes were responsible for processing the act of victimizing miserable women in the name of witchcraft. Churchill’s VT explores these complex social mechanisms that oppress and subjugate women.

II

Caryl Churchill’s VT, from a socialist-feminist perspective, critically explores the process of persecution of women as a community. The play is set in a small English village in the seventeenth century when witch-hunting was a major social practice. It was a time of social upheavals and class discrimination. Austin E. Quigley says:

The play is ostensibly about seventeenth-century witches, but what lingers in the memory is not the suffering of any particular character or the peculiarity of any specific historical situation. What we remember, instead, is the unsettling contemporary relevance of an image, apparently archaic, that is forcefully and disturbingly reconstituted. No one who has seen the play will ever think about witches or women in quite the same way again (28).
The play is definitely not about witches as Churchill herself asserts, but about the ways how contemporary women play stereotype gender roles in the society.

The action of *VT* begins with the conversation between an unnamed ‘Man’ and his companion Alice. While speaking about their erotic desires and experiences, the man suffers from the fear of being a devil or bewitched by his partner Alice, whom he considers to be a witch. Their boredom with provincial life and involvement in forbidden relationship instills a sense of fear. Alice, who has been hurt by men, desires to escape from the social constraints with her lover, the Man:

ALICE: Will you take me with you, to London, to Scotland? Nothing happens there.

MAN: Take you with me?

ALICE: Please, I’d be no trouble...

MAN: A whore? Take a whore with me?

ALICE: I'm not that

MAN: What are you then? What name would you put to yourself?

You’re not a wife or a widow. You’re not a virgin. Tell me a name what you are (Churchill 1).

The above conversation reveals that the women are compelled by patriarchy to acquire gender roles. Their ‘body’ is exploited for the satisfaction of male desire and abused when deemed
threatening and useless. The female ‘body’ becomes a ‘sign’ controlled and utilized by man for his own pleasures and benefit. The opening scene directly focuses on the insults and tortures imposed upon women being accused of witchcraft. The prevalent social beliefs about witches and the superstitions regarding the tales of witches reveal the ignorance and inhumanity of the society that undertakes repressive measures to control women. The tremendous tortures inflicted on women are graphically sketched by the Man:

MAN: I saw her burnt.

ALICE: Tell then. What did she say?

MAN: She couldn’t speak, I think. They’d been questioning her.

There’s wrenching her head with a cord. She came to the stake in a cart and men lifted her out, and the stake held her up when she was tied. She’d been in the boots you see that break the bones.

ALICE: And wood was put round? And a fire lit just like lighting a fire? Oh, I’d have shrieked, I cry the least thing.

MAN: She did shriek (1).

The violent social action against witchcraft practices is a brutal mechanism for subjugating women. Such violent action has also been devised in times of religious conflicts. The Man says: “One of my family was burnt for a catholic and they all changed to Protestant and one burnt for that too” (1). Society, grounded on ideological structures circulates its power by ostracizing marginalized sections of the society itself. The first scene introduces the basic issue of the play
that gradually unfolds in the following scenes. The farmer Jack and his wife Margery feel that their economic prosperity is at risk because of the influences of their evil neighbours. They accuse the poor women in their neighbourhood, Joan Noakes and her daughter Alice, of witchcraft. Joan Noakes, the poor old lady is believed to be the cause of the death and the disease of the calves of Jack and Margery. When she begs for food, she is turned away and abused by Margery and held responsible for spoiling their butter by casting her evil spell and curses upon their dairy farm.

The continental *Malleus Maleficarum* warned people not to give or lend butter, milk or cheese to a begging witch, and English authorities agreed that witches sometimes worked 'by leaving something of theirs in your House' or 'by getting something of yours into their House.' It was even dangerous to co-operate with them in everyday activities, since they also worked 'ingratefully and by occasion of good turnes.' If they loitered near one's house they should be warned off, since they might be burying their magic under the bedstraw or threshold" (Macfarlane 105).

The superstitious beliefs and suspicions about these miserable women are sufficient enough to condemn them as witches and place them before the trials. Jack, suffering from the fear of castration complex, believes that he is rendered impotent by the dark power of Alice. At the same time he cannot resist the temptation of being attracted towards her. He finds some opportunity to talk to her and gain her consent in satisfying his lust. Alice's body becomes an easy target of the 'male gaze'. Jack dissatisfied with his conjugal life desires to quench his sexual urges by exploiting Alice's body. When denied, he becomes revengeful enough to abuse her as a witch. The poor young girl, Alice suffers greater indignities because she opposes the fulfillment of male desires. She becomes the target of those weak men who claim superiority by crude force.
Being bewitched by Alice, he feels desexed and wants back his organ and potency. The female ‘body’ thus becomes the site of evil and dark forces when she poses a threat to the patriarchal order.

The painful experiences of young women become explicit in the conversation between the two friends -- Susan and Alice. Susan, the married woman, is confined within the role of a mother. She is exhausted by the pressure of child birth and rearing up children. Susan conforms to the role of ‘domestic slavery’. J.S. Mill points out in his *Subjection of Women* (1869)\(^4\) that a woman is a bondservant within the conventions of marriage. Marriage based on sale and enforcement endows power to the husband who controls the life and death of his wife. According to Kate Millett, Mill contends that the wife is “the actual bondservant of her husband: no less so, as far as legal obligations go, than slaves commonly so called. She vows a lifelong obedience to him at the altar, and is held to it all through her life by law” (Millett 73). In *VT*, though Susan is tired of her role, she willingly accepts it as a social convention. Such acting out of ‘gender roles’ is opposed by Betty and Alice. Betty tries to escape from the constraints of marriage. Alice, though a victim of sexual exploitation like Susan, challenges the convention of marriage. She hates her body as it is the site of torture and exploitation; but it is her body that has the power to enslave any man she desires. Breaking the normal codes of marriage and sexuality she protests against assuming the role of a ‘bondservant’. She boldly says to Susan:

    ALICE: I don’t want to be married. Look at you. Who’d want to be you?

    SUSAN: He doesn’t beat me.

    ALICE: He doesn’t beat you.

ALICE: Three babies and what, two, three times miscarried and

wonderful he doesn't beat you (5).

Alice's staunch satiric remark on the subjection of wives in conjugal life makes her an outsider in the society. Ironically enough, it is Susan who believes that as she was a witch, she killed her babies before birth. Thus women themselves willingly and unconsciously accept those norms that in turn oppress them.

The patriarchal social structure upholds its power by crude coercive forces. Betty is tortured brutally to obey the codes of marriage. She is suspected to be influenced by the dark forces and therefore requires proper treatment. The Doctor treats (maltreats) her malady by bleeding her profusely. She screams in pain while the Doctor believes that bleeding will lead to purgation finally making her a submissive wife. The Doctor says: "After bleeding you must be purged. Tonight you shall be blistered. You will soon be well enough to be married" (6). In spite of all protests, she finally has to submit before the discretion of the authority. Being a landowner's daughter, economically well placed, she escapes the persecution of women at the cost of commodifying herself through a marital relationship framed on economic gain.

The play reaches its climax in the trial scenes. The lonely women who deviate from assumed codes of gender roles are the prime targets of such witch trials. Witchcraft prosecutions are normal part of village life, quite common and regular. Women accused of witchcraft are made to undergo certain tests and trials to provide concrete proof of their evil motives and actions. Ironically enough, these tests can never provide any scope for escape or prove them innocent. If the accused woman fails to bleed when pricked then she is a witch. But if she does
not bleed then the witch-hunter has to prick more spots. Again, if she floats on water she is a
witch, but if she fails, she dies at once. Thus no sign can mark her innocence. Thus accusations,
trials and evidence all culminate in the verdict that the witch must die. Considering such social
issues Churchill says:

One of the things that struck me reading the detailed accounts of the witch trials in Essex
(Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England, Macfarlane) was how petty and everyday the
witches' offences were, and how different the atmosphere of actual English witchhunts
and films and fiction, of burnings, hysteria and sexual orgies. (Plays by Women 39).

In VT, Churchill penetrates deeper into the social contexts to unmask hidden ideologies.
Joan Noakes is first brought to the trial. She is severely abused and tortured by Packer and
Goody. She is pricked under her skirt while she screams in pain. Alice, who threatens the
patriarchal social structure, is obviously the prominent target of witch-hunts. Moreover, it is
Susan her friend who accuses her of witchcraft. Susan too is purged off by Goody and Packer.
Ellen, the cunning woman or healer, who earns money moving beyond the economic structure of
the establishment is also brought to trial and hanged. Susan’s belief that she has been a witch
without knowing it, shows the process of internalization of patriarchal social codes of conduct.
Women who believe in the hidden dark forces within them are dangerous not only to themselves
but also to others. After Joan and Ellen are hanged, Susan accepts her faults before Alice:

SUSAN: I was a witch and never knew it. I killed my babies. I never
meant it. I didn’t know I was so wicked. I didn’t know I had that
mark on me. I’m so wicked. Alice, let’s pray to God we won’t be
damned. If we’re hanged, we’re saved, Alice, so we mustn’t be frightened. It’s done to help us. Oh God, I know now I’m loathsome and a sinner and Mr Packer has shown me how bad I am and I repent I never knew that but now I know and please forgive me and don’t make me go to hell and be burnt forever (20).

Susan’s confession of her crime makes her a victim of sexual politics. She submits before the patriarchal laws, willingly enough, to be a woman ‘good’ and ‘pure’. Joan Noakes is forced to confess that she possesses supernatural power which she definitely has none. Such fantastic confessions are signs of the acceptance of society’s verdict and the norms of discipline and punish. Most of the characters confess their crimes by coercion, fear or guilt. As a contrast to Susan, her friend Alice protests against such exploitation. Alice, an outsider of the society represents the economically deprived single-mother group. She is not even allowed to rear up her child without the support of the father. In her trial, Packer reminds her of the social codes and conventions:

PACKER: How could a mother be a filthy witch and put her child in danger?

ALICE: I didn’t.

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

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

PACKER: He should have a father. Who’s his father? Speak up, who’s his father? (17)
The conversation makes it prominent that a woman does not have the right to assert her identity as an individual without being related to any man. "Packer's cross-examination of Alice bears a frightening resemblance to the 1990s crusade against 'lone mothers' and 'home alone' children by right-wing politicians who, for example, have argued that it is a "'good Christian doctrine" to stop single women having children before they... formed stable relationships', or have 'defended the Government's right to speak out against the impact of single parenthood on crime and social breakdown'" (Aston 30). The situation in which a woman is placed in the society has remained unchanged whether it is the seventeenth century Alice or any modern woman. Refusing to accept the role of a witch, Alice's protests castigate her from the male dominated society. She boldly asserts:

ALICE: I'm not a witch. But I wish I was. If I could live I'd be a witch

now after what they've done. I'd make wax men and melt them on a

slow fire. I'd kill their animals and blast their crops and make such

storms, I'd wreck their ships all over the world. I shouldn't have

been frightened of Ellen, I should have learnt. Oh if I could meet the

devil now I'd give him anything if he'd give me power. There's no

way for us except by the devil. If I only did have magic, I'd make

them feel it (20).

Alice's self-assertive, revolting words are responsible for making her a witch. Her desires to be a true witch and to destroy men focus on the cravings of an individual to go beyond the patriarchal
power structures within which women are mercilessly crushed. She desires to possess evil power to combat the torturous patriarchal forces. Unlike other women characters who succumb to patriarchal control, she stands resolute challenging the powerful centre from her peripheral position.

The final scene of the play introduces the two major demonologists of that period, Kramer and Sprenger. They designate themselves as ‘Professors of Theology’, the authors of *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486) and *Witches’ Hammer* (1487). These books propose that witchcraft was the worst of all crimes as it combined heresy, adoration of the devil, theft, murder and sodomy. “Kramer tells us in the *Malleus* that forty-eight women had been burnt as witches in the diocese of Constance, and there is no reason to doubt this number, even more so as he indicates that he himself had searched this diocese more than any other” (Behringer 76). Such a misogynistic attitude is treated comically and satirically in the last scene of the play. Kramer and Sprenger appear like music hall performers having top hat and tails. Kramer says: “All wickedness is but little to the wickedness of a woman’. Ecclesiastics” (21). They state that women are ‘more credulous’, ‘impressionable’ and have ‘slippery tongues’ by which they disclose their evil art. Above all women are more ‘carnal’ than men and therefore an ‘imperfect animal’. They refer to Helen of Troy, whose carnal desires have overthrown empires. Finally they conclude that witchcraft emanates from carnality and women have ‘insatiable’ lust. Sprenger thanks God and says: “And blessed be the Most High, which has so far preserved the male sex from so great a crime” (21). Ironically, the last scene gives a picture of the prejudiced power structure of the society where women are believed to be incarnations of evil forces. The depiction of women characters in the play, at a broader scale, shows the relationship between the ‘image’ of woman in the society and the ‘identity of woman’ as an individual. Through *VT,*
Churchill reconstructs our understanding of the series of images imposed upon women by our culture. Witch is a sign that negates and damages the potentialities of women. Witchcraft is not only a social practice, rather it existed in the minds of the persecutors as well as those who are persecuted. Churchill is not providing any concrete stereotype solution to such social problems; she tries to make us revise our notions about the gender roles we play in our everyday lives.

III

Churchill’s play *VT* makes use of a semiological language of the theatre that challenges the oppression of sex, gender and class. Her refined, duplicitous theatrical language subverts the operation of gender politics through a unique, feminine dramatic structure. The play *VT* is divided into twenty-one interconnected short scenes including seven songs that are highly significant and connotative. These scenes are episodic, portraying the process of exploitation of the poor, miserable women. The episodic scenes very often appear to be disjointed or disconnected with the previous scenes. The scenes are carefully set having the structure of play-within-the-play. The scenes, being episodic, interrupt the spontaneous flow of the plot. Instead of engaging emotional attachment of the audience, Churchill’s play jolts the audience out of their empathy by incorporating disruptive stage devices. The episodic scenes of the play instigate the audience to think more critically, in a detached manner, about the stage performance. Such a disconnected complex structure breaks the illusion of reality, thereby making the audience conscious of the artificiality of the stage performance.

Though the twenty-one scenes are episodic, they are interconnected with each other. The scenes dealing with particular events do not appear to be incoherent. Unlike Brechtian ‘epic
theatre' the scenes do not appear to be loosely linked episodes, set against one another. But, in the later plays of Churchill like Hotel, Blue Heart, This is a chair and other short plays the scenes are disjointed, episodic, taking the shape of a montage. But in VT, Churchill does not follow a linear plot structure. Music and songs, functioning as interruptive devices, isolate each scene. These scenes shatter the illusion of the reality, encouraging an enquiring response from the audience. The audience speculating the situation in the present is able to understand the ways in which gender and class are interrelated in maintaining the power structures of the society.

The entire dramatic action in twenty-one scenes has been disrupted by the intrusion of seven songs. The songs are functional and performed by actors dressed in modern dress and the songs are not intended as 'part of the action'. In the Production Note Churchill mentions that it is essential for the actors to be out of their roles when they sing the songs. The songs take place in the present. Such discrepancy between the seventeenth century setting and the appearance of contemporary modern women shatters the emotional engagement of the audience. The Production Note of Monstrous Regiment says:

Looking back, it's difficult to remember at what point the songs appeared. There may have been one or two lyrics in the first draft--it was certainly always our intention to include as much music as possible in the play. Since the beginning there had been a composer/singer/pianist is the company, Helen Glavin, and Josefina Cupido was just about to join us -- [. . .]. We were determined that ours should be original in style, and should have an intellectual and creative life of its own-- pushing the action along almost as much as the dialogue, not simply existing as a decoration or breathing space in the plot. Accordingly during rehearsals we decided, with Caryl, that the music should be performed in modern dress and provide a contemporary commentary on the action. The
instruments (piano, congas and guitar) and the voices were all acoustic, so Helen was able to compose music that was in keeping with the period yet could strongly embrace twentieth century idioms (*Plays by Women* 41).

The strange style of insertion of the songs goes beyond the traditional use of music in theatre. This is not only a new style of performance, but also a theatre semiotics that serves as a ground for subversive thought, suggesting the very possibilities for intervention and change. The songs, in line with the feminist style of performance, unsettle the linear progression of the action of the play. The songs sung by modern women not only distort the flow of action, but also historicize the events. It maintains the critical distance from the historical facts, thereby calling for comparisons with the present. Moreover, the songs challenge the treatment of women as man-made signs. Thus, music subverts the ideologies working behind the operation of gender politics within the society. Modern songs disengage the emotional involvement of the audience.

The ‘modern dress’ performs a semiotical function by connoting multiple layers of meanings. The ‘dress’ emphasizes the exploitation of women even at the present. Thus, the ‘image’ and ‘identity’ of historical women are superimposed on the women at present times. “Gillian Hanna explained how this ‘style’ was a response to breaking down conventions of dramatic form, stating that ‘we knew that we had to have the music to smash that regular and acceptable theatrical form’, in the interests of exploring what she identified as a ‘counter-cultural’, feminist style of performance” (Aston 27). The ‘modern dress’ draws the attention of the audience to the ‘female body’ which is the site of exploitation as well as disruption. The first song, at the end of Scene Three, ‘Nobody sings’, critically analyses the exploitation of the female body. The physical changes of an old woman make her an outcaste of the patriarchal society. She becomes invisible as her body is no longer capable of satisfying masculine desires. Women are
treated as sex objects for the satisfaction of the ‘male gaze’ when young and attractive. Woman is ‘nobody’ either in her youth or in her old age. Female experiences and desires have been repressed throughout history. The second song ‘Oh Doctor’ in scene six also deals with the theme of gender politics operating in the society. This scene shows Betty diagnosed as ‘hysteric’ is tied to a chair and bled. She is a victim of male clinical treatment, a dominant cultural discourse that (mal) treats women to cure them of their diseases. Betty’s body has to be cured as it revolts against the patriarchal conventions of marriage and domestic slavery. Through proper treatment Betty is compelled to submit before the norms of commercial marriage. The song shows how the female body is dissected, tortured and bled to cure the female malady. The body of the woman with its power for reproduction symbolically poses a threat to the patriarchal order. Men, ignorant about the mysteries of the female body torture and control it. The phallocentric system threatened and subverted by the female body, in turn tries to treat female maladies by wrenching and moulding it in terms of patriarchal conventions. This song sung by a woman, expresses her extreme physical pain. She wants to know the problems with her body and she desires her body back. It reveals a woman’s earnest desire to regain her self identity that has been denied to her. The severe pain imposed upon the female body is expressed by the song:

Who are you giving my womb?

Who are you showing my breath?

Tell me what you whisper to nurse,

Whatever I’ve got, you are making it worse.

I’m wide awake, but I still can’t shout.
Why can’t I see what you’re taking out?

[...] 

I want to see myself.

I want to see inside myself.

[...] 

Give me back my body.

I can see myself (6).

Through the song the dispossessed woman claims to regain her body that has been fragmented and silenced by patriarchy.

The song ‘Something to Burn’ is inserted at the end of Scene Seven. In this scene, Jack and Margery, superstitiously burn an animal to get rid of the evil impact of witchcraft. The song, subversively emphasizes the social castigation of women as the ‘other’. The ritual of burning something to neutralize the evil influence of witchcraft is a sign not only of ignorance but also of a desire to get rid of women. The song focuses on the tortures imposed upon women.

Sometimes it’s witches, or what will you choose?

Sometimes it’s lunatics, shut them away.

It’s blacks and it’s women and often it’s Jews.

We’d all be quite happy if they’d go away.

Find something to burn.
Let it go up in smoke.

Burn your troubles away (7).

The final measure adopted by the patriarchal social structure is to burn women and purge the society of their evil influences. The ‘burning of something’, a ritual, is a device implemented by the society to silence and torture women. The fourth song ‘If Everybody Worked as Hard as Me’ also focuses on the conventions of sexual politics operating in the society. Woman’s identity is always expressed in relation to a man. She can make a happy family if she willingly accepts the gender roles as a daughter, wife and mother. She has to ‘become’ a woman according to the norms of patriarchy. The lines “Oh the country’s what it is because/ the family’s what it is because/ the wife is what she is to her man”, focus on the sex roles ordained for and ratified by the society. The repetition of the words ‘nobody loves’ signifies that a woman who refuses to perform such roles finds no place in the society. The fifth song ‘If You Float’ at the end of Scene Sixteen deals with the prosecution of women captured in the web of gender politics. This song subverts the strategies devised for prosecution of women. One of the conventions of the witch trial was to make a woman float on water. If she floats she is a witch, if she drowns she dies. Thus, such trials were a trope to kill women accused of evil doing. This song like ‘Something to Burn’ focuses on the sign-systems reconstructed and manipulated by the patriarchal system to punish underprivileged women. The song, ‘Lament of the witches’ in Scene Twenty questions the real identity of the witches. Churchill, after unmasking the operation of sexual politics in the society, draws the critical attention of the audience to the true identity of witches. Women accused of witchcraft regard themselves as witches, thereby exploiting their own selves. Through this song, Churchill makes the audience think about the process of being condemned as a witch or an evil woman. The closing song ‘Evil women’ at the end of the final scene is subversive in its
connotation. Women are abused as ‘evil women’ to mask the inefficiency and impotency in man. The song replete with slangy, abusive words directed towards women signifies the hatred and arrogance of the misogynistic society towards women. The evil woman is seen by the man either ‘on the movie screen’ or in their ‘own wet dream’ to fulfil his sexual desires. The body of the woman is the object of exploitation from the past to the present times.

The songs are subversive and satiric in appeal. The use of refrain lines focuses on the recurrent theme of exploitation of the female body and mind. The use of colloquial words creates a sense of contemporaneity, linking the past to the present. Moreover, the songs interrupting the flow of dialogue disengage the emotional response of the actors and the audience to the stage performance. The songs, rhythmic and spontaneous like the feminine language itself are the revelations of the ‘semiotic’ drives of women crushed by the ‘symbolic’ masculine order. It provides women a medium to speak in their own voice free from the ordered sequence of symbolic order. Thus the songs function as powerful theatre semiotics to meet the feminist issues dealt in the play. As in Brechtian epic theatre, Churchill makes use of songs as interruptive devices, providing enough scope to the audience to interpose their critical judgement on the stage presentation. Such technical devices result in creating ‘alienation effects’. The audience is jolted out of his emotional involvement in the performance and further alienated from it. Through such process, the everyday condition appears to be something strange and unnatural rather than inevitable and expected. But Churchill ventures to go beyond Brecht to use her theatre as a space to voice the feminist issues that have been repressed by dominant culture. The actors singing the modern songs do not take part in the action of that scene. Therefore they perform a choric role almost like the Greek tragedies of Sophocles. The songs, often inserted at the end of the scenes, mark the beginning and end of a scene. They inform the audience about the critical issue or
'subtext' that requires proper investigation. Unlike the Greek tragedies, they do not speak about the past or the future. Neither do they comment on the present action. The songs and the modern dress of the actor function as 'signs' that connote multiple layers of meaning for the audience. Apart from breaking stage illusions, the songs leave the audience thoroughly disturbed as they appeal to their intellect. Churchill's experimentation with music and dance acquires new dimension in her *Floorshow* (1977) performed by Monstrous Regiment. This play makes use of cabaret form to deal with the issues of sexual politics.

In order to alienate the audience from the stage performance Churchill has extensively utilized the technique of cross-gender casting and multiple role-playing in her later plays like *Top Girls* and *Cloud Nine*. In *VT* also Churchill employs these innovative techniques to involve the critical attention of the audience. The first production of the play at Humberside Theatre shows triple casting. The roles of the Doctor, the Bellringer and Packer are performed by a single actor. The single triple casting acquires the dimension of a powerful theatre semiotics. The three male characters are the representatives of the patriarchal society. They devise effective measures to conduct surveillance while controlling and punishing the female maladies as diagnosed by them. By making a single actor play three different roles, Churchill is trying to focus on the various agents that perform the single function of upholding patriarchal dominance. These three roles reveal the dominant ideologies that function through coercion and force by circulating its power through different social agencies. The technique of cross-gender casting gains special significance in the last scene, when the two Dominicans, Kramer and Sprenger appear on the stage. Some of the opening rhymes and jokes are presented by Kramer and Sprenger dressed as Edwardian music hall agents wearing top hats and tails. These opening roles are played by women actors. The other parts of this scene are to be played by characters of the same sex. The
entry of Kramer and Sprenger, the two philosophers who framed the bible of witchcraft practices shocks the audience through their casual comments. They are not directly related to stage action; they perform a choric role, though in a more symbolic way. Their misogynistic statements reveal the collective attitude of the society. Being spokesmen of the dominant culture they prove that the process of persecution of women is legitimate and beneficial for the society. Churchill adds a further twist in the presentation of these characters. The two persecuted women who were hanged for witchcraft practices in the previous scenes, Joan and Ellen, reappear on the stage through the roles of Sprenger and Kramer. The women actors playing the roles of Joan and Ellen are made to play the roles of Kramer and Sprenger. The reappearance of the two hanged women is suggestive of the fact that dominant culture cannot eternally silence the opposing voices. The opposing marginalized forces will overthrow the dominant ideologies bringing about the changes in the history. These two women are semiotically ‘resurrected’ after their death in the last scene. On the contrary, the juxtaposition of the roles of exploited women and the roles of the patriarchs makes the play more shocking and startling. The exploiters and exploited, men and women, centre and periphery all merge in the final scene. Such merging signifies the instability of historical process. By employing the innovative technique of cross-casting Churchill makes the audience alert yet critical about the stage performance. Being alienated from the performance, the audience finds the situation unfamiliar and strange. Such technique encourages a socially critical and enquiring response by the process of ‘distancing’ and ‘defamiliarization’. It turns the ordinary, familiar objects into something unfamiliar and extraordinary. Thus Churchill’s theatre, functioning as a powerful sign-system leads to higher level of connotation.

Kramer and Sprenger, the philosophers in the fifteenth century are brought to life on stage in the last scene of the play. In the same way, the women characters like Joan Noakes and
Alice are also drawn from the original lives of women. Macfarlane in his book *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*, while siting examples of Essex trials of witches, mentions Mother Noakes, Alice Noakes and Margery. As mentioned in the pamphlet (Macfarlane mentions the pamphlet as the source) Churchill retains the original names of characters drawn from history, though the events associated with them provide new perspective to the play. Macfarlane mentions the final case that concerned Mother Noakes of Lamborne and her daughter Alice Noakes who was found bewitching Elizabeth Barfott to death. Their motives for the supposed bewitchings were sexual jealousy and rudeness. A young man snatched the gloves of Alice, as a result the mother was angry. At once the unfortunate man was paralysed by the evil influence of the mother. In the pamphlet Margery Stanton of Wimbish was also mentioned. In 1578, she had been found guilty of witchcraft practices at the Quarter Sessions. “Among the misfortunes supposedly inflicted by Margery’s witchcraft were: tormenting a man, killing chickens, causing a woman to swell so that she looked pregnant and nearly burst, making cattle give, ‘gore stynking blood instead of milk, making a child ill […]. Perhaps the most peculiar effect of her wrath occurred after she had been denied yeast” (Macfarlane 83). Churchill relies extensively on the historical documents provided by Macfarlane while adding new dimensions to such documents, thereby retaining her originality. Churchill, with the intention of re-evaluating the history of witches draws evidence from history to unveil what has been repressed by dominant culture.

The play historicizes the notorious practice of witchcraft and witch-hunts and relates it to the oppression of contemporary liberal women. It can be said that “VT reclaim(s) the history play from women’s point of view” (Keyssar 7). The historical incidents presented in the play are unique, associated with particular period. Churchill, as she herself says, has been greatly influenced by Macfarlane. The historical relativity of the incidents gain special significance
when the audience relates the past to the present lives of women. The technique of historicization is a significant theatrical device that instigates the critical attention of the audience thereby creating ‘alienation effects’. Historicization makes the present look strange; suggesting the necessity for social change.

“Historicizing the incidents” may involve re-examining a concrete historical situation and its customary interpretation to see what is missing, or what new insights emerge if hidden aspects are thrown into relief. It may also involve making explicit the relationship between past and present, in order to show that human history is an open horizon, subject to constant change (Reinelt 42).

Historicization therefore defamiliarizes history by providing new interpretations and multiple layers of meanings. The historical events in VT are not a presentation of basic facts of history. Churchill makes the audience understand the hidden meanings behind such facts. The audience should critically investigate the process how the historical events fit within the complex network of ideologies and cultural agenda of that particular time and place. Thus, Churchill does not present bare historical facts, but questions the traditional interpretation of such facts. Thinking in line with the new historicists, Churchill shows that an individual is shaped by the culture and in turn, the individual shapes it.

[...] new historicism might be defined as the history of stories cultures tell themselves about themselves. Or as a corrective to some traditional historical accounts, new historicism might be defined as the history of lies cultures tell themselves. Thus, there is no history, in the traditional sense of term. There are also representations of history (Tyson 288).
There is no unified, monolithic, totalizing explanation of history. The complex networks of socio-cultural dynamics are unstable, overlapping and always in a state of flux. Power is not vested upon a single level of the society, it circulates through various agencies. Patriarchy in order to retain its dominance circulates power through different discourses. Persecution of women as witches is such a discourse that sustains patriarchal control through discipline and punish. Through the institution of ‘marriage’ patriarchy controls female desires. Christianity, the discourse of religion upholds the mechanism of social control. In VT the verdict of Kramer and Sprenger frames the norms of patriarchal society. To them woman is “an imperfect animal” (37) corrupted by the devil. Women are carnal, evil, “Satan’s lady” (38). Even Christianity propagates the notion that woman is the cause of Fall of Man as she can easily be tempted by the devil. In this context, it is worth mentioning, Greenblatt’s proposition:

[Greenblatt] takes as his example the Machiavellian proposition that religion was a kind of false consciousness perpetuated by the rulers to keep the ruled in their place. If authority does indeed depend on such mystifications for its successful operation, then the Machiavellian demystification of such a process is also a subversion of authority (Dollimore, Political Shakespeare 11).

Such discourses show that definitions of ‘crime’, ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ are social constructs by which authority rules and controls. The codes of ‘law’ and ‘normal’, at a particular historical time, have been subsumed by the dominant culture. Such codes facilitate the promotion of power politics of the privileged section of the society. By referring to historical records, Churchill deconstructs the linear progression of history. The historical records are stories or episodes framed by the dominant culture of that time. Churchill foregrounds suppressed histories of marginalized women to interpret the silenced, disturbing facts of culture. The play portrays the
process of legitimation of dominant ideological structures; at the same time shows that power in turn produces its own subversive measures.

In VT Alice, Betty and Mother Noakes are miserable victims of witch-hunts. In turn, they distort and subvert the appropriation of patriarchal norms. Mother Noakes and Betty are compelled to submit before such conventions. But Alice violates the roles assigned to her. In spite of all obligations she finally refuses to accept that she is a witch; rather desires to be one that possesses power enough to dismantle ordered social structure. Such a challenge from the peripheral woman poses a threat to the monolithic power structure of the society. Churchill seems to confirm Dollimore’s concept of “subversion-containment debate” (Political Shakespeare 12). Dollimore speaks about three aspects of historical and cultural process-consolidation, subversion and containment. “The first refers, typically, to the ideological means whereby a dominant order seeks to perpetuate itself; the second to the subversion of that order, the third to the containment of ostensibly subversive pressures” (10). Churchill’s VT implicitly shows these aspects of historical process. The order of patriarchy constructs a ‘witch’, which, along with the passage of time gets disrupted and subverted by opposing forces. The peripheral challenged forces, in time, overpower dominant discourses thereby affirming possibilities of change.

Dollimore reminds us that marginal subjects may and do appropriate dominant discourses, that subversion produced by authority for its own purposes may get out of hand, that the contradictions power relies on may “generate an instability which can be its undoing” (Leinwand 478).

The notions of subversion and containment explain the complex functioning of social process and the possibilities of social change. The real experiences of women, as depicted in the play
constitute a plurality of historical voices that question and destabilize the ruling powers of the society. The merciless act of hanging women, sexual exploitation and torture are the discourses that perpetuate the laws of the patriarchal society. The exploitation of Susan, as naturalized by the conventions of marriage and domesticity connotes deeper meanings. It questions the basic historical facts, instigating the audience to raise further questions and new interpretations from such facts. The play is not a search for historical facts, rather, a search for new meanings hidden in the history of family relationships, sexualities and child-rearing customs. Thus, the private lives of women come into the foreground of historical interpretations, deconstructing the universality of accepted history.

New historicism in the 1970s considers literary text and historical situation in which it is placed, mutually interrelated. Historical conditions are not the context, rather the co-text of the literary text. Literary texts are shaped and they shape the historical contexts. New historicists believe that:

[… ] literary texts are cultural artifacts that can tell us something about the interplay of discourses, the web of social meanings, operating in the time and place in which the text was written. And they can do so because literary text is itself part of the interplay of discourses, a thread in the dynamic web of social meaning (Tyson 291).

Thus literary text and historical contexts create each other. A new historical approach to VT will reveal the ways in which dominant ideologies suppress and silence opposing peripheral voices in the society. The play analyses the historical context that creates ‘witches’ and ‘evil women’. The circulation of powerful historical discourses creates repressive strategies that marginalize women as witches. Beneath the mask of witchcraft and witch-hunts, what remains is the story of
oppression and torture of marginalized women who often become a threat to the patriarchal power. As Janelle Reinelt views,

The historically-received notion of witches’ evil power survives in contemporary mystifications of women as possessing dark, evil, secret power. The vestigial remainder of a false perception of the past, these ideas persist in determining aspects of contemporary ideology. *Vinegar Tom* dramatizes the dialectical relationship between history and consciousness (45).

In *VT* history is the co-text that shapes and is shaped by the literary text. The audience is invited to revise histories produced by dominant discourses, thereby interpreting history itself. The text functions as a historical discourse interacting and coalescing with other historical discourses at a time and place when the play is set. The play provides enough scope to the audience to speculate the ways in which events are interpreted and meanings are generated along with the social changes.

IV

Churchill, as a playwright is concerned not only about providing a potential public sphere to silenced women, but also about encouraging the audience to inspect critically through the process of ‘complex seeing’. By the use of innovative theatrical devices Churchill alienates the audience from the stage performance by interrupting the emotional engagement of the audience. Deconstructing the conventional rules of theatre, Churchill aims at making the sign-systems of theatre strange and critical. She focuses on the role of the audience in the theatre. Their position has to be raised from a passive observer to an active participant so that they can produce new
meanings instead of accepting the conventionality through their mechanized response. R.D Laing observes in *The Politics of Experience*: “If there are no meanings, no values, no source of sustenance or help, then man, as creator, must invent, conjure up meanings and values, sustenance and succor of out of nothing. He is a magician” (qtd in Schlueter). Thus the artist and the audience both are recreating the terms of reality to perceive the world and reconstitute it. By employing interruptive devices like music and song, cross-gender casting, multiple casting and play-within-the-play structure, that the actor is alienated from the role that he is playing. It leaves enough scope for the actor to interpret critically the role he is playing. Such techniques contribute to the ‘poetic language’ of Churchill’s theatre. The ‘poetic language’ of the theatre defamiliarizes accepted conventions thereby challenging the automatization of theatrical art. These ‘foregrounding’ techniques change the habitual response of the audience. The familiar actions are interrupted; it produces the effect of defamiliarization. Churchill fulfills what Shklovsky declares about art in his ‘Art as Technique’:

> The technique of the art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar’, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important (qtd in Selden 42).

The artfulness of theatrical devices produces the effect of defamiliarization. Churchill, by ‘laying bare’ her devices of stagecraft gives enough scope to the actors and audience to create new meanings. It prevents the audience from accepting the world of fiction as the reality. Churchill’s theatrical art is not limited to any external reality but creates an unreal world of its own.
In Churchill’s play illusion and reality cannot be segregated. In VT the characters are constantly reminding the audience about the artificiality of the performance. “They represent to the playwright the effect of dramatic imagination before he has begun to exercise his own; on the other hand, unlike figures in tragedy, they are aware of their own theatricality” (Abel 134-135).

VT can be called a metaplay as the anti-theatrical stage devices reveal the theatricalization of modern life in an ambiguous manner. Metatheatre, as Lionel Abel postulates, is based on two features: ‘the world is a stage’ and ‘life is a dream’. Fantastic elements are necessary for metaplays. VT incorporates fantasy to produce ‘alienation effect’. The actors dressed in modern dress sing the songs at the end of some scenes in the play. The episodic arrangement of the events breaks the convention of well synchronized plot. The episodes become mini plays within the play VT. The play- within-the-play structure gathers intellectual response of the audience. Moreover, the appearance of Kramer and Sprenger as music hall comedians creates an aura of fantasy. In addition to these techniques, the strategies of cross-gender and multiple casting juxtapose illusion and reality. The play creates a fantastic aura that presents the world as a projection of human consciousness. What remains is the reality of the stage which is as real as our dreams. The stage-signs continually disengage the emotional involvement of the audience by exposing the fantasy associated with the performance. These techniques enable the playwright to create her own frame of reality which in turn deconstructs the conventional notions of truth and reality. Louis Montrose points out the remarkable consequence of this metatheatrical device: “If the world is a theatre and the theatre is an image of the world, then by reflecting upon its own artifice, the drama is holding the mirror up to nature” (qtd. in Dollimore, Sexual Dissidence 57).

These innovative theatrical devices, to a certain extent, bring the audience nearer to their real selves, a site of socio-cultural conflicts. Being subversive and disruptive; these stage devices
practiced by Churchill make the play appear ‘strange’ to the audience and they too participate in the strange experience. The audience is inspired to participate in the play intellectually to explore hidden truths and create new meanings.
Notes

1. The Programme note to the production of VT at Questors Theatre, 1987, states that 'vinegar tom' is the name of a cat-like animal depicted on a seventeenth-century engraving along with Matthew Hopkins, the famous witch-hunter. The head resembles a bull's, having horns, it has an elongated body like a greyhound's and the tail is thin and long. Macfarlane in Witchcraft in the Tudor and Stuart England refers to the pamphlet of 1645 and says that the strange familiars of the witches had fanciful names like 'vinegar tom', 'sacke and sugar', 'griezzell greedigutt' and others.


3. Michelene Wandor in Spare Rib, December 1976, makes a positive review of the play as an 'impressive feminist play, and an impressive feminist theatre production.'

4. J.S. Mill's "The Subjection of Women", written in 1861 was published in 1869. This essay was written in collaboration with his stepdaughter Helen Taylor and his wife Harriet Taylor. It is a reasoned and eloquent statement of the actual position of women throughout history as well as an attack on the conditions of legal bondage, debilitating education, and the stifling ethic of 'wifely subjection' within the Victorian period.

5. Macfarlane mentions some pamphlets as the sources of the events described in the Essex trials. "A True and Exact Relation of the Several Information, Examinations, and Confessions of the late witches, arraigned and executed in the county of Essex" (1645); several copies and abstracts are printed in Ewen, II, Page 262-77. The 1566 pamphlet "The Examination and
Confession of Certain Wytches at Chensford in the Countie of Essex before the Queens majesties, Judges, the xxvi day of July Anno 1566.” Another pamphlet mentioned is “A Detection of damnable drifts, practized by three Witches arraigned at Chelmisforde in Essex, at the late Assizes there holden, whiche were executed in Aprill. 1579.”

6. Lionel Abel, while speaking of ‘metatheatre’ says: “It is the necessary form for dramatizing characters who, having full consciousness, cannot but participate in their own dramatization. The famous lines of Jacques, in Shakespeare’s As You Like it -- “All the world’s a stage, / And all the men and women merely players” (55-56) – bring out the philosophy of metatheatre. Pedro Calderon expressed the same notion in his work The Great Stage of the World. Another proposition of Abel is that “the reality of the world is mortally affected, illusion becomes inseparable from reality.” Shakespeare’s The Tempest terminates with the line “We are such stuff as dreams are made on” (4.1.156-157). Calderon’s play Life is a Dream enunciates the same philosophy. Thus Calderon and Shakespeare initiated the fundamental concepts of metatheatre.
Works Cited


