Chapter Four

*Top Girls*

Caryl Churchill’s *Top Girls*, the third play chosen by me in this dissertation highlights the aftermath of the glory of success and freedom achieved by women in the public sphere. Though *Cloud Nine* dramatizes both the ecstasy and frustration of the so-called free women, *Top Girls (TG)* offers glimpses of a frightening, uncertain future of women’s destiny. Hereafter in the fourth chapter, i.e. in the analysis of *The Skriker*, such a dystopic vision of women’s struggle for existence will be discussed in detail. Churchill’s award-winning masterpiece, *Top Girls (TG)*, has been acclaimed by the playwright Mark Ravenhill as ‘the best play of the past 20 years’. It has been listed by the critic of *Guardian*, Michael Billington, in the ten best British plays of the century and rated by the reviewer Benedict Nightingale as the ‘play of the century’\(^1\). The play has been first produced in 1982 in the Royal Court Theatre with a cast of seven women playing the roles of sixteen female characters. The play’s all-female cast deserves special focus as it tries to create a space for women on the commercial stage, a place traditionally assigned to men. In the social scenario of Thatcher’s Britain, Churchill felt the necessity of socialist correction of the mistaken notion that bourgeois individualism and personal achievement are the key tenets of feminism. Thus, *TG* is less concerned with the celebration of successful women, than with the questioning of the kind of success that women achieve in the patriarchal domain. Benedict Nightingale in *New Statesman* says:

> One of the questions Caryl Churchill put to her fellow-feminists in *Top Girls*... was this: What have you, or indeed anyone, to offer the woman who hasn’t the mental wherewithal ever to overtake the men on the promotion ladder, run her own office, jet off to New
York for meetings and California for holidays, and do all the greater and lesser things associated with ‘making it’ in our sabre-toothed society? . . .

It has . . . [an] unusual and arresting point to make: liberation is only a subtler, uglier form of enslavement if women have to maim, mutilate and be-Thatcher themselves in order to achieve it (Fitzsimmons 58).

Churchill's theatre demonstrates an erosion of socialist and humanitarian values as women feel that pursuing materialistic gains and progress in career prospects will finally lead to freedom and power. *TG* questions such issues of bourgeois interpretation of feminism predominant in Thatcherite Britain. Her concern about the hazards of materialistic power of women has been summed up in an interview with Lynne Truss:

> It was also that Thatcher had just become prime minister; and also I had been to America for a student production of *Vinegar Tom* and had been talking to women there who were saying things were going very well: they were getting far more women executives, women vice-presidents and so on. And that was such a different attitude from anything I'd ever met here, where feminism tends to be much more connected with socialism and not so much to do with women succeeding on the sort of capitalist ladder. All of those ideas fed into *Top Girls* (qtd.in Aston 38).

From the sociological point of view, *TG* highlights the contemporary socio-political issues to draw the attention of women to the complexities of feminism. While critically evaluating the conventional images of successful women, Churchill in *TG*, unlike her other major plays “focuses increasingly on the experience of a single individual” (Quigley 41). In conformity with the feminist slogan ‘the personal is political’, Churchill here shows the process how the personal is related to the political power through material success. The women characters in the play
while describing their experiences, subvert the prevalent image of ‘top girls’; their experiences, on the contrary, reveal their exploitation and repression. Individuality, that has to be cherished and protected from acts of repression recorded in history, in turn gets converted from the subject of repression to a new weapon that distorts the lives of underprivileged women.

*TG*, a postmodern play is the product of the ‘female phase’ of women writing, as Elaine Showalter terms it, that emphasizes female psychology and experience. The heroine, Marlene, a ‘superwoman’ in Thatcher’s Britain, embodies “the characteristics of the popular myth of career woman as castrating female and barren mother.” (Marohl 309). The myth is devised to supplant radical bourgeois feminism with socialist feminism, as the audience can decipher the pseudo ‘feminist hero’ practicing the too conventional role in the existing sexual, socio-political set-up. Though modern women take much initiative to be ‘top girls’ in material terms, the play ends in disorder, confusion, barrenness and defeat, thereby attaching an ironic twist to the title. The play acts as a device to shatter the mistaken notion that economic success can only lead to the emancipation of women from the heavy thuds of patriarchy. Churchill describes the genesis of *TG* in an interview:

> I wanted it [Top Girls] to set off, with all those historical women celebrating Marlene’s achievement, to look as if it were going to be a celebration of women achieving things, and then to put the other perspective on it, to show that just to achieve the same things that men had achieved in a capitalist society wouldn’t be a good object. (qtd. in Churchill xxii).

*TG*, a ‘woman centered play’ opens with a surrealistic dinner party hosted by the top girl, Marlene, to celebrate her own success of reaching the top position in the careeristic field. The
guests in the party comprise a large number of suffering women from history and juxtapolate them with the so-called progressive woman, Marlene.

Marlene’s assertion that “We’ve all come to a long way” (Churchill, *Plays One*) seems ironic as we gradually realize that the careeristic triumphs of women are marginal. The Second Act, which shows Marlene interviewing other employees, on the contrary, challenges individual achievements and advancement as the Top Girls Employment Agency symbolizes the economic status of women in the field of employment. The following scene dramatizes Angie, the assumed daughter of Joyce, Marlene’s sister, discussing violence, money and matricide with her friend Kit. The slow-witted Angie decides to visit her successful aunt Marlene in London. After meeting Marlene, Angie falls asleep in Marlene’s office and this incident makes Marlene predict that “She’s not going to make it” (2.2). In the climactic quarrel scene between Marlene and Joyce, the vagueness of Marlene’s economic independence becomes clear. Marlene believes that her own progress is a sign of the collective progress for women. But it is the socialist Joyce who shatters such mistaken ideas. It is Marlene who is detached from the family and remains quite indifferent to the problems that cropped up in the family. She is even reluctant to provide any sort of support to her poor sister who has been obliged to look after Marlene’s illegitimate child, Angie. Marlene’s snobbery and unfulfilment in life get expressed in the conflicting conversation between the two sisters:

MARLENE. America, America, you’re jealous. / I had to get out,

JOYCE. Jealous?

MARLENE. I knew when I was thirteen, out of their house, out of them,

never let that happen to me, / never let him, make my own way, out.
JOYCE. Jealous of what you’ve done, you’re ashamed of me if I came to your office, your smart friends, wouldn’t you, I’m ashamed of you, think of nothing but yourself, you’ve got on, nothing’s changed for most people / has it?

MARLENE. I hate the working class / which is what you are going.

JOYCE: Yes you do.

MARLENE: to go on about now, it doesn’t exist anymore, it means lazy and stupid. / I don’t like the way they talk. I don’t.

JOYCE. Come on, now we are getting it. (3)

Finally, it is Marlene who emerges to be the weaker. She weeps and shouts, pleading for emotional sustenance from her sister. On the contrary, Joyce’s words gain momentum as she points out that in her glamour world there is no place for the underprivileged women like Joyce and Angie. Her assertion prefigures the real failure of the ‘top girl’ Marlene.

MARLENE. If they’re stupid or lazy or frightened, I’m not going to help them get a job, why should I?

JOYCE. What about Angie?

MARLENE. What about Angie?

JOYCE. She’s stupid, lazy and frightened, so what about her?
MARLENE. You run her down too much. She’ll be all right.

JOYCE. I don’t expect so, no. I expect her children will say what a wasted life she had. If she has children. Because nothing’s changed and it won’t with them in.

MARLENE. Them, them. / Us and them?

JOYCE. And you’re one of them.

MARLENE. And, you’re us, wonderful us, and Angie’s us / and Mum and Dad’s us.

JOYCE. Yes, that’s right and you’re them (3).

Though Marlene tries to identify herself with ‘us’, she remains the other—‘them’, the exploiters, the torturers of the weaker women like Joyce and Angie:

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

Great adventures (3).

The economic independence of some specific women does not signify the success and progress of the entire woman sex. In this context Carol Rumens says:

. . . Churchill offers us a Hobbesian version of feminist theory in which men’s achievement depends upon the exploitation on their women, and women’s on their exploitation of other women. The dark and desolate force of this retrospectively lends
the first scene of celebration a considerable pathos; we have to remind ourselves that in
the narrative sequence, the success comes later. Marlene, with all the selfish force
inherent in natural evolution, has survived and prospered (Fitzsimmons 57).

Marlene's apparent progress does not determine the progress of women as a community. The
play has a startling ending that provides a glimpse of the nightmarish world awaiting women.
The play ends with Angie, Marlene's unacknowledged daughter, waking up from her nightmare
and in the dark mistaking unknowingly Marlene (her real mother) as her mother, describes her
dream as 'frightening'. The final word 'frightening' utterly negates the materialistic progress of
modern women. Being a subversive play, *TG* connotes contradictory meanings, multiple
perspectives and varying signification against a feminist social context. In order to subvert the
prevalent feminist issues, Churchill devises stylistic strategies which are counter-discursive and
challenging. While dealing with the issues of gender, class, race, age and sexuality, she specially
highlights an alternative articulation of female subjectivity. Such a subversive play opens up new
ways of social change through politicized action on the part of the intellectual spectator.

The meanings and connotations of a dramatic performance vary from one presentation to
the other. The process of signification should emanate form the total impact of the complex
multidimensional structures of the interwoven and interlinked signifiers. The interacting sign
systems including verbal language and non-verbal gestures, sequential patterns, visual modes
and symbols weave the semiotics of theatre. Martin Esslin says:

The process of communication involved in a dramatic performance thus can be seen as
one of a continuous accumulation of consciously or subliminally perceived signifiers
which are progressively synthesised, filtered, coalesced into more complex structures,
which in turn are distilled into even more condensed, concise and generalized 'gestalts'
out of which the ultimate, over-all ‘meaning’ of the drama will finally emerge. The audience is thus in the presence of a pyramid of meanings. At its base there are all the multifarious individual signs, at its apex a complex but unified impression of ‘what it was all about’ (*Field of Drama* 152-153).

This stage performance constitutes the widening circles of interpretations and thought processes. The multidimensional signification of the drama depends upon the fusion of the interaction between the signs it reveals in itself, and the competence of the audience to decode the subtext in the context of the contemporary social, historical and personal situation in which he locates himself. Thus the process of signification is a social mechanism involving ‘polysemy’ and producing a heteroglossic effect. Churchill’s ‘politics of style’ constitutes a system of semiotics that constitutes a media for social interaction and experience. Reconsidering the basic premises of socio-semiotics, that the domain of meanings are structured by the modulation of knowledge and power, Churchill’s theatre creates new signifieds while deconstructing the traditional notions of Aristotelian model, thereby providing multidimensional perspectives to observe life within a social context and devise necessary changes in the socio-economic scenario.

II

The Aristotelian theories of drama are based on the structural and stylistic unification of the narrative plot where the plot gradually progresses towards the climax finally effecting a resolution through a cathartic effect culminating in ‘calm of mind’, all passion spent. Aristotle defines tragedy as:
the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form, with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions (35).

‘Catharsis’ has been translated as purification, purgation, a clarifying process. The emotions of pity and fear are aroused finally leading to purification. Thus drama has a therapeutic effect by exciting the emotions of the spectator. Such plays lack social interaction and critical involvement of the audience. Having an organic unity these plays appeal to human emotion and psyche. Deviating from the traditional system of fixities in theatre, Churchill’s theatre becomes an arena for social change involving intellectual participation of the audience. She rejects the traditional norms of drama and creates a space for women where the roles that women play are no more controlled or manipulated by men. The women in Churchill’s theatre speak about themselves in the way they desire, thereby suggesting alternative ways to bring about changes in their lives. Thus the plays shatter the ideologies that create gender roles leading to the marginalization of women. Churchill has been greatly influenced by the Brechtian ‘epic theatre’. Although Bertolt Brecht has been considered as the originator of the ‘epic theatre’, the contribution of Erwin Piscator is no less. Undoubtedly Aristotle’s Poetics is one of the greatest influences on the contemporary dramatic theory. Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht have reworked on Aristotelian dramatic aesthetics to formulate the new kind of political theatre which can be designated as ‘epic theatre’. Piscator in The Political Theatre (1929) focuses on the political dimension of theatre. Theatre should engage the spectators politically so that they can learn to recognize their relationships with the society. In this way the stage can be a medium for social and political change. Piscator discards the notion of enjoyment and pleasure associated with Aristotelian
theatre; he is in favour of didacticism and instruction to the audience through stage performance. While giving prominence to audience participation, he encourages political enlightenment and intellectual involvement of the audience. Both Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht are in favour of a politically engaged, revolutionary, socially conscious theatre. Thus, theatre should educate common people, advocating social change. As Feminism is a political issue, Churchill's socialist-feminist perspective can be well represented through the devices of epic theatre, which is invariably a political theatre. The term 'epic theatre' may appear to be contradictory to the Aristotelians as in Poetics Aristotle contrasts between 'epic' and 'tragedy'. Epic poetry being distinct from tragedy has a narrative form; tragedy, on the other hand, cannot exist without the imitation of an action. Epic includes episodes that give it variety and grandeur. Music and dance, the important parts of tragedy are absent in epic as it is a narrative form. Moreover, epic is much longer than tragedy. But, Piscator and Brecht, have combined epic and theatre in order to propose new theories of theatre by challenging Aristotelian conventions. Elin Diamond while relating Feminist theatre with Brechtian theatrical technique says:

A feminist practice that seeks to expose or mock the strictures of gender, to reveal gender-as-appearance, as the effect, not the precondition, of regulatory practices, usually uses some version of the Brechtian A-effect. That is, by alienating (not simply rejecting) iconicity, by foregrounding the exploitation of resemblance, the ideology of gender is exposed and thrown back to the spectator. (46).

This enables the spectator to observe the play critically and see what he cannot see when induced with empathy for the characters. Like Brecht, Churchill was opposed to the bourgeois theatre which Brecht terms as the Gesamtkunstwerk, the totalised or integrated artwork. This term derived from Wagner refers to a theatre where all elements and media work in unison towards a
single expression. The integration of various parts constructs a reality, when reality itself is a mere representation, a social construction. Such a stage performance fails to ensure audience participation. But Brecht demanded a critically detached audience, alert but relaxed, observing the performance as a critical representation of reality. His intention was also to break the identification of the concrete actor with the abstract character that he is playing. Moreover, the emotional involvement of the spectator in the stage performance should be shattered so that the spectators can intellectually react to the stage show, thereby suggesting social change. Such a progress has been termed by Brecht as the ‘alienation effect’ or the *Verfremdungseffekt*. According to Brecht, “A representation that alienates is one which allows to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar; ‘[the] A-effect consists in turning [an] object. . . from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible into something peculiar, striking, and unexpected’” (qtd. in Diamond 45). The primary objective of the Brechtian Epic Theatre was to bring about a socially critical and enquiring response of the spectator through the process of ‘distancing’ or ‘defamiliarization’. Alienation effect enables the spectator to adopt a critical and enquiring attitude while interpreting the play. Brecht makes use of episodic scenes, narrative mode, historicization, gestus and other interruptive stage devices to bring about alienation effect. Brecht’s *Mother Courage and her Children* (1939) makes use of various stage devices in order to alienate the audience from the stage performance. The flow of action is continually disrupted by the intrusion of songs that inform the audience about the events of the play. Moreover, Brecht provides short summaries of the action before each scene. The subtitle of the play, “A Chronicle of the Thirty Years’ War”, inspires the audience to see the play as a historical document. But, Brecht frustrates the expectation of the audience as historical characters do not appear. The heroes of the war like Wallenstein, Tilly and Gustav Adolf never
come on stage, on the contrary, Mother Courage, with her wagon, the visual symbol of her trade, dominates on the stage. Kattrin, Eilif, Swiss Cheese, the chaplain, a clerk, a peasant woman are the characters in the play. The use of short, non-realistic, isolated scenes and the setting denaturalize the performance. The play is set in remote places like Sweden, Poland, Moravia, Bavaria and Italy. Such episodic scenes and isolated events remind the audience about the artificiality of the theatrical performance.

The Brechtian theatre was to present a Marxist analysis of social relations. Marxism proposes the concept of ‘dialectical materialism’ that focuses on economy and social change. It is the economic base that defines the shape of the society, and all its component parts determine history in turn. Brecht’s view of the ‘dialectical theatre’ was grounded on the belief that out of the conflict between the opposing forces in the society, new forces would emerge leading to renewed synthesis and creativity. In his essay “A Short Organum for the Theatre”, paragraph 45, he illustrates his perspective:

In order to unearth society’s laws of motion this method treats social situations as processes, and traces out all their inconsistencies. It regards nothing as existing except in so far as it changes, in other words is in disharmony with itself. This also goes for those human feelings, opinions and attitudes through which at any time the form of men’s life together finds its expression (193).

The presentation of the multidimensional perspectives of society through estrangement and defamiliarization results in ‘dialecticizing of the events’. On the contrary, like Aristotle, Brecht favoured intermingling of music and dialogue. To Brecht, such a technique interrupts the emotional engagement of the audience. Deviating from Piscator, he gives importance to the Aristotelian principle of pleasure of learning in theatre. But, Brecht vehemently attacks the
Aristotelian notion of ‘Catharsis’. The spectators engrossed in the action emotionally get exhausted. Therefore stage illusion has to be disrupted to appeal to the reason of the spectators. They should derive pleasure while intellectually participating in the performance. Brecht believes that theatre has the potential to create a learning experience. Such ideas are reflected in Lehrstücke ⁴, or ‘plays for learning’ written in collaboration with Elisabeth Hauptmann, Kurt Weil, Hans Eisler and Paul Dessau during 1928-1939. Inspired by the Brechtian non-authoritarian theatre, Churchill reworks on the Brechtian techniques to create her own theatrical style. In a letter, 1985, Churchill acknowledges the influence of Brecht in her works:

I don’t know either the plays or the theoretical writings in great detail but I’ve soaked up quite a lot about him [Brecht] over the years. I think for writers, directors and actors working in England in the seventies his ideas have been absorbed into the general pool of shared knowledge and attitudes, so that without constantly thinking of Brecht we nevertheless imagine things in a way we might not have without him (qtd.in Reinelt, After Brecht 86).

Assimilating Brechtian technique to her socialist-feminist stance, Churchill in Top Girls deviates from the traditional concept of well-made play designed with a well-structured plot. She fuses past, present and future to encapsulate the stories of tortured women from pre-historic times to the contemporary Thatcherite England in a continuum. Being influenced by Brecht, Churchill deviates from the Aristotelian concept of ‘tragedy’ and ‘plot’. Aristotle states that “Tragedy [drama] is essentially an imitation not of persons but of action and life, of happiness and misery. All human happiness or misery takes the form of action; the end for which we live is a certain kind of activity, not a quality” (37). Thus, Aristotle emphasizes ‘imitation’ and ‘action’ as necessary requirements for tragedy. While speaking of the six parts of tragedy, he gives ‘plot’
the first place. He defines plot as “a combination of incidents” (38). He gives prominence to the “Unity of a Plot” (41) or action. He means that the incidents should be presented in a linear progression. The plot should have a beginning, a middle and an end. Aristotle further says that: “Of simple Plots and actions the episodic are the worst. I call a plot episodic when there is neither probability nor necessity in the sequence of its episodes” (45). On the contrary, Churchill makes use of episodes to break the illusion of reality. The juxtaposition of the historical characters with the modern women erases the gap between the real and the unreal. The plot of the play does not have a linear progression but proceeds in a narrative mode with episodic scenes. The First Act opens with a dinner party while the following scene presents a totally different episode. This scene depicts the careeristic motives of modern women like Jeanine who have also bartered their female identity for personal achievement being caught in the trap of ideologies. The next scene shifts to the working-class background of Joyce and Angie where we hear the conversation between Angie, Marlene’s unacknowledged daughter and her friend Kit. Scene three again takes us back to the Top Girls Employment Agency where we come across modern successful top girls like Nell and Win. This constant juxtaposition of the office scenes with the working-class socialist background of Joyce and Angie indirectly refers to the fact that collective progression of women is yet hard to achieve. Act Three, the climactic scene takes the spectator forward chronologically. By employing the time-shift technique, the setting of the scene is Joyce’s household one year earlier to the previous episodes. Thus the disjointed, loose episodic structure disrupts the spontaneous flow of the action, emphasizing the possibilities for intervention and change. What Brecht writes in paragraph 67 of *A Short Organum for the Theatre* is relevant here:
The episodes must not succeed one another indistinguishably but must give us a chance to interpose our judgement. . . . The parts of the story have to be carefully set off one against another by giving each its own structure as a play within a play (201).

The episodic scenes are complete in themselves but appear to be disjointed from the previous scenes. The principle of montage operates here by the representation of short contradictory, incoherent episodes, thus signifying the collision and interaction of forces in the society. The events do not maintain the chronological sequence or any sort of Aristotelian unities to create the notion of verisimilitude, rather shift from one social context to another, juxtaposing a scene against one, a moment against another. Thus the episodes are skillfully fused and alienated or rearranged.

The all-female characters in the play emphasize the necessity for the collective action of women to activate the dialectical social change. By creating a domain of women, Churchill asserts the legitimacy of women as the general subject of social change, rather than merely the subjects of historical periods governed by patriarchy. The dinner party in the opening scene hosted by the modern woman Marlene gathers oppressed women characters from history. This scene is amusing and entertaining in effect as the underlying irony gradually unfolds. “The cumulative effect of this scene is to display the individual existential strengths and varieties of female history or mythology, so they are presented as exceptional or extraordinary women, even though not all had social power” (Wandor, Gender 123). These tortured characters interact with Marlene, narrating their stories of repression and subjugation and protest. Thus the play, through flashback technique, transports the audience to different historical periods. Brecht in The Caucasian Chalk Circle (1954) makes use of double flashback. The two stories—one of Grusha, the maid, and the other of the scribe, Azdak— are entirely separate at first. But these two stories
merge in the last scenes. But the main story begins in a narrative mode. Moreover, "the scenes of Grusha's escape, adventures, marriage and rejection by Simon, forming half the play, make a loosely strung narrative in the fashion of "epic" theatre. While there is a certain thread connecting them, however—they do not stand "each for themselves", as Brecht suggested earlier that "epic" scenes should do—the interest is sustained not so much by the thin plot as by the detailed interactions of the characters and by the beauty of the portrayal" (Demetz 152). Moreover, the setting of the play is partially imaginary, supernatural, in a way. It takes place in the Russian province of Georgia, a legendary land. Brecht's use of unconventional theatrical strategies serves the purpose of creating a distance between the audience and the play, so that the audience is constantly reminded of the fictional world of the stage. As in The Caucasian Chalk Circle, in TG also the narration of the women characters in the dinner party, while revealing their stories of torture denaturalizes the stage performance. But Churchill's originality lies in manipulating the narrative mode. The flashback is finely fused with the narration. Their narration is broken, disorderly and interruptive and incomplete. Churchill breaks the magic of the theatre and makes the audience realize the artificiality of the performance. The spectators are jolted from their passivity as they see the fictional aura associated with reality and the strange experience with the past in the present times. The historical characters like the nineteenth century Scottish lady-traveller Isabella Bird, Lady Nijo, the thirteenth century Japanese courtesan-turned-nun, Pope Joan, disguised as a man, the suffering lady in Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales, Patient Griselda, and Dull Gret pictured by Bruegel as storming hell in apron and armour, narrate their tales of torture, endurance and courage. They collectively provide a background for the new woman Marlene. The stories that the historical characters narrate reveal that from time
immemorial women have been expected to fulfil certain ‘sex roles’ either as wife, daughter, mistress or beloved by erasing their individual identity to satisfy men.

Isabella Bird begins her story by portraying how she tried to fulfil all the duties that were assigned to her by her father. Being a clergyman’s daughter, she had to perform certain roles that confined her within the domestic realm. Like ‘an angel in the house’, submissive, and dedicated, she willingly assumed the identities that the male figures -- father and husband -- wanted her to bear. Being totally influenced by them she felt helpless and barren after the death of her husband. Suffering from a sort of identity crisis, she gradually created her own identity as a traveller pursuing a male activity of gathering experience and knowledge from her travels all alone without any supportive tag of patriarchy. She realizes that it is indeed difficult to assert one’s identity as a woman in this male-dominated world. Finally she bursts out: “How can people live in this dim pale island and wear our hideous clothes? I cannot and will not live the life of a lady” (1). In a similar tone Lady Nijo narrates her tale of exploitation and sexual oppression. Being a slave to patriarchal conventions she obeyed her father’s strong order: “Serve His Majesty, be respectful, if you lose his favour enter holy orders” (1). She enjoyed her role of serving patriarchy as long as she was the Emperor’s mistress. In other words, so long as she satisfied the male desire and male gaze by her physical charms and beauty she was favoured. With the loss of physical attractiveness she was thrown off as an unwanted thing devoid of any utility. Thus she had to take refuge in religion in order to survive in the patriarchal world. Like Isabella, she too raised her voice of protest when her sufferings were intolerable. In the party she defiantly says:

“in his rooms, and Lady Mashimizu stood guard with a stick at the door, and when His Majesty came in Genki seized him and I beat him till he cried out and promised he would never order anyone to hit us again. Afterwards there was a terrible fuss. The nobles were horrified. ‘We
wouldn’t even dream of stepping on your Majesty’s shadow.’ And I had hit him with a stick. Yes, I hit him with a stick.” (1).

Such a strong protest satisfied her.

Though Isabella and Nijo belong to different historical backgrounds, their stories like a montage suggest that women at different historical contexts were happy to play certain sex roles as dictated by the whims of patriarchy and were abandoned by them when deemed useless. On the contrary Joan’s story has a different strain. Right from the very beginning of her life she intervened into the activities of the patriarchal domain. She devoted herself to the pursuit of knowledge through religion and God. Rejecting the conventional roles of femininity she desired to achieve knowledge and power by acquiring the position of a Pope. But she finally realized that it was not possible to separate power from the production of truth through knowledge. Power, enjoyed by the dominant section of the society uses knowledge to justify and support the regime that disciplines and controls society by facilitating the functioning of the ideologies. Finally Joan discovered that even Catholicism is governed by male norms where women cannot have any access. She asserts: “Exactly and I shouldn’t have been a woman. Women, children and lunatics can’t be Pope” (1). The higher religious orders are reserved for the powerful section of the society and not for the ‘second sex’. Again, in a later scene Joan reappears in a job-interview as a middle-aged middle-manager, thus suppressing her female identity to compete in a male-dominated world.

Griselda and Dull Gret are figments of male fantasy. Thus Gret represents ‘womanhood’ as designed by patriarchy. ‘Woman’ itself has become a sign of submissiveness, patience, sacrifice, obedience, passivity and endurance. Griselda testifies to this process of ‘becoming a
woman'. Churchill represents Dull Gret as the alter ego of Griselda. It is surprising to note that Dull Gret, the creation of a male artist, voices her rebellion against patriarchy at the end of Act One which gives a new turn to the play. She says:

We’d all had family killed. My big son die on a wheel. Birds eat him. My baby, a soldier run her through with a sword. I’d had enough, I was mad, I hate the bastards. I come out my front that morning and shout till my neighbours come out and I said, ‘Come on, we’re going where the evil come from and pay the bastards out.’ And they all come out as they was / from baking or washing in their (1).

Thus, the experiences of women regarding religion and other social institutions, their notions about female body, pregnancy and childbirth, overlap each other and clash at certain points to reveal the subtext, thereby forming a mosaic of historical juxtapositions. Marlene, having much affinity with the historical women has reached the acme of power as she also had to sacrifice her motherhood and humane values to achieve individual benefits in modern economic framework, thereby conforming to the role assigned to women in the male dominated world. Marlene, like Brecht’s Mother Courage is both the exploiter and the exploited. Mother Courage, the merchant-mother, who has lost her children, is preoccupied with business. “She is rather the human embodiment of a complex social phenomenon. Her main contradiction is to be located between her individual and personal role as mother and her social and public function as tradesman” (Chatterji lxvi). In the same manner, Marlene the ‘top’ mother does not hesitate to sacrifice her motherhood to fulfil her careeristic motives. It is the socio-economic set-up that marginalizes the less privileged women like her sister Joyce and her daughter Angie. Marlene competes in the struggle for power by exploiting her own sister and daughter for the sake of material gains. Thus pursuing male ethos is an equally compromising solution to the problem of subjugation of
women; the resulting consequences of which are equally frightening. The apparent success that women have achieved in this male dominated world is merely an imitation of patriarchal conventions. Dull Gret, Pope Joan, Isabella Bird, Lady Nijo, Patient Griselda share a common bond by echoing their stories of oppression and failure. Marlene also follows the same way as it gets revealed as the play unfolds gradually. These characters, in spite of their similarities are individualized. They inform us about Renaissance art, Catholic heresy, nineteenth century travel account and the feudal system so far as these historical conditions can be linked with contemporary relevance. The characters of the dinner party reveal their individual identities by bearing traces of their original contexts like costume, language and beliefs, which prevent historically different eras from being jumbled up together. Like Pam Gems, Churchill is also interested in dealing with historical women from a feminist perspective to wipe away the myths that surround them, thereby revealing repressed history of women. Pam Gems, in *Queen Christina* (1977) and *Piaf* (1978), deals with historical women to bring out feminist issues on stage. Women share a common bond in their struggle to live in a man-made world. While prefiguring the struggle of a woman-monarch, the Swedish Queen Christina, Pam Gems shows how women are caught in the complex network of masculine power and the disempowered female body. The play shows "the manly qualities of a king, and the fecundity of a woman" (Gems 1.5). The historical women characters of Churchill and Gems show the insecure lives of women in a patriarchal world where women are acknowledged only by their female body -- the site of exploitation and torture. Thus historicity alienates the audience from the actor. The role the actor is playing is in contrast to his/her own present time. As Elin Diamond observes: "The historical subject plays an actor presumed to have superior knowledge in relation to an ignorant character from the past, but the subject herself remains as divided and uncertain as the spectators"
to whom the play is addressed. This historical subject disappears neither into a representation of the character nor into a representation of the actor; each remains processual, historical, incomplete" (50-51). Unlike her other plays like Cloud Nine, Serious Money, Light Shining in Buckinghamshire, the present play does not overlap two historical eras, rather it blurs the contexts of historical accuracy. Churchill's view of history is related to the notion of discontinuity. She blends different historical figures to show that women are the incarnation of archetypal suffering. She historicizes the opening scene to enable the spectator to observe contemporary situation at a distance, historically. Dealing with historical facts does not result in historicization. Brecht asserts in paragraph 36 of A Short Organum for the Theatre:

We must drop our habit of taking the different social structures of past periods, then stripping them of everything that makes them different; so that they all look more or less like our own. . . . Instead we must leave them their distinguishing marks and keep their impermanence always before our eyes, so that our own period can be seen to be impermanent too (190).

Thus Churchill presents a reflection of the world, in which the audience confronts something defamiliarized and is made to study what he sees. Such a technique of historicization constitutes her theatre semiotics that aims at placing the audience in such a way so as to make them 'see' contemporary experience from a vantage point. Thus, historicization is the process of making the present look strange thereby suggesting the need for social change. Following the Marxist-Brechtian legacy, Churchill is in favour of a revolutionary theatre which will motivate the social consciousness of the audience and encourage the transformation of the particular historical era of the stage action to a new set-up with new connotations. Brecht writes,
Historical incidents are unique, transitory incidents associated with particular periods. The conduct of persons involved in them is not fixed and “universally human”; it includes elements that have been or may be overtaken by the course of history, and is subject to criticism from the immediately following period’s point of view (Keyssar 42-43).

Thus the process of historicization opens up new histories and interrogates the prevalent conventions. In relation to gender issues and Feminist Theatre, historicization demystifies the process of presentation of women as signs of pleasure satisfying the male gaze and ideologies that govern the social institutions.

Apart from historicizing the events, Churchill employs devices of discontinuity and incoherence to break the illusion of reality. Brechtian theatre semiotics serves as a paradigm for challenging or disposing the conventional strategies of representation. In Brecht’s A-effect the ongoing refusal to permit audience empathy or the concomitant distinctions between actor / character and story / history-- produces a constructive disengagement of the audience and actors as they read the speaking body and their signifiers. What is remarkable in Churchill’s theatre is that the actors playing the roles of the historical figures in the first Act appear on stage in the following Act as Marlene’s clients, co-workers, sister and daughter. Such a theatrical strategy results in the alienation effect. The actors do not lose themselves in the roles they play. The difference between the face and the mask is made prominent by multiple casting. In Brecht’s *Galileo* (1943), composed of fifteen scenes, the actor Charles Laughton ‘demonstrated’ the character of the scientist, but he did not become the character that he was playing. Brecht’s Galileo is an efficient scientist who enjoys eating. For him “the quest for knowledge and insight is pleasurable for the senses. This alone presents Brecht’s theory of the didactic and at the same
time culinary theater in a nutshell" (Bloom 62). By such strategies Brecht alienates not only the audience from the stage but also the actors from the roles they are playing. Churchill’s theatre uses the strategy of doubling and tripling of roles to alienate the audience from the reality of the stage and engage them critically in the stage performance. Moreover, the actors also reveal the fictionality associated with the stage roles. In TG, the actor playing the role of Isabella also plays the role of Joyce and Mrs. Kidd, a modern counterpart of the historical character. This effect gains special significance in the scene when Marlene encounters Mrs. Kidd in the office. The dramatic impact of this technique has been summed up by Oskar Eustis:

You must feel that Marlene is defending herself against this awful, old-fashioned, nagging, sick woman who is trying to get her to give up her job; that this awful woman represents everything that is wrong with our sexist society, and that Marlene is standing up to her and defending her rights as a woman. The audience at this point should be cheering Marlene on. The moment when Marlene says, ‘Will you please piss off!’ is the climax of the scene and we-- like Angie, her daughter—are supposed to be completely with Marlene. Then Mrs. Kidd collapses emotionally, and she is absolutely destroyed by what Marlene just said to her. That moment is the first hint the Marlene is not a simple hero. She sacrificed something at that moment. She hurts another human being and enjoyed it (11).

Marlene’s material gain for herself reinforces her vacuity and unfulfilment. Unlike Isabella who became an independent traveller, after much torture and oppression, Joyce failed to assert her identity and be a so-called top girl. On the contrary, Joyce sacrificed herself and her motherhood to look after Angie, Marlene’s unwanted child, enabling Marlene to become a superwoman in the field of professions. Again the roles of Nijo and Win are played by the same actor in order to
judge women from the historical past to the present context. What is most striking is the fact the actor playing the role of Dull Gret is none other than the actor playing Angie, the weak helpless daughter of the top girl Marlene. What Angie wants in order to come out of her bleak frightening future is the rebellious spirit of the historical figure Dull Gret storming in hell. Contrary to all these double roles, the character of Marlene, a lady who has constructed herself in terms of masculine power is fixed and performed by a single actor to reinforce her inherent maleness in subduing her weaker daughter Angie. What she does in the name of economic liberation is nothing but a servile imitation of patriarchal convention that results in the repression of her own sex. Churchill in an interview with Linda Fitzsimmons says: “Another advantage of doubling is that you can have very good actors in even the smallest parts. And another effect of it is that the audience can enjoy the medium and appreciate the theatricality rather than overidentifying with the characters” (Fitzsimmons 61). Thus multiple casting shocks the audience by juxtaposing historical women and modern progressive ladies. Such a technique represents the oppression of women as a community.

III

While discussing semiotics in Churchill’s theatre it is vital to explore the signs of performance which are capable of indicating social positions and relationships. With the intention of deconstructing prevalent conventions regarding gender, Churchill employs the strategy of social ‘gest’, thereby alluding to the complex network of sign-system. While discussing epic theatre, Brecht uses the term ‘gestus’ which can be described as the fusion of gesture and gist. By ‘gesture’ the actors’ action and body language are taken into account while
the term ‘gist’ encodes the character’s social position and relationship. The sequences of gests that constitute a dramatic performance are signs that signify the social forces that influence the role which the actor plays and his individual position. By the fusion of fact and fiction it opens up new areas which are to be explored as the subtext. In his essay ‘On Brecht’s Notion of Gestus’, Patrice Pavis develops the point:

In a dramatic form where the text is staged, the actor’s gestures often only illustrate or punctuate the spoken word by creating the illusion that it is a perfectly integrated part of the enunciator, thus of his gestural universe. Gestus, on the contrary, approaches the text / gesture ensemble so as not to eliminate either of the two terms of the dichotomy. . . . So instead of fusing logos and gestuality in an illusion of reality, Gestus radically cleaves the performance into two blocks: the shown (the said) and the showing (the saying). . . . Gestus thus displaces the dialectic between ideas and actions: the dialectic no longer operates within the system of these ideas and actions, but at the point of intersection of the enunciating gesture and the enunciated discourse (298).

Thus gestus breaks the common logic and the interpretation of all stage signs and enables the audience to derive meaning from within the locus in order to realize what the text is hiding from itself.

What Brecht calls ‘gestus’ has been defined by Roland Barthes as ‘the external material expressions of the social conflicts to which it bears witness’. In Mother Courage and her Children, Brecht makes use of ‘gestus’. The gesture of mute Kattrin beating the drum in scene eleven gains special significance as ‘gestus’. The mute Kattrin becomes articulate suddenly. Her courageous action shows her innate goodness that propels her to become the spiritual mother, the saviour of the poor victims of war. Churchill makes use of the gestus by linking it to the signs
of social identity and individual attitude. Thus, signs originate from the interaction between the character’s inner self and his surrounding world out of which his social role is determined. In Top Girls, costumes acquire the dimension of a social gest. In the opening scene of the play the five historical figures belonging to different historical eras appear on stage with costumes which mark their typical cultural backgrounds. Gestic costume is not an icon but an index as it aims at pointing to the reality rather than producing an illusion of it. In TG the gestic costume does not emanate from an identity; it is a social role which the subject agrees to bear willingly or forcefully. Thus the use of costume alienates the audience from the accepted social meanings. The costumes of the historical characters act as a type of signifier that relates the characters individually to the superwoman Marlene dressed in modern formal dress. Pope Joan, a lady dressed in the costume of a Pope, a position assigned only to men of higher order of Catholicism perhaps raises the question why women can’t be Pope? Again Joan reappears in a job interview dressed as a middle-aged man. Dress often functions as an ideology that gives prominence to gender discriminations. Thus it is not the real self that dress connotes but endows a role on the bearer. Thus, the subjugated and peripheral position of women is marked by her costume. This code prevents her from entering into the spheres of patriarchy. Through the costume “each points to the elaborate historical text that she embodies—Nijo in geisha silk, Joan in regal papal robes—but their fragmented speeches—the effect of the words of one being spoken through and over the words of another—refer to need, violence, loss, and pain, to a body unable to signify within those texts” (Diamond 89). ‘Dress’ acquires the momentum of a gestus when Marlene presents a dress to her acknowledged daughter Angie. This dress does not fit Angie anymore. It acts as a signifier that signifies that no communication or fruitful relationship can ever be possible between the materialistic world of Marlene and the socialistic world of Joyce. The result
is that Angie becomes the victim and reaches nowhere, as she is trapped in the gyres of her mother’s (Marlene’s) selfishness and neglect.

In the dinner party the characters discuss about dress which marks their contradictions as they belong to different cultural and historical backgrounds, and at the same time binds them together in a common bond:

JOAN: I dressed as a boy when I left home.

NIJO: green jacket. Lady Bitto had a five-layered gown in shades of green and purple.

ISABELLA: You dressed as a boy?

MARLENE: of course, / for safety.

JOAN: It was easy, I was only twelve. Also, women weren’t / allowed in

the library. We wanted to study in Athens.

MARLENE: You ran away alone?

JOAN: No, not alone, I went with my friend. / He was sixteen

NIJO: Ah, an elopement.

JOAN: but I thought I knew more science than he did and almost as

much philosophy.

ISABELLA: Well I always travelled as a lady and I repudiated strongly
any suggestion in the press that I was other than feminine.

MARLENE: I don’t wear trousers in the office. / I could but I don’t (1).

In the above conversation it is quite clear that Joan had to turn to transvestism in order to gather knowledge. Women were debarred from libraries and education, as education was accessible to men at that historical context. To Nijo transvestism is just a romantic fantasy. On the contrary Isabella and Marlene connect transvestism to their own historical contexts, thus failing to participate in understanding the significance of Joan’s action. Women themselves fail to empathize with other miserable women as they seem to be more preoccupied with their own problems.

Another powerful gestus in the play is the ‘nightmare’ of Angie which she describes as ‘frightening’ to her aunt Marlene, mistaking her (correctly) as her mother Joyce. The question which keeps harping on the audience is that which is the nightmare and which is the reality? What is the value of liberation and success and feminism if the futures of women remain bleak and uncertain? Is feminism a failure? The frightening future towards which the weaker women are heading forward is indeed not far away. Thus “the social gestus is powerful not only because it expose the internalization of ideology but also because of its power to demonstrate, or make signs, that call attention to the ‘theatre’ of everyday life, the spectatorship to which we are all condemned in the public area” (Reinelt, After Brecht 92).

By the employment of social ‘gestus’, a stage performance shatters illusions and dismantles all sort of authorial control. In Feminist theatre the ‘female body’ gains special significance. Apart from language, the non-verbal language which the body of the performer communicates constitutes a sign system. It is quite evident from the first Act that women become
the site of exploitation because of their body. Alice in *Vinegar Tom* says that she hates her body because it is the site of torture and exploitation.

But the body is also directly involved in the political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs (Foucault 92).

The body transforms into a sign when its physical features which are apparent can be erased out, when the traditional conventions associated with the female body can be made invisible. This alienates not only the audience from the stage performance but also the actors from the roles they are playing. This also deconstructs the prevalent man made images of women. In order to produce such an effect, Churchill uses the technique of transvestitism or cross-dressing. Joan’s costume hints at the ideological construction of religion and education. On the other hand, Nijo’s feminine dress (gown) alludes to her sexual exploitation. Getting drunk, Pope Joan’s action of vomiting signifies the female body’s revulsion at the misogynistic attitude of the social institutions. Thus the female body is the site of exploitation, struggle and protest.

While reviving her theatre semiotics, Churchill makes use of the stage as the arena for continuous recreation of meaning. Verbal language, its sequence and modulation constitute the basic element of her theatre. The dialogues do not follow a set pattern or well organized discourse, rather appear to be discontinuous and disruptive. “It is from the dialectical interplay between the situation as it has developed from the chain of previous situations, on the one hand, and the words that are spoken, on the other, that the underlying unspoken thoughts and emotions of the characters-- the subtext-- ultimately emerge for the attentive and perceptive spectator who has often instinctively mastered the art of decoding such a subtle interplay of signs” (Esslin,
Field of Drama 86). Such a performance, like TG opens up enough scope for the audience to interpret the meaning of the words. In Churchill’s theatre, the appearance, words, gestures, ideas and attitudes of the actor constitute the language of theatre. The play under discussion employs a complex mixture of styles, temporal dislocation and overlapping speeches or fugue breaking the fixities of authorial control. It creates polyphony of voices where the women characters speak and interact in a way they feel, rather that following the dictates of the social convention. Acquiring the propensity of a basic theatrical sign, the language of the play is indeterminate and non-authoritarian demanding active participation on the part of the audience to decipher the signifieds.

In TG the characters speak through the speeches of the others forming a sort of incoherent and complex mode of conversation. The characters appear to be imprisoned within the cell of their individual experiences from where release and free communication appear to be difficult. The following conversation will clarify the complex mode of overlapping dialogues:

NIJO. Ah, you like the poetry. I come of a line of eight generations of poets. Father had a poem / in the anthology.

ISABELLA. My father taught me Latin although I was a girl. / But

MARLENE. They didn’t have Latin at my school.

ISABELLA. really I was more suited to manual work. Cooking, washing, mending, riding horses. / Better than reading books.

NIJO. Oh But I’m sure you’re very clever.
ISABELLA.  *eh Gret?* A rough life in open air.

NIJO.  I can’t say I enjoyed my rough life. What I enjoyed most was

being the Emperor’s favourite / and wearing then silk. (1)

The characters talk and cross-talk to narrate their stories of oppression and subjugation. These short, sharp cross-talks resemble the language pattern of the absurd plays. Like Pinter, Churchill is also trying to show the absurdity of existence on the part of women. All their material gains finally lead to nothing but damage and violence to the more helpless lot. While dealing with language Pinter tried to transcribe everyday conversation in all its repetitiveness, incoherence and lack of logic or grammar following a ‘line of associative thinking’. In an interview with Tynan, Pinter says: “instead of any inability to communicate there is a deliberate evasion of communication. Communication itself between people is so frightening that rather than do that there in continual cross-talk, a continual talking about other things, rather than what is at the root of their relationship” (qtd.in Esslin, *Absurd* 244). Thus disjointed dialogues focus on the tragic predicament of the life of women both ancient and modern. The existential crisis and terrible angst of women get well reflected in their overlapping dialogues. In *TG* the speech of one character is obstructed and continued by another though in a different context:

NIJO. Yes, but I was very unhappy. / It hurt to remember

MARLENE. And the wine list.

NIJO.  the past. I think that was repentence.

MARLENE. Well I wonder.

NIJO.  I might have just been homesick.
MARLENE. Or angry.

NIJO. Not angry, no, / why angry?

GRET. Can we have some more bed?

MARLENE. Don’t you get angry? I get angry. (l)

These overlapping dialogues marked by incoherence and disruption reveal their fragmented lives. Their impulsive and broken discourses reveal their inner desire to produce some meaning in connection with others. They are struggling to find an alternative to come out of their segmented lives. The audience is made to see, hear and feel each word, idea or gesture with renewed interest and decode it.

It may appear that the women characters are unable to share their experiences. But they all share the common bond of becoming a ‘woman’ in the world of men. This broken narrative also focuses on the limitation of language as a perfect means of communication. Framed narrative cannot encapsulate the loss and pain that a woman experiences. When Pope Joan begins to narrate her story of trying to hide her femininity and how she enjoyed the supreme power being a Pope, the other characters are amused. Even when she says that “the baby just slid out onto the road” as she was on a gorgeous procession dressed as a pope, the others laugh as they fail to realize the utter pain and humiliation that she had to endure. Joan’s words and gestures fail to communicate her feelings. But when she says that “They took me by the feet and dragged me out of town and stoned me to death” (1), they all stop laughing at once. Such an experience of torture and insult is not unknown to anyone present in the party. It is not language but the experience that ties all the women in a bond. Churchill, by applying her innovative theatricalities is successful in portraying the complex signs that govern women’s lives—her
position in history, her desires and politics, her class, ethnicity and the role that society confers upon her.

Even from the technical point of view the play shatters the male-dominated norms of writing. There is a ‘female way’ of speaking in the play that justifies Helene Cixous’s theory that women’s writing is different from writings of men because women write with their bodies. In spite of apparent cacophonous language and staccato rhythm, the language has a rhythm of its own. The overlapping dialogues create a polyphonic musical pattern enunciated with a number of voices at the same time. The stories of sexual oppression are presented like a series of musical refrains.

IV

When we have an overview of Churchill’s TG, our attention consciously or unconsciously is drawn to the galaxy of the Shavian heroines who are endowed with the power of Creative Evolution. Shaw has placed them on the process of an evolutionary progress deriving his idea from the concept of the French philosopher Bergson, but moulding it in his own way. In Creative Evolution (1907) Bergson asserts that the creative urge, not the Darwinian concept of natural selection, is at the heart of evolution. He says: “organic creation, on the contrary, the evolutionary phenomena which properly constitute life, we cannot in any way subject to a mathematical treatment” (Bergson 20). Shaw has depicted his women as essentially ‘vital’,
capable of winning over their counterparts. This amply makes a relation, not contrapuntal, but parallel with that of Churchill’s constellation of women in *TG*, thereby making enough room for examining the play by the parameter of Creative Evolution. Emphasizing Shaw’s idea, we can say that what Churchill’s Marlene lacks is the vital force and inner potency of Ann in *Man and Superman* to master her situation.

Though Marlene appears to be a successful woman in the capitalist social framework, her life is marked by loneliness, unfulfilment and vacuity. The cost of reaching the zenith of success by Marlene is evident when it is learnt that the actor Dull Gret is none but Marlene’s unacknowledged daughter Angie, looked after by her sister Joyce in the bleak slum from where Marlene herself escaped cunningly. Hence Marlene’s progress is illusory as her achievement totally depended on the sacrifices made by others for her well-being. The socialist Joyce is presented as Marlene’s opposite, caring and sacrificing her desires to bring up the unwanted child. What the play has as its subtext is that the rewards that a woman earns in a capitalist system by mercilessly slaughtering all her maternal instincts and affection lead a weaker woman again to the margin. This trend runs counter to what the feminists strive to establish. In the play there is a process of gradual decentering of Marlene as a ‘top girl’ and the deconstruction of the ideology encoding the term. The hankering after mere economic freedom has necessitated a sort of tearing off of all maternal bonds and human feelings. Marlene’s Darwinian notions cruelly denies all sorts of support to the “stupid, lazy and frightened” (3) Angie. The result is that the
marginal remains the marginal and the deprived forever. It can be inferred that “from the family-value frame of American conservatism, Marlene can be seen to stand for all feminists, bringing the play's point of view in the 1990s uncomfortably close to the recent calls for women to stay at home with their children, seeming to support the charges that feminism has failed women by promoting the workplace to the exclusion of marriage and motherhood” (Reinelt, *Cambridge Companion* 181). Churchill makes women aware of their own activities in the capitalist social framework. Joyce and Angie represent that section of the women community that need the most support but, what is shocking is the fact that they are more and more relegated to the margin. Benedict Nightingale has questioned the very validity of the theme of the play: Does freedom and feminism consist of aggressively adopting the very values that have for centuries oppressed your sex? (qtd.in Churchill xxxv). Such questions are posed as actions on stage through the encounter between Marlene and Joyce in Act Three, as described before. The apparent economic success of women is set within the patriarchal conventions of the society. The economic freedom that they get is a kind of pseudo-freedom where the fittest can only survive in their struggle for existence. Marlene being fit survives while Angie being weak perishes in such a social set-up. Such a Darwinian thrust on social castration proves ultimately banal to society, when the consideration of the lot of the marginalized section seems to be the only means of social progress. The Darwinian credo of ‘biological evolution’ cannot ensure prosperity and justice in socio-political dispensation. A judicious, humane and anti-Darwinian system must be evolved to
resolve the crisis in modern life. Shaw countered the Darwinian cult of Natural Selection with his philosophy of ‘Creative Evolution’.

The Shavian theory of Creative Evolution propagates the fact that the individual must try to merge himself in the process of evolution—a process that evolves ‘superman’ from ‘man’. Shaw thinks following the theory of Bergson, that the individual ‘Will’ should not be restricted to the blind command of nature, rather it should be directed towards a creative process of social evolution, where the stronger should make enough room for the weaker so that all may live together. Interestingly enough, though his creative evolution is related to the evolution of ‘man’ to ‘superman’, it is his women who are more enthusiastic and modern in this respect. From Raina to Saint Joan, it is ‘women’ who take the initiative, whether in an inverted domestic comedy world (like Candida) or in a love chase (as in Man and Superman) or, more profoundly, for waging a war against religious institutions (Major Barbara and Saint Joan).

The Shavian women are all, in one way or the other, myth-breakers, whether it is the myth of war, religion or patriarchy, sometimes directly or sometimes indirectly. It is for this reason that when Tanner admits that it is woman who taught him to believe: “I am; therefore I think” (Shaw 134), we not only wonder how Shaw has inverted the philosophy of Descartes, but also feel that Shaw’s feminist stance can be explored to interpret Churchill’s TG, a play that depicts a galaxy of women suffering under the heavy burden of social conventions. Marlene is
successful in the world of business, where Ann is in the world of love; for Marlene is more modern than Ann, and therefore more tortured and frustrated. The women characters in TG are also iconoclasts as they defiantly protest against the torture that they have faced in history. But this does not guarantee total female emancipation as the marginal women never prosper. The only solution lies in the placement of the process of evolution which would both revolutionize them socially and internally. What must be considered is that the margins hold the orbit. Shaw has shown that women are ‘vitalists’. Ann wins Tanner, and finally rejoices at the prospect of getting a father for the ‘superman’. This is her triumph—they are united for they are under the grip of Life Force. Churchill’s women also need that Force to get themselves emancipated from the bondage of patriarchy. It is only this Force that can make the women of today march forward towards the center as a powerful woman community.
Notes


2. Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) deals with a whole tradition of women writers who have been neglected by male critics. She divides the entire tradition into three phases—the ‘feminine’, the ‘feminist’ and the ‘female’. The female phase includes writers from 1920s onwards. The ‘female’ novelists have focused on female experience and self discovery while practicing a mode of female writing to convey the real experiences and desires of women. Churchill’s female writing, in the same manner, is elliptical and fragmented as it deals with female psychology and experiences.

3. Erwin Piscator in *The Political Theatre* (1929) proposed that drama should utilize the stage as a platform for public discussion of social and political issues. This new form of drama has been entitled ‘epic theatre’. Piscator was in favour of a revolutionary theatre that would engage the audience politically. He says: “It is not his [man’s] relationship to himself, nor his relationship to God, but his relationship to society which is central . . . .It is no longer the private, personal fate of the individual, but the times and the fate of the masses that are the heroic factors in the new drama” (Piscator 187).

4. Brecht devised the openly didactic *Lehrstücke* or ‘learning plays’ to be performed by amateur proletarian organizations and school children. Martin Esslin says in *Brecht: The Man and his Work* (1959) that “The Lehrstücke and ‘school operas’ are meant to be ‘teaching aids’ rather than art, and their language is severely factual” (qtd. in Demetz 178). Plays like *Badener Lehrstücke* (1929) and *The Measure* (1930) propagate the total subordination of the individual to the larger interests of the political party or community.
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