

# Gender, Class, and Politics in Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*

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A thesis submitted to the Department of English and Humanities in partial fulfilment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts in English

Department of English and Humanities  
Brac University  
May 2022

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It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my/our own original work while completing degree at Brac University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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## Approval

The thesis titled “Gender, Class, and Politics in Caryl Churchill’s *Top Girls*” submitted by Sumaiya Sarker ID: 18303023 of Spring, 2022 has been accepted as satisfactory in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts on 16-05-2022.

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## **Abstract**

Theatre has always been a platform for expressing what cannot be expressed through mere words coming out of one's mouth. From the beginning of theatre, playwrights have tried to bring out issues concerning love, betrayal, war, socio-political issues, and so on to portray the authentic and real picture of life. The age-old ability to portray life on stage, theatre has remained yet one of the strongest mediums to convey issues regarding life and society. 20<sup>th</sup> century playwrights have utilised this craft and performed magic on stage to bring issues out in public, throwing questions on their faces, opening their eyes to the matters they were trying to avoid. Caryl Churchill, one of the gems of 20<sup>th</sup> century theatre has performed her magic of portraying political issues happening all around the world on stage in order to slap necessary questions on the face of ignorant world leaders and citizens. She has been doing this for a long time and *Top Girls* one of her initial plays show how beautifully and cleverly she addresses the issues of state politics and sexual politics of that time. This thesis aims to explore how politics is reflected in theatre. By analysing and exploring Churchill's *Top Girls*, this research seeks to show how politics is reflected in theatre.

**Keywords:** theatre, feminism, politics,

## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate my work to my friends who were always encouraging and motivating me to complete my thesis properly and pushing me to finally be done with it.

THANK YOU!

## **Acknowledgement**

The very first heartfelt gratitude and thank you goes to my amazing supervisor Miss Anika Saba who continuously backed me up and supported me when I felt everything was becoming overbearing for me. Without you, I would not have finished my thesis. Thank you for showing so much patience and guiding and encouraging me even when I wanted to give up. All my love and gratitude for you for being a kind and patient supervisor whom I needed the most. Lastly, I would like to say that I have learnt so many things from all of my faculties that I can proudly say I am a student of Bracu ENH.

My idiotic yet selfless friends, without whom I would be a mess, thank you for dealing with my dramas and tantrums and still encouraging me to work. For staying there over the phone to watch over me if I am working or getting lost in my own thoughts, thank you!

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

When thinking about the oldest forms of entertainment, theatre, especially Greek theatre comes to mind. While talking about the origin of theatre, the credit goes to the followers of Dionysus, God of fertility and wine, particularly one priest, Thespis. In 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, Thespis first introduced the new element in their traditional choral singing and dancing by incorporating dialogues which makes him the first actor in history as well. Thespis even bagged an award for himself in a drama competition. His predecessor Sophocles needs no introduction as one of his plays *Oedipus Rex* remains one of the masterpieces till this day. In those days, there were only two categories of drama- Tragedy and Comedy but as time progressed the genre of plays started becoming far reaching and versatile and the twentieth century has seen some great advances in terms of genres, writing style, use of the stage and a lot of other things. They started leaving their mark in every territory, be it romanticism, surrealism, absurdism, comedy of manners, kitchen-sink drama, in-yer-face theatre, political theatre etc. to bring out their stories on stage. Twentieth century theatre has seen some ground-breaking genres of plays of playwrights like Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, Caryl Churchill, Sarah Kane et al. It is considered that twentieth century theatre started its journey in Dublin, Ireland with the beginning of the Irish Literary Theatre founded by W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory and J.M. Synge.

The first half of the twentieth century has seen two world wars and its effects were seen largely especially on theatre as unlike other categories of literature, plays are performed in front of an audience and due to the wars and their atrocities, plays were no longer held in theatres and there was a massive gap in writing new plays as well. It was in the second half of the twentieth century where playwrights brought new ideas and strategies to incorporate in



their plays to represent themes such as political, philosophical, colonization and its after effect, existential and absurdist, new political ideologies like socialism, feminist writings, representing the other rising half of the society who started including themselves in the workforce (women) during and after the second world war due to shortage of workers and the scarcity in providing bread and butter. These were happening in real time and were being represented on stage through the genius of the playwrights. Industrialization is another important factor in modern British theatre as it became the main highlight of the society as a whole and had an impact on everyone's lives creating themes of alienation which is an effect of wars as well. It was not that peace had prevailed after withstanding two world wars, there were still wars taking place among countries, regions, there was political unrest all over the world. During the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the century, Cold war (1945-1990), French-Algerian war (1954-1962), Vietnam war (1959-1975), Soviet-Afghan war (1979-1989), Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), Cuban revolution (1953-1959), Bosnian genocide (1992-1995), Israeli-Palestinian conflict (1948-) etc. and a lot of other wars and political unrests were happening and because of these, politics had become one of the major themes of twentieth century theatre.

State politics is a part of theatre from the beginning of theatre as even *Oedipus Rex* builds its storyline around the power structure of the state Thebes. Even Shakespearean plays have politics incorporated in them which reflected the social and political context of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The play *The Tempest*, though written in 1611 almost at the beginning of the colonisation period, bears the theme of colonisation. Apart from state politics and its influence on theatre, twentieth century has gender politics included in its themes as well where the issues of sexual politics are brought out on stage by the playwrights through their plays.

Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* explains that male-female relationships, whether on a cultural or an individual plane, constitute a larger context defined as

‘power structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another’ and the ‘set of stratagems designed to maintain a system’. The system, patriarchy, is not simply male-dominated social structure and government; for, deeply entrenched in cultural forms, it pervades and shares socio-economic roles and institutions, religious dogma, and interpretative and prescriptive ideologies psychology, education and literature. (Jaeger 598)

Twentieth century has seen a lot of significant political movements, changes and reforms. Women’s rights to vote, women’s suffrage movement, women’s liberation movement, 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminism, rights to abortion, equal pay, female solidarity and many more reforms were made during this century and their effects can be seen in literature as well. The first female prime minister Margaret Thatcher was elected in 1975 which was a huge milestone given the situation of women. Apart from sexual politics and 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminism there were national and international conflicts and issues going on inside and outside Britain for example, the political relationship between America and Britain at that time, Roman revolution, Vietnam war etc. While talking about twentieth century politics, the name of Caryl Churchill comes up as she through her plays raises questions on ongoing political issues on stage.

Churchill was born on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1938 in London, Britain and is known for her use on non-naturalistic technique in plays portraying abuse of power and exploring sexual politics and feminist issues. Her works have always dealt with contemporary social and political issues from the beginning of her career. For example, one of her early works *Cloud Nine* deals with what was going on during the 60s and 70s as in the peak of 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminism “roads to freedom” (Marwick 188) and the knowledge of the dramatic surge of female solidarity and sharing among women is necessary to understand the background of the

play. During the 80s Roman empire was undergoing a massive change as people grew tired of Ceausescu's regime of injustice and exploitation and "A bloody battle played out in Romania in December 1989 that led to the remarkable collapse of one of Europe's most repressive communist regimes - and arguably its most menacing dictator" (McGrath, BBC news). Based on this Romanian revolution Churchill travelled to Romania and wrote *Mad Forest* (1990) where the historical and political manifestations of the revolution is portrayed through the lives of ordinary citizens of Romania including two families who are affected by the uprising. Churchill's non-naturalistic writing style included a lot of theatrical experiments in the play. "The play counterpoints a severe, almost hyper-realism with exuberant eruptions of the fantastic and theatrical; appearances of ghosts, an angel, and a vampire; the staging of a character's surreal nightmare; and a farcical stage melee in the plays final act" (Garner, Jr. 399). Another play of hers *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?* (2006) sets on the relationship between America and Britain where it is portrayed through "the seduction of Britain by the United States- presented as gay men locked in a seriously sick love affair- reads as a minor work from a major playwright, little more than a political poison-pen letter" (Brantley, nytimes). This play shows two white drunk men Guy (Briton) and Sam (American) talking in fragments sitting on their sofa and only this goes on all through the 8 scenes. "Guy is a polite, reticent fellow, slightly softer and older than his new lover and totally intoxicated by Sam's aggressive, dominating ways" (Brantley). They talk about starting from American culture to its foreign policies addressing the political issues. The stage play also remains simple yet astounding as there can only be seen a sofa which keeps elevating a little farther and higher from the ground each scene "until Guy and Sam would appear to be overlooking the cosmos in the isolation of madness" (Brantley).

Churchill's *Top Girls* (1982) is one of the first plays to directly work around Thatcherism where individualistic success surpasses the solidarity of the sisters and sharing

among them. It opens with the restaurant scene where Marlene the new managing director of the agency top girls invites 5 women to celebrate her promotion and the twist here comes in these 5 women who are historical figures from different time periods and social contexts which means they do not exist in the contemporary times. Churchill brings these different historical characters in relation to career driven Marlene to show the diversity of women across the globe depending on their social and political contexts with different views on life and society. This also challenges the Women's suffrage movement where the notion took all women's suffrage and experiences in the same account creating a universal sisterhood. In the remaining scenes, contemporary Britain gets a bright light through giving a tour into the workplace and personal relationships of Marlene where topics of Thatcherite monetarism, individualistic success, sexual politics, socio-political context of that time, etc. are raised. Moreover, the writing style of this play introduced the overlapping technique in theatre where the conversations happen as it happens in real life where people keep on interrupting one another while conversing. Cameron talks about Churchill's intention in this play,

In contrast to the suffrage-era spectacles of transnational, transhistorical female solidarity, however, Churchill soon dismantles this tantalizing vision of unified sisterhood by showing the historical characters' interactions with one another. The women's forced, dissonant relations, heightened by Churchill's innovative use of overlapping dialogue, suggest that a common gender does not easily overcome cultural, political, and class differences. (156)

Since the formation of Israel in 1948, the conflict between Israel and Palestine has been going on and the severity of this issue is not something the world and world leaders can overlook but unfortunately, it is being overlooked till this day. Because of this conflict, they are almost always in a warring state and as a result, families are being torn apart, people are losing their lives, hatred for the other nation is only increasing, no solid solution is nowhere

to be seen and no one really talks about this sensitive issue so international economic relationships do not get tainted. To preserve economic relationships, this forever-going conflict is not seeing an end and Churchill being the vocal playwright she addresses this issue through her unique play *Seven Jewish Children* (2009). She wrote this play in response to the Israeli military strike on Gaza in 2008-2009. Though this play is comparatively new, it still has been more than a decade and the world is still seeing the outcomes of these warring states. This play not only highlights the Israeli-Palestinian issue but also is written in a unique style where the dialogues are written without any characters and they are written giving liberty to the director how many character the director might incorporate or how it should be acted out on stage.

The works of Churchill addresses the abuse of power showing the contemporary political situation be it national or international and, in this thesis, I would like to explore how Churchill addresses political issues by dissecting her play *Tops Girls*. Whether it is Thatcherite monetarism or sexual politics at the peak of 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminism also known as Marxist feminism, they are results of politics and Churchill bravely addresses them in her work bringing it out in the light and the objective of this research is to analyse and understand how the playwright addresses politics through theatre.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

#### 2.1 Political state of Britain

In 1979, Thatcher won the national election and became the country's Prime Minister. She was not only the first female Prime Minister of the UK, but also the most loved and hated Prime Minister at the same time making her a controversial figure. While she gained international fame and praises for her decisions, faced protests and unrest in her own country for her actions. Even after all the controversies and backlashes, she was elected three times in a row as the country's Prime Minister. She was bold, fearless and strict for which she brought some significant changes in then Britain and till this day her ideologies, legacies, policies are followed, discussed and debated nationally and internationally. On one hand, some believe that she saved the country from an economic catastrophe, on the other hand, some stand accused of destroying millions of workers' livelihood. Either way, she has become one of the most influential political figures of the UK. She has also become the first person to have her statue while being alive in the *House of Parliaments* opposite Winston Churchill's.

She was quite the talk of the town even before her Prime Minister-ship began. Thatcher's first role as a high-ranking government official came in 1970, when Prime Minister Edward Heath named her Secretary of State for Education and Science to his Cabinet. She managed the expansion of comprehensive schools, which are secondary schools that accept all students rather than selecting students based on academics or income, as grammar schools do. There were proponents and opponents of comprehensive schools, but the central critique was that they supported a class-based society and inhibited aspiration, particularly in poorer disadvantaged communities. As part of the government's overall effort to slash spending, Thatcher's popularity in her Cabinet role continued to dwindle when she

abolished free milk for school children over the age of seven. Many people began to perceive her as a threat to the nation's health and well-being, and the term "Mrs. Thatcher, milk snatcher" was coined.

But she persisted, and during the 1970s, as Heath's government suffered, Thatcher began to establish herself as a political leader. According to the Margaret Thatcher Foundation, “she was chosen as the Conservative Party leader and Leader of the Opposition in 1975, making her the first woman to lead a major political party in Britain”. Thatcher spoke on the Iron Curtain — the political barrier that divided Europe during World War II — in a speech at Kensington Town Hall in London in January 1976. According to the Margaret Thatcher Foundation, a Soviet press article on the speech referred to Thatcher as the "Iron Lady". The nickname stuck with her for the rest of her career and beyond. Her policies, which included raising indirect taxes and cutting government contributions, were daring and controversial in equal measure, advocating for individuals to be less reliant on the state and more capable of making their own decisions. Her solutions were severe and tough to bear for the poor and disadvantaged in society, as she inherited a crumbling economy. Her tenacity and will won out, and her famous "the lady's not for turning" speech at the Conservative Party Conference in 1980 left no mistake in her detractors' minds about her vision and determination. Thatcher's regime did not affect everyone. With initiatives like allowing tenants to buy their council house (Britain's version of communal public housing) and allowing anyone to buy shares in the major utility companies as part of a massive privatisation program, she aimed to give all men and women more choices in where to invest their money and a sense of pride in their future.

Following Argentina's invasion of the Falkland Islands in 1982, and with diplomatic channels closed, the prime minister made the historic decision to form and deploy a ten-thousand-strong task force to sail down to the South Atlantic and reclaim the British Overseas

Territory. It was a gesture that galvanised a nation, uniting them in their patriotism and sense that Britain was still a major participant on the international arena. The returning task force received a hero's welcome after the Argentinian army was forced to surrender, and Thatcher referred to the "Falklands spirit" for many years afterward, according to The Guardian. But it came at a cost: almost 250 British lives lost, which a country mourned. Some people were critical, but the majority of people were supportive, and she was able to ride the crest of the wave for a time. However, for many people living under Thatcher's home agenda, the shimmering elegance of foreign policy would be overwhelmed by a brutal hard reality. The Community Charge, or "Poll Tax", as it was called, became synonymous with Thatcherism at its most savage, with property taxes shifting to individual taxation, dividing the country along lines of haves and have-nots, which for many was the same as class. Protests took place around the country, with violence and riots breaking out in many of the larger cities, according to The Independent. Thatcher's reign was marked by change. The world of the 1980s and beyond changed dramatically in response to the political and social turbulence of the 1970s, but at what cost? It was a case of no pain, no gain for her. It was a ruthless dissection of society for others. She made it possible for a large number of individuals to own homes and benefit from shared ownership, but she also deprived entire villages of their livelihood and left many people feeling targeted and victimised by unfair taxation.



## 2.2 Thatcher and Marxist Feminism

Thatcher is the first female Prime Minister of the UK and Europe as well which should have been a great achievement for female solidarity in the height of the second wave feminism known as Marxist Feminism. But it has conflicting arguments about her being a feminist icon and she is mostly negatively viewed for not standing with female solidarity rather focusing on individualism. Natasha Walter, in an interview with the Guardian,

Thirteen years ago, in *The New Feminism*, I wrote: "Let's start with Margaret Thatcher. No British woman this century can come close to her achievements in grasping power. Someone of the wrong sex and the wrong class broke through what looked like invincible barriers to reach into the heart of the establishment. Women who complain that Margaret Thatcher was not a feminist because she didn't help other women or openly acknowledge her debt to feminism have a point, but they are also missing something vital. She normalized female success. She showed that although female power and masculine power may have different languages, different metaphors, different gestures, different traditions, different ways of being glamorous or nasty, they are equally strong, equally valid ... No one can ever question whether women are capable of single-minded vigor, of efficient leadership, after Margaret Thatcher. She is the great unsung heroine of British feminism".

She adds, Feminists could not do anything but denounce Thatcher back then, as they appear to be doing again. Thatcher was clearly not a feminist: she had no interest in social equality and had no understanding of female solidarity. She knew it then, and she knows it now; by the time she graduated from high school, she'd been to a number of protests when the chant "Maggie Maggie Maggie Out Out Out" could be heard. Her damaging policies

should never be forgotten, and her caustic legacy should never be sanitised. But we shouldn't ignore the reality that, as an outsider who pushed her way in, as a woman in a man's world, she was a towering challenge to those who feel women are unsuited to authority.

Margaret Thatcher became the Conservative Party's leader during the height of the feminist movement, yet she was entirely disconnected from all the campaigns, passions, and identity. “She was the middle-aged woman with the hats, the pearls, the teeth, the strangled high-pitched voice, and the policies which had nothing to do with equal pay for work of equal value, free abortion on demand or take back the night marches” (Linda Grant, *The Guardian*). But, as much as feminists despised her for her lack of solidarity with them, or with women in general – she was one-of-a-kind, for herself and for herself – there is no doubt that she was a role model. In the same way that it was no longer feasible to say that America was so racist that it would never elect a black president following Obama's election, Thatcher in Downing Street gave a clear message to women that anything was possible. The issue remains, though, because she was so out of the ordinary that no other female politician has come close to matching her. There is not any other politician who is twice as masculine and twice as feminine as Thatcher. If she represented anyone, it wasn't women, but a group that emerged in the early 1980s that rejected class solidarity, recognizing their place, and instead aspired to home ownership, foreign vacations, private education, and self-employment, and among them were many women. “She did a great deal to smash the ideas of class that prevailed in the 70s, but smash patriarchy? No” (Linda Grant, *The Guardian*).

As a matriarch, Mrs. Thatcher is far more famous than as a feminist activist. Her political power was never represented in terms of fighting the male establishment; rather, it was expressed as a political personality who dominated the masculine, clubby power structures she inherited. She didn't have time to think about intellectual feminism, but she did and continues to represent an interesting aspect of female action that we see today. Her

political rhetoric was centred on women. Owning a home, deciding on a household budget, and selecting the best school for your child are all messages that a woman crafted and conveyed to inspire other women to make the decisions that were necessary for their families. “Women were given a new level of political importance and one that has not been lost by subsequent leaders. So, a feminist matriarch but not a feminist icon” (Laura Sandys, The Guardian).

Margaret Thatcher is not a symbol of feminism, liberty, justice, or style. As a pioneering female prime minister, she is unique in British history. She has a lot of charisma. She has the bravery to stand by her beliefs. She is a survivor, which is something that most politicians lack. “But she ain't no sister. She likes what macho, sexist, patriarchal men have always liked: war, the defence of the status quo, established power, entrenched inequality, heavily rigged individualist competition and absolute freedom. Not freedom as in emancipation, but the greedy savagery of an unregulated market in which man eats man and woman is neither seen nor heard” (Bidisha, The Guardian). A feminist idol is a woman who is both positive and self-identified as a woman. She is outspoken in her opposition to machismo and misogyny. Thatcher did little on rape, domestic violence, childcare, single mother benefits, discrimination, sexual harassment, and sexual inequity.

## Chapter 3

### Theoretical Framework

#### 3.1 Marxist Feminism:

Before diving deeper into Marxist feminism, first we need to understand what Marxism is. Marx never directly talked about women's oppression but has provided the tools to prove inequality faced by women. Marx himself was influenced by Engel's work where Engel talks about shifts in the family. To understand it further, Engel's study shows how the position of women changed according to how families were viewed with time. Engel talks about the origin of private property undermining the egalitarian tribal order while creating families as economic units, inequality of property ownership, and exploitative class society. Women's social position started declining as private property gained strength. What he talks about basically means, women had a stronger position in the society that deteriorated when private property ownership came to be as previously, the family had an equal share in everything under communism. The absence of private property gave equal stature to both men and women's work; however, women were transformed into subordinate beings after private property ownership came to be in the picture because, this time rather than working for the household, women started working for their husbands who were the breadwinners. Private property made the owner the ruler of the household which led others to become subordinate members of the ruler for example, women became wives, daughters and wards from individual adult members of a family. The historic defeat of the female sex and the establishment of patriarchy, according to Engel, resulted in a discounting of female chores and responsibilities and a dependant value of male roles and activities.

With families becoming individual units, income became one of the major tasks and the distribution of labour kept women out of the arena of earning an income. Sister

relationships were further harmed by the dismantling of kin group businesses that served as the foundation for sister relationships. Property inheritance made the male members of the family's head of the family and even if women were given inheritance of the property, it was only limited in papers as they did not get the right to control their property. Coming back to Marx, in Marxism, there is no place for housewives while analysing capitalism however, it is Marxist feminism that put housewives into the structure of capitalism. Capitalism does not include or talk about the labour of women in the households on the other hand, Marxist feminism deals with the unpaid labour of the women within the household. And the oppression of women was led by inequalities created within different institutions including family. So, to say, it does not deal with women's suffering as individual problems as in, a woman is facing these issues and problems rather, it looks at the problem in a larger spectrum of women being oppressed systematically by social institutions. According to Marxist feminists, to eradicate the oppression of women, an entire shift of the social structure is needed because housewives are vital to capitalism because the unpaid work in the home maintains bosses and workers and reproduces the next generation of bosses and workers.

Women doing unpaid labour and men refusing to acknowledge this labour oppresses women within the household and at large, within the society. This unpaid labour, if were paid, would take a large portion of the money from the household but continues to devalue it. Furthermore, women are hired less and paid less than men for the same work in workplaces. As it is known, during the World War, women joined the workforce because a lot of the men were fighting in the war and millions of them lost their lives as well. After the war had ended, women were expected to go back to their unpaid work positions within the household and pushing them back to the household started creating difficulties. During this period, a lot feminist movements and questions were raised. The concept of reproduction came to be questioned by a group of feminists as they see the problems underlying within the concept of

reproduction. Women for their unpaid labour and reproduction, became commodities to be exchanged among men through marriage and it reduces their worth into being objectifying. In terms of objectification, now if a woman is exchanged for unpaid labour and her reproduction ability, appearance, body structure, health, looks, genetic history of a woman, all of these come into light. On top of that, children were considered as properties of the father so the child rearing experience became alienating. Because the children take fathers name and carry on the family name, they become properties of the father and his kinships. So, even though the mother gives birth to the child through her ability of reproduction, she does not have ownership over the child which again makes her see as an object of reproduction. Moreover, the concept of patriarchy existed before private property ownership and monogamy, so the feminist theorists took on Engel's arguments even further that what he said is right but patriarchy did not only come with capitalism or private property ownership. The oppression of women existed before that as well and it builds its connection through the process of reproduction.

The aspect of reproduction leads to controlling women by the patriarch society. Because women can reproduce and they were a means of exchange among men, fathers started controlling their daughters' movement, husbands to their wives and women's sexuality became something that must be controlled by men because if a woman becomes pregnant who would be the child's father would be a question. The concept of abduction, rape, forceful marriages came to be because of the concept of reproduction as well. Furthermore, this control over women's body and sexuality was gradually institutionalised at several levels: work, culture, custom, religion and education. Now, some feminist theorists try tying production and reproduction together. "Relations within the household are patriarchal and men systematically exploit and benefit from women's labour within a domestic mode of production (Delphy, 1976)". She assimilates women's sexuality to the category of exploited

labour and explains how the unpaid labour of women is immediately exploited by men rather than the capitalist system.

Marx has talked about the bourgeois and the proletariat but Delphy explains how being married to a man of higher class can raise the living standard of a woman but it does not make her the owner of means of production thus keeping her remains as a commodity of unpaid labour or reproductive medium. “Her position is not dependent on class relationship but on her serf relations of production with her husband (Delphy 7)”. Women’s work within the household is limitless as there is no fixed job description, no fixed amount of work and no return for the work done. The same way, working women who earn enough to meet their own maintenance costs are still expected to do housework and, in this case, she is working for nothing.

According to Juliet Mitchell, there are 4 levels that comprises the exploitation of women: production, reproduction, socialisation, and sexuality. Control of production was not only limited to sexual division of work, rather, it was linked to the nature of work women can do as well. For example, women worked in jobs with less pay, less technological expertise, and were in service work like secretaries, nurses and so on. And the cycle of this was maintained by the gendered educational system wherein most courses for women equipped them for service functions only. Additionally, reproduction creates a barrier for women as well because even if the work pays well, the family would not allow the woman to take the job for having longer hours and the concern of her safety.

In we are to look at Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, it is seen that Woolf has addressed the social status of a woman particularly, woman artists. “This essay investigates secret economy that is central to Woolf’s life and work, to feminist theory: the economy of sexual identity” (Rosenman 634). Woolf claims that centuries of prejudice, as well as

economic and educational limitations, have hampered women's creativity. She uses the hypothetical case of William Shakespeare's bright but uneducated sister, who is discouraged from all except the most prosaic domestic responsibilities and eventually kills herself. According to Woolf "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (Woolf 1). Woolf makes a series of controversial societal and aesthetic critiques. She examines the state of women's literature as well as the state of feminist studies, both theoretical and historical.



## Chapter 4

### Analysis

#### 4.1 Britain during the 80s

Because Caryl Churchill resists the temptations of narrative and leverages the potential of the live stage to inspire our recognition of the frailty and elasticity of human beings, neither the chronology nor the unfolding events are fundamental to the drama in her plays. In each of her plays, she emphasises our recognition of ourselves; in the universe she creates, we are challenged to express ourselves not only as men or women, but as individual human beings. From this perspective, we can see that she not only addresses issues related to feminism but also the problems people face in a society at large. Apart from the discrimination of women in society or criticism of certain aspects of feminism, Churchill addresses any ongoing issue of that time. For example, *Top Girls* certainly deals with feminism but it also shows how the ongoing political situation had affected different classes of people and how Thatcher's policies were accepted by people who were to directly benefit from those policies and raised questions and hatred among others for not doing anything to better their societal position rather costing them their jobs. The ideological differences between Joyce and Marlene become obvious near the end of the third scene of the play, and they find themselves on opposing sides of the 'we' and 'them' barrier. Their differing beliefs shed light on current Britain's social realities.

Margaret Thatcher was elected as the country's first female prime minister during the period *Top Girls* was published. She believes that if someone has what it takes to succeed, they will be successful. Marlene is a believer in Thatcherism, who even tells Joyce, "Anyone can do anything if they've got what it takes." Joyce, on the other hand, represents the working class, who does not gain from Thatcher's position as Prime Minister because she does not

care about them. Marlene, like Thatcher, believes in the individual and is extremely ambitious, having had to utterly disregard her social responsibilities and family ties in order to advance. Joyce works four separate cleaning jobs to support her family, raised Marlene's daughter Angie and lost her own kid in the process, and observes the hardship and pain of the working class who are unable to advance due to their socioeconomic circumstances. Marlene admits in their talk that she despises the working class and would not hire them if they were lazy, stupid, or afraid. Joyce brings up Angie, who is lazy, ignorant, and afraid, as well as their mother, who was a working-class woman, to dispute her position. The sisters became a part of 'Us' and 'Them' as a result of their socioeconomic circumstances and differing philosophies, with the 'them' not caring about 'us' as individuals and blaming their situation on their incapability.

Thatcher's political moves to privatise practically everything, including fundamental healthcare, social services, education, and the closure of numerous enterprises and factories, resulted in tremendous unemployment in the country, while the 'Individual' thrived. These disparities are evident in Marlene and Joyce's discussion, when two philosophies collide. Despite having the same family history, the sisters' current socioeconomic situation has revealed that they have opposing philosophies and perspectives on life. The socioeconomic state of modern Britain is accurately reflected through their talk, where Marlene became successful by prioritising her profession over all of her familial relationships, including her daughter.

Mrs. Thatcher implemented radical economic policies that had a significant impact on the UK economy. They were defined by a belief in free markets, as well as efforts to limit government intervention in the economy, trade union power, and inflation. Mrs. Thatcher began a monetary strategy in the early 1980s. This entailed attempting to control the money supply in order to reduce inflation. More interest rates, higher taxes, and budget cuts were all

part of it. These strategies succeeded in lowering inflation, but when combined with a strong pound, they resulted in a significant drop in output. Unemployment reached three million people, and industry output dropped dramatically. Throughout the 1980s, unemployment remained high, indicating a growth in structural unemployment as a result of the loss of conventional industrial enterprises. Unemployment rose to the greatest level since the 1930s. In 1981, 365 economists addressed a letter to the New York Times saying that monetarist policies were damaging economic output unnecessarily, generating increased unemployment and poorer GDP. The relationship between money supply and inflation, in particular, was far less than monetarist theory projected. Through Joyce, the frustration of working-class people is portrayed and it is clear if we look at how she talks about and addresses Thatcher's Monetarism and the upper class. While talking to Marlene about how being working class had ruined their parents lives and it is ruining her and Angie's lives now. She blames the system for her father being violent and having a drinking problem. "Their lives were rubbish. They were treated like rubbish. He's dead and she'll die soon and what sort of life/ did they have?" (Churchill 112). She goes on about how Marlene is ashamed of her being her sister and how she is ashamed of Marlene as well for only thinking about herself. Marlene works as a true embodiment of Thatcherism where she is highly individualistic and hates the working class and blames them for not improving their situation. According to Marlene, "I hate the working class... They don't exist any more, it means lazy and stupid" (Churchill 113).

## 4.2 Feminist Reading of *Top Girls*

Churchill is a dramatist and a feminist who has risen to prominence. However, calling her a major feminist playwright may be a contradiction in term. *Top Girls* continues to defy time and history expectations while returning to her past attempts to challenge us with the nuances of women's existence. "A marriage of two plays that had been struggling for life in Churchill's head, *Top Girls* complicates and extends questions about women's roles" (Keyssar 214). She claims to have been tormented for years by an odd array of dead women from history, paintings, and literature: A thirteenth-century Japanese courtesan, a figure from a Breughel painting, a Victorian traveller, and Chaucer's Patient Griselda were once spirits at the playwright's table, and are now dinner guests of Marlene, the CEO of a high-powered employment agency. Marlene's interactions with her working-class sister, the sister's "thick" sixteen-year-old daughter (who is subsequently revealed to be Marlene's daughter), and the "tough, high-energy" women in Marlene's job were inspired, Caryl said, by women she met on her visit to Northampton, Mass. *Top Girls* features all female characters who will be played by women.

The play begins at a restaurant, where a total of six characters are celebrating Marlene's promotion to managing director of the *Top Girls* Employment Agency. Five of the people are from various historical timeframes, each with their unique story of surviving in a patriarchal environment. Churchill uses five historical female figures, as well as a current ambitious working woman, to demonstrate how diverse and different women are from one another, countering the belief that all women's suffrage and experiences are equal, resulting in a sense of universal sisterhood. Truth be told, different women from various social contexts, timeframes, races, and socioeconomic classes have had quite varied experiences, and their struggles were also very different. Isabella, a 19th-century English woman traveller, Lady Nijo, a 13th-century Japanese courtesan, Dulle Gret, the subject of Brueghel's painting

who charges into hell and beats the devils, Pope Joan, who lived as a man until just before her death (between 854 and 856), and Griselda, the obedient wife from *The Clerk's Tale*, and Marlene, who represents working women in the 1980. Not only that, but their views toward each other contradict the universal sisterhood, as evidenced by Isabella's dismissive attitude toward Easterners while pointing to Nijo, and Marlene's characterization of Griselda's husband as a "monster." The opening scene depicts that women do not have a common experience, but rather have diverse experiences and problems as a result of their diversity, and that being a woman does not always make them empathetic to other women, as Marlene's clear ignorance of Griselda's narrative demonstrates. "Marlene does not maintain control of the gathering, and her attempts to establish common ground with the other women seem dubious at best" (Cameron 158).

The image offers an attractive visual spectacle of sisterhood from which one may easily expect a great synthesis of these women's trans historical experiences, strengths, and resistance techniques as encouragement for today's struggling women. However, by presenting the historical figures' interactions with one another, Churchill quickly dismantles this seductive idea of unified sisterhood. The women's forced, dissonant relationships, heightened by Churchill's innovative use of overlapping conversation, show that cultural, political, and class divisions are difficult to overcome. As Kritzer observes, the historical women "remain locked in their own, singular perspectives" (Cameron 156). They have viewpoints that cause them to misinterpret or judge others. Lady Nijo and Isabella Bird, for example, call each other's civilizations "barbaric" while Pope Joan accuses Isabella Bird of "heresy." The absence of a shared cultural framework is frequently expressed in the women's interactions. Following acts also highlight gender inequalities, as the relationship between Joyce and Marlene, two contemporary women who are physically sisters, falls apart due to ideological differences. Sisterhood, as shown in the play, appears to be bound to fail.

Churchill urges the audience to look for alternatives to the representational framing of the play. The drama does not entirely dismiss the prospect of a united sisterhood, but rather portrays it as an elusive ideal whose realisation is contingent on societal change.

Churchill's more sceptical attitude of sisterhood can be linked in part to current national and feminist issues. Margaret Thatcher's prime ministership posed an immediate challenge to any idealised vision of universal sisterhood, displaying strong ideological differences. As Churchill commented in one interview, Thatcher "may be a woman but she isn't a sister, she may be a sister but she isn't a comrade" (Cameron 157). Churchill refuses to take sisterhood for granted; her play acknowledges that the only way to achieve female solidarity is to acknowledge and overcome, rather than suppress, women's differences. The disciplined, symmetrical groupings of ladies in the suffrage pageants contrast strongly with Churchill's cacophonous, disorganised dinner party. Unlike the suffrage pageant, which used previous "great women" to legitimise their cause and encourage group cohesion, Churchill's historical "top girls" function in almost the opposite way, questioning women's seeming achievements and the idea of an inherent, natural relationship between women. *Top Girls* employs the same historical archetypes as suffrage pageants—powerful women who excel in men's roles and female martyrs—but in a more self-aware, critical manner. Churchill's opposition to assessing women's greatness in terms of their accomplishment within an individualistic, competitive, capitalist model has been noted by several commentators. In the first act, Churchill uses cross-dramatic dressing's force to criticise, rather than laud, powerful women whose power comes from imitating a traditionally masculine role.

Pope Joan's masculine garb, for example, comes to symbolise her society's disdain for feminine bodies. While her robes and rhetoric may initially suggest more opportunities for women ("I would be Pope. I would know God. I would know everything") I'd be able to recognize God. Her story quickly becomes a cautionary tale about transgressing gender limits

("They took me by the feet and dragged me out of town and stoned me to death.") Joan's body struggles against the masculine role she has acquired when she vomits during her intoxicated, faltering delivery of a Latin piece by Lucretius. "a sentient *gestus* announcing the female body's revulsion at the mystification and misogyny of Western religion—whose authority Joan nevertheless impersonates" (Diamond qtd in Cameron, 159). Similarly, Dulle Gret, Churchill's female warrior, appears to be unaffected by her masculinity. Gret doesn't say much until the conclusion of the act, and she plays the warrior role defensively rather than courageously, in a rage and helplessness against the Spanish. "I'd had enough, I was mad, I hate the bastards.... I've got a sword in my hand from somewhere.... You just keep running on and fighting / you didn't stop for nothing" (Churchill 49). *Top Girls* emphasises the unpleasant and disempowering repercussions of imitating a masculine position, demonstrating how such achievements can reinforce rather than remove gender constraints. Churchill's usage of mythical and legendary figures from art and historical works created by men serves as a further reminder that men's authority is still constrained by patriarchy.

Churchill frequently gestures toward reconciliation in the last moment as an unrealized prospect. The sisters acknowledge that a gap has opened up between them in the last minutes of the play—despite coming from the same family, their current socioeconomic and political differences place them on opposite sides of the divide between "us" and "them". Through Joyce's repeated rejections of Marlene's attempts to gloss over their differences, Churchill keeps these perspectives in dialectical antagonism, preventing synthesis or resolution. Churchill disturbs idealized ideals of universal sisterhood by making visible—and audible—significant ideological and power distinctions among women, in response to an emerging recognition of the importance of differences among women within the feminist movement of her day. She does not, however, reject the ideal of female solidarity entirely, acknowledging its importance to feminism. Instead, in the play, undivided sisterhood is a

palpable absence, an unarticulated alternative to the fractured status quo that is all the more compelling for its ambiguity.



## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

Without a doubt, feminist issues and preoccupations discussed at the time when Caryl Churchill wrote *Top Girls* (1982) influenced the play. Additionally, this essay discussed that the artistic discourse of women's feminism and its shift depict and follow dramatic changes that British women underwent. It indicates that the play depicts the move from women's solidarity, which was so widespread during the Women's Liberation Movement and especially in the late 1970s when British feminism exploded, to a focus on individual skills, entrepreneurship, and achievements without remembering and assisting other women. As a result, the essay demonstrates that *Top Girls* reflect and follow feminist preoccupations and issues of a certain moment in the United Kingdom.

The characters in the play *Top Girls* are depicted as already emancipated and self-identified; as a result, they do not struggle to establish self-worth and do not examine the patriarchal bonds and values from which they have been freed. The protagonists in *Top Girls*, on the other hand, lack a sense of sisterhood and solidarity, which they do not apply even when their employment at the Top Girls Employment Agency, which evokes a caring ethic, is taken into account. On the other hand, they are portrayed as tough women who have developed a tough 'macho' approach, which they regard as a necessary and desirable trait in any woman seeking a lucrative job and professional distinction. As a result, women who do not represent "tough birds" or who lack the skills to be recognized are completely marginalized, and the sisterly solidarity that was so important for women's liberation in the 1970s, as well as the assistance of powerful women, are denied to them, regardless of the ties that bind an influential woman to the powerless woman.

Margaret Thatcher's policy emphasising individual skills and enterprise, fierceness when desiring to be successful, patriarchal family, individual responsibility for oneself, and women's role as care-givers, all linked to the belief that women should stay at home with their children, has had a significant influence on Marlene and other powerful 'top girls.' Thatcher's regressive approach toward the achievements of the second wave of feminism led women to confront existential choices between a conventional role at the heart of the home and public recognition, which required the cultivation of ruthlessness and resolve. As a result, women in *Top Girls* are portrayed as victims of the period, as Thatcherism undermines sisterly solidarity by emphasising individuality and fierce competition without regard for others, leading to women seeing one another as enemies. A woman who possesses the talents that Thatcherism demands has a chance to be recognized, successful, and even more powerful than men, if she abandons solidarity with other women who lack the necessary abilities or who choose a different path in life. The outcome of it turns to making such a woman disloyal to feminist ideals by denying sisterly solidarity. However, as Churchill seems to emphasize, there is no other option offered by Thatcher's policy when considering the fact that such a woman wants to achieve another feminist goal, namely public recognition and success.

*Top Girls*, which rejects Thatcher's severe conservative policies and promotes, among other things, individual abilities, monetarism, authoritarianism, and hierarchy, seems to describe what feminists have begun to notice. Women's subjugation is ingrained in all of our society's social institutions and ideas, rather than the consequence of a purposeful plot by males, or at least not solely of a conscious conspiracy by men. As a result, in *Top Girls*, Churchill portrays the importance of what feminists realized and what those years in Great Britain brought; a strong belief in and a return to socialist feminism, whose importance had been overshadowed in the late 1970s by a radical feminism emphasizing patriarchal oppression. The dramatic rise of feminism was followed, at the start of Thatcher's

administration, by a brief collapse of feminist organizations, which was part of a larger trend of many campaigns and organizations around welfare, housing, and opposition to government cutbacks withering as political optimism faded. As a result of these implications and the imperative of mobilizing feminist power, socialist feminism and feminist action stood for the outcome and acknowledgement of the seriousness of women's condition in the early 1980s, as the play *Top Girls* illustrates.

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