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邱琪爾之《醋湯姆》與《頂尖女子》中與父權共謀的女人

The Women’s Collusion with Patriarchy in Caryl Churchill's *Vinegar Tom* and *Top Girls*

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摘要

凱蘿・邱琪兒在《醋湯姆》和《頂尖女孩》主要運用社會女性主義的觀點，探討女性在資本主義與父權的宰制下所遭受的壓迫。兩部作品中不但關注女性在社會上的地位，更重視在不同的社會階級下，女性會因階級上的差異而自我分化。

第二章在分析《醋湯姆》 中，邊緣弱勢女性在面對父權壓迫時的種種煎熬、憤怒、與掙扎。《醋湯姆》以十七世紀基督徒獵殺女巫事件為背景，劇中被指控為女巫者，大多為社會邊緣人。其中指控他人為女巫者，竟也不乏女性，他們為了自我的利益和生存，願與父權共謀，欺壓弱勢階級，但自身也受父權機制的壓制。此外，本劇穿插的歌曲將十七世紀迫害女巫的厭女思想連結到二十世紀持續詆毀女性的態度。

第三章則著重《頂尖女孩》，雖然劇中出現諸位歷史上的成功女性，但至今女性仍為了追求成功而缺乏團結甚至放棄母職。1980 年代柴契爾主義（Thatcherism）的「成功女性」可以跨越階級的藩籬並獲取職場上的成就。但劇中批評 Marlene，這種為了事業成功而放棄家庭的女性，不過是複製了另一種父權思維而已。另外，第三章也探討邱琪兒創新的寫作手法，她認為向父權屈從的女性角色在性別扮演上皆有其目的。女性角色過度強調外在的服裝藉此討好男性支配者，並展現自己的社會地位。例如，Marlene 刻意穿著女性服裝遮掩自身，實際上是在遵從父權體制。

第四章為總結，邱琪兒在兩部劇本中指出部分的女性不願意團結，也拒絕幫助大多數的女性尋求轉變。藉由這兩部作品邱琪兒檢視女性間的階級衝突：女性為了自身利益和成就壓迫其他女性；遭受壓迫的女性因難以離開困境而敵對成功的女性。那些屈服於父權的女性不單強化了父權體制，更對處於不利地位的女性造就更加無望的未來。

Abstract

This study of *Vinegar Tom* and *Top Girls* demonstrates how Caryl Churchill asserts her socialist feminist concerns of intertwining class and gender issues. Both plays reveal the relationships between economic situation and gender oppression. She makes explicit that the class hierarchy plays a significant role in determining women's experiences. The power and injustice are practiced by patriarchy and capitalism which uphold the oppression for women. The main concern of both plays is the indictment of the women in powerful class who participate in the patriarchal system.

In *Vinegar Tom*, the witch accusations result from the patriarchal and class prejudice against poor and marginalized women. The power and interdependence of patriarchy and capitalism is manifested by some women who are patriarchal agents to victimize the women of lower class. In addition, by using the songs, Churchill presents shocking connection between medieval misogynist attitudes to witches and people's continuing denigrating attitudes to women in general.

Top Girls manifests, in spite of the historical women's success, lack of solidarity and abandonment of motherhood remain unchanged in the present time. Thatcherite politics promoted the image of the high-flying female achiever who was capable of transcending class boundaries and of attaining material success in the work place. However, in this play, the successful woman, Marlene is a believer of patriarchy in disguise of a woman who forsakes her origins and family. In addition, there is a theme of performed gender roles in both plays. The women who collude with patriarchy focus on their dressing to achieve the practical purpose.

In both plays, Churchill addresses the women who do not build solidarity or foster

change for the majority of women. The women of upper class oppress the other women to attain their achievements or pursue their own benefit. The women of lower class cannot escape the plight and they are hostile to those upper class women's advances. The women's collusion with patriarchy strengthens the stable of the patriarchal system and causes a bleaker environment for those disadvantaged women.

Introduction

In the history of patriarchal culture, men dominated the ownership of property, written language and theatre. According to *Strategies of Political Theater: Post-war British Playwrights*, there were few female classic productions in the field of British theater; in *Feminist Literary Theory*, only fifteen percent of all registered playwrights were women in the twentieth century. Before the 1960s, there was little space for women playwrights to develop themselves in the male-oriented theater. Invisible in theatrical achievements, women playwrights were largely excluded from the dominant culture.

However, in the late 1960s, the feminist theater emerged to create the alternative performances which present women's thoughts and emotion, exploring the issues from female perspectives. Some theater collectives, such as Joint Stock Company formed in 1974 and Monstrous Regiment founded in 1975, have given more voices to female characters and have concentrated on female experiences to enhance the role of women in theater. These two groups are devoted to finding the space which probes into the feminist ideas and politics in theatrical practice.

In the early1970s, the British playwright, Caryl Churchill is the one who attains to the highest achievement. She was born in London in 1938 and returned to England to attend Oxford University where she wrote plays that were performed by student theater groups. After her graduation, she wrote several radio plays and television scripts. Her first professional production is *Owners*, which was performed at London's Royal Court Theater in 1972. Having written more than forty plays, she is made well-known mostly because of *Cloud Nine* (1979) and *Top Girls* (1982). Her works probe into the interaction of gender with race, class, and sexuality. The dense social and historical texture of class and gender relations in her plays locates her more

specifically in the area of socialist feminist. Churchill also mentioned, "if pushed to labels, I would be prepared to take on both social and feminist" (Itzin 279). As a socialist feminist, she mostly analyzes women's subordination which is in a coherent and systematic way that integrates class and sex.

Caryl Churchill deals with class issues in almost all of her works. Sometimes women can be a group of united victims under patriarchal capitalism but they also can be separated by different class interests. Therefore, the difference between the middle class and working class women might undermine their sisterhood. Women in the privileged position in fact are assimilated into the patriarchal system and they oppress women in the working class.

Among her numerous works, I will focus on two specific plays, *Vinegar Tom* (1976) and *Top Girls* (1982) because they share a prominent feature: almost all the characters of both works are female but the patriarchy can still work successfully in these two plays. I intend to indicate the oppressive forces of women on other women due to their different classes, and to analyze how these women disrupt the vestimentary sign-system of feminine under Churchill's writing theatricality. Caryl Churchill in both *Vinegar Tom* and *Top Girls* manifests that women's collusion with patriarchy only deteriorates women's plight in gender inequalities. I argue that while the women in *Vinegar Tom* collude with patriarchy to oppress marginalized women for their own interest, *Top Girls* creates the image of the superwomen who in fact follow the male rules to exploit other women.

The innovations of form and content in both works certainly have received the critics' attention for decades. Criticisms of the past forty years pay close attention to the issues of the marginalized women, the impact of patriarchy on them, and the songs incorporated in *Vinegar Tom*. David Zane Mairowitz's commentary on this play

sets Churchill's new feminist dimensions against the prime of plays about witchcraft, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. In *Vinegar Tom*, Churchill does not arrange the tragic male hero to be the persecuted center of dramatic action and attention. Instead, she sets a collective representation of women-centered oppression. Feminist critic Michelene Wandor criticizes that the complexity of the narrative is undermined by the crudeness of the songs and the integration of different art forms in one production are difficult and need more analysis of *Vinegar Tom* (169-70). Robert L. Neblett praises the theatricality of *Vinegar Tom*; he states that "the feminist message is centralized within these songs; without them, the play is little more than a historical drama about the witch trials of the seventeenth century" (101). Based on the feminist perspective, Elain Aston considers that this play offers a way of representing the marginalized and the absent in the dominant systems of representation. Through the songs, she asserts that patriarchal logic manipulates sign-system, arbitrarily inventing the signs of women. She believes, "the phallocentric order is disturbed by the unnatural presence of the offside body" (27), because the absent body of menstruating and the ageing women present a way of showing threat to the dominant order.

Top Girls, has aroused more numerous researches, with emphasis on the concept of new women and the absence of the father in the play. Janet Brown declares that *Top Girls* catches the next wave of feminism, which is "a feminism that focused not on the individual women's struggle for autonomy, but on the need for a radical transformation of society" (117). Lisa Merrill refers to Simone de Beauvoir's term that "ambitious women and the heroines are strange monsters" (71). The whole play is the process about how Marlene is transformed from a heroine into a strange monster. Joseph Morahl points out that all female casting shows the prejudice that "women should be political only about women's issues" (382). Paul Rosefeldt declares that

"the daughters in *Top Girls* are truly obsessed with the bodiless or absent father" (132). Marohl and Rosefeldt focus on the theatricality of the absence of male characters on stage. In addition, Michael Swanson emphasizes the oppressor/oppressed relation between mother and daughter in *Top Girls.* The mother and daughter relationship is based on power rather on mutuality (55).

Most researches of these two plays mentioned above are based on the new dramatic skills and the analysis of the protagonists. The research about the power relation of social structure in the gathering of women themselves still leaves much to be investigated. Therefore, I choose *Vinegar Tom* and *Top Girls* as the focus of this thesis, from the perspectives of socialist feminism and Judith Butler's gender theory, to offer a social, contextual reading of both plays.

In *Feminism and Theatre*, the term, material feminism, is another name of socialist feminism which posits that class determines the situation of all people within capitalism. Sue- Ellen Case states,

> The dynamics of class consciousness are central in the formation of all economic, social and cultural institution. Class biases determine the attitudes of individuals in the spheres of labor, interpersonal relationships and the production of cultural artefacts. (82-83)

In other words, she highlights class as the crucial element that accounts for the oppression of women. Michelene Wandor also states,

> Socialist feminism, on the other hand, proposes changes both in the position of women as women, and in the power relations of the very basis of society itself—its industrial production, and its political relation. (136)

Socialist feminism emphasizes the differences, particularly the social and economic differences between women, by situating the gender oppression in the analysis of

class. While radical feminism tends to view women's oppression to lie exclusively in patriarchy, socialist feminism examines the social structure and material condition to explain gender oppression. From the perspective of socialist feminism, the problem of women as both worker and mother, producer and reproducer needs to be formulated. Male supremacy and capitalism are defined as the core relations determining the oppression.

First, women's oppression is caused by uneven division of economy in capitalism. The division of labor often strengthens both patriarchy and capitalism. "When capitalism is viewed instead as a system of power relations, it is described as a society in which every kind of transactional relation is fundamentally exploitative" (Tong 98). From Heidi Hartmann's viewpoint, the partnership between patriarchy and capitalism is complex because, firstly, women earn lower wages than men, which perpetuates men's material advantage in the labor market, and secondly in the early nineteenth century industrialization, women are paid wages by capitalists to do service at home, like childcare, which benefits men directly. Women serve men and their family, and also serve capitalists as consumers. Women's home responsibility in turn reinforces their inferior labor market position. In this economic structure, "Patriarchy reinforces capital control and capitalist values shape the definition of patriarchal good. . . if we examine the characteristic of men such as competitive, rationalistic, dominating, they are much like our description of the dominant values of capitalist society" (Hartmann 21). Therefore, in capitalist society, there is sexist ideology which serves the dual purpose of "glorifying male characteristics/capitalist values, and denigrating female characteristics/social need" (Hartmann 21). In this capital society, women are looked down because they are regarded as emotional, irrational and dependent. The interaction between women's position in the workforce

and in the family thus produces a powerful economic and ideological entrenchment of their subordination both inside and outside of the home. Hartman concludes that although women are in no-win situation, women should not give up the struggle against capitalism and patriarchy. Women need to keep exploring the issues of feminism and build their own power base to establish a practice which can fight against patriarchy and capitalism.

Secondly, socialist feminists discern two modes of production: the industrial and familial; the first gives rise to capitalist exploitation and the second to patriarchal exploitation. The husband's appropriation of the wife's domestic labor within marriage is the first facet of women's; the second is male control of reproduction. Shulamith Fireston locates women's biological, reproductive nature as the cause for their entrapment and oppression by men (48). Zillah Eisenstein examines the economic relationship between the domestic sphere and capital, as well as addressing the power relations between men and women: "Patriarchy has been sustained through the sexual division of labor and society which has been based on a cultural, social, economic usage of women's body as a vessel of reproduction" (50). The sexual definition of woman as mother either keeps her in the home doing unpaid labor or enables her to be hired with a lower wage because of her defined sexual inferiority. Maxine Molyneux concludes, "It is the work of child-care which constitutes the most entrapping material condition for women and which at the same time is of the most benefit to the capitalist state" (25).

Furthermore, Silvia Federici points out capitalism has created a true masterpiece at the expense of women by denying housework a wage and making the work of a mother or housewife simply an act out of love. She states, "Housework was transformed into a natural attribute, rather than being recognized as work, because it

was destined to be unwaged" (Federici 16). Under such a capitalist context, because housework is totally naturalized and sexualized, it becomes a feminine attribute (Federici 18). Sharing the house work appeared in the 1970s; a new phenomenon—the househusband—begun to emerge. However, most women were frustrated by the low wages in the labor market so they still depended on their husband's wage. Therefore, despite a trend towards the desexualization of housework in the 1970s, most of unpaid housework were done by women in the capitalist society.

Moreover, Juliet Mitchell claims that "reproduction is a sad mimicry of production" (22). She mentions that the mother's alienation from her child, whom the mother perceives is a product of her own creation. She states,

> A person's biological origin is an abstraction. The child as an autonomous person inevitably threatens the activity which claims to create it continually merely as a possession of the parent. Possessions are felt as extension of the self. The child as a possession is supremely this. Anything the child does is therefore a threat to the mother herself who has renounces her autonomy through this misconception of her reproductive role. (22)

The reification of motherhood masks the unpaid labor, unpaid devotion, the strong sense of self-sacrifice, and the alienation to which women as mothers are subject in the context of a capitalist and patriarchal system. The two reasons mentioned above result in mainly the women's plight in both plays.

Churchill's *Vinegar Tom* was co-created and produced with Monstrous Regiment in 1976. When she decided to produce a play about witchcraft, she started to research the sixteenth-and-seventeenth-century witch hunt in the spring of 1976. She was also encouraged by *Scum*, the previous work of Monstrous Regiment which focused on the experiences of Parisian washer women in 1871 Paris commune. This play motivated

Churchill to analyze the interaction of gender ideology and changing socio-economic conditions. Therefore, the social and political perspectives of her later work begin to emerge in *Vinegar Tom.* Organized into twenty-one scenes with seven interspersed songs, the play sets in seventeenth-century rural England, the period of the last major English witch hunt. In the introduction of *Vinegar Tom*, Churchill states, "I wanted to write a play about witches with no witches in it; a play not about evil, hysteria and possession by the devil but about poverty, humiliation and prejudice, and how women accused of witchcraft saw themselves"(*VT* 129-30)[1]. The women in this play are not witches but depicted as the weakest members in the society, such as an old widow, a single mother, and the women who do not conform to acceptable social standards.

This play makes explicit the patriarchal connections among the institutions of church, state, and family and illustrates the formation of misogynism by using a mixture of historical and religious documentation and references. Churchill credits Alan Macfarlane's thorough social study of prosecutions for witchcraft, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (1970), which shows "how petty and every day the witches' offences were" (*VT* 129). The play is also based on the work of feminist scholars which had initiated the re-examination of such historical phenomena as witch hunts. In Churchill's preface to the play, she mentions *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers* (1973), which links the witch hunt to the suppression of female lay medical practitioners as the exclusively male medical profession gained ascendancy. According to the book, "women made up some 85 percent of those executed-old women, young women and children" (Ehrenreich and English 24). Furthermore, Anne Barstow in *Witchcraze* states that the men accused of witchcraft "were related to women convicted of sorcery—husbands, and sons, or

[1] *Vinegar Tom* (London: Methuen, 1990) is hereinafter abbreviated as *VT*.

grandsons—and thus were not perceived as originators of witchcraft" (54). Hence, witchcraft was thought of as something peculiarly female. By calling attention to some of Churchill's sources in the preface to the play, she extends the idea of staging the historical event to represent the particularity and significance of women's persecution.

Vinegar Tom is a story of a small English society, "in which economic disparities combine with random misfortune to produce a witch hunt" (Kritizer 87). The two main systems of domination and oppressive force in this play are patriarchy and capitalism. Four women, Joan, Alice, Susan and Ellen are persecuted and condemned to torture because their unconventional behaviors threaten the sexual and economic hierarchy. All four of them try to live in the autonomous manner, sexually or economically, but are violently expelled from the society. In addition, this play focuses primarily on the relationships between women so these women's dilemmas not only relate to men but also to other women. As Allan G. Johnson states, "Patriarchy is a kind of society, and a society is more than a collection of people. As such, patriarchy does not refer to. . . collection of men, but to a kind of society in which men and women participate. By itself this poses enough problems without the added burden of equating society with a group of people" (5). Since patriarchy refers to a society which consists of both men and women, some women might possibly speak for patriarchy. These women collude with patriarchy and oppress the other women for their own interest or survival. In the play, Margery, the first oppressor, recognizes and introduces the stereotypical witches, and Goody, the second oppressor, catches and hangs them. To survive, Susan accuses her best friend of being a witch and colludes with male power unconsciously. In the final scene, Kramer and Sprenger are played by women, which provides a graphic illustration of women's alienation

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from themselves and draw attention to women's unwitting complicity in their own and other women's oppression.

The other play, *Top Girls*, was staged at the Royal Court Theater in 1982, during the early years of Margaret Thatcher's first term as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. She was called The Iron Lady by the Soviet Media because her of tough-talking rhetoric. At the time when Thatcher acceded to power, Britain was facing severe economic instability due to high inflation, monetary restraints and unemployment. In order to tackle this situation, she planned to focus on reducing state intervention by encouraging the privatization of major nationalized industries. She also weakened the power of unions by stimulating individual initiative, and strengthened small business through lower direct taxation. "The 1980s became a time when women had a figurehead of power in Margaret Thatcher, but no guarantee of equal opportunity" (Tycer 21).

The individualism of the 1980s challenged the ideas of sisterhood in the 1970s. "While women who were able to enter well-paid professions, start their own business, or buy property could do well in the 1980s, their lower-paid counterparts had increasingly less security" (Tycer 21). The policies affected low income mothers who need to have multiple part time jobs to fit their family responsibilities. Churchill states,

> Thatcher had just become prime minister; there was talk about whether it was an advance to have a woman prime minister if it was someone with policies like hers: She may be a woman but she isn't a sister, she maybe a sister but she isn't a comrade. And, in fact, things have got much worse for women under Thatcher. (qtd. in Mann 78)

Therefore, *Top Girls* shows Churchill's critque regarding a social emphasis on

capitalist success over sisterly solidarity. Marlene is a “high flyer” woman in a chief executive position, who has no consideration for her sister, Joyce, who represents the working class without any chances of climbing the corporate ladder. In this play, women are described as the participants in the economic system and they succeed in the male world by internalizing the patriarchal rules. In *Top Girls*, Churchill engages her audience in questioning capitalist strivings. “By presenting the moral and ethical deficiencies of women whose notion of success is making it by male terms in a male world rather than attempting to change the exploitive structure of that world, Churchill is advocating a social feminist stance” (Merrill 85).

Top Girls opens with a celebration dinner at a restaurant for the protagonist, Marlene, who gets promotion in her company. She invites five women who are historical and fictional women to share their life stories about the experiences of being daughters, wives, mistresses and mothers. As they share their outstanding lifetime achievements, they are often overlapping speeches, lacking common ground and interlocutory exchange, which expose contrasting characters and attitudes. It is important to specify that the women in *Top Girls* are not represented as a uniform community, but as a group which allows plural identities to emerge. In Act Two, it is the typical office scene at the employment agency where Marlene and her co-workers are running their ordinary work, including three interviews. Here, Marlene endorses the phallocentric system by deflating a young female interviewee’s hopes and send her to a clerical job without any prospects. She has attained professional success by the appropriation of masculine behavior. Her model of success brings into attention that the acquisition of power by women who have no concern for the powerless does not constitute a feminist victory. Benedict Nightingale mentions,

> What use is female emancipation, Churchill asks, if it transforms the clever

> women into predators and does nothing for the stupid, the weak and the helpless? Does freedom and feminism consist of aggressively adopting the very values that have for centuries oppressed your sex? (27)

The final Act jumps backward to the previous year and occurs when Marlene visits Joyce. This visit is manipulated by Angie who is Marlene's daughter in reality. The sisters argue about their childhoods, different life choices and politics. Joyce identifies herself with the working-class background and maintains close familial ties that cause her life of economic drudgery. Marlene expresses admiration for Margaret Thatcher and emphasizes her career at the expense of her family life. She aspires toward the career ladder to pursue an ethic of individualism, so she feels no affection for Joyce and Angie. The play ends with Angie's awakening from a nightmare uttering the final word: frightening.

While *Vinegar Tom* started with the interest generated by the Women's Movement, *Top Girls* was staged at a time when women needed to examine more closely the complexities of feminism. The oppressive force between female communities under patriarchal capitalism is explicated through *Top Girls* and *Vinegar Tom*. Churchill creates the female community and subverts the traditional structure, in which man is regarded as male subject and woman is constituted as the other. From a social feminist standpoint, she devotes to opposing the conventional theoretical framework that confirms patriarchal ideology and the low status of women. In sum, in *Top Girls* and *Vinegar Tom*, Churchill creates a new mode of expression to restructure the gender roles.

In both plays, there are women who do not collude with the patriarchy and who dare to speak their thought to ask for a change. For example, both Alice in *Vinegar Tom* and Dull Gret in *Top Girls*, are the revolutionary characters of the play. They

deliver a speech to re-delineate patriarchal conventional terms, which makes them different from other stereotypical women in such a society. Their statements can be regarded as a starting point for women's revolution against social oppressors' agents. It is believed that Churchill intends to portray that women can still have a voice even if they are oppressed; thus, she transmits her feminist voice to condemn patriarchal and capitalist forces through these characters.

Patriarchal ideology is that masculine subjectivity depends upon the identification of the feminine as the other, within the closed structure of the opposition of subject and object. The patriarchal capitalist culture dominates rules about characters, actions, language and other theatrical resources to present the images of powerful men and submissive women. However, through the female performances in these two plays, some women expose their secrets that they collude with patriarchy by their gender performance. Like in *Vinegar Tom*, the cross-gendered display of the final scene disrupts hierarchy of masculine and feminine. Judith Butler states:

> The presumption of binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it. When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice… (*Gender Trouble* 10)

For Butler, the sexed body gains its meaning through the performances of gender which are culturally regulated by the heterosexual ideology. Churchill arranges the female characters to roleplay the male characters to break the subject/object opposition, which reifies patriarchy's masculine/feminine opposition. The device of cross-gender manifests the floatability of binary gender system, which implies the

persecution of the powerless women from the female in disguise of the male. In *Vinegar Tom*, the cross-dressing draws attention to women's complicity, albeit unwitting, in their own and other women's oppression.

In addition, in *Top Girls*, there is a female community which gathers the different voices from different historical backgrounds and social classes. It is important to specify that the women in *Top Girls* do not represent a uniform community, but as a group which allows plural identities to emerge. As suggested by Ryan Claycomb, feminist playwrights are not satisfied merely with recovering women's identity, but they pay more attention on how women act themselves (527). Although the women in the first act of *Top Girls* express their desire to exit from the oppression of patriarchy, they show their favor of feminine costume or degrade themselves in order to please the male dominator. For instance, Nijo, a courtesan, describes her love of clothes, silks designed to attract and please the Emperor, and Griselda's narrative signifies the objectification of the feminine in male gaze. In addition, Marlene in *Top Girls* is like the conventional man as associated with dominant and masculine values. But she takes care not to wear trousers in the office to project a super woman image. Her feminine dressing is simply for a practical purpose to let her exploit other women easily, and it enables her to escape from the lower class under patriarchal capitalism.

As Butler mentions, "drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity" (*Gender Trouble* 174). To some degree, although Marlene's appearance is feminine, her essence inside is masculine. Butler states, "if gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which

an act or attribute might be measured . . . the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as regulated fiction" (180). Marlene wears the feminine costume deliberately, which foregrounds the performativity of the feminine dress code. She can hide behind the feminine mask but actually she stands on patriarchal alignment.

In *Vinegar Tom* and *Top Girls*, Churchill focuses on the connection between patriarchal-capitalist ideology and the material condition of women's situation. In what follows, Chapter Two, which is centered on *Vinegar Tom,* discusses that many women are not only trapped in the marginalized social position but are also oppressed by other women. In Chapter Three, which is centered on *Top Girls*, I analyze how the successful women follow the patriarchal rules and look down upon the other women from the lower class. Finally, in both *Vinegar Tom* and *Top Girls*, I adopt the gender theory to distinguish between sisters and foes through the different voices and performances in the female communities of the two plays. In both *Vinegar Tom* and *Top Girls*, Churchill challenges the culturally imposed ideology of femininity. She devotes to challenging the form and unfixing boundaries in order to unmask those women who in fact obey the patriarchal rules to exploit other women for the pursuit of their own interests.

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Chapter Two: The Collapse of Sisterhood

The Antagonistic Female Community in *Vinegar Tom*

"While socialist and Marxist feminist thinking was never the dominant voice of feminism in the industrialized world, during the early years of feminist second wave and throughout the 1970s, [socialist feminism] had a profound effect on feminist theory and practice" (Hennessy and Ingraham 4). The women's liberation movement of the 1970s focused on uniting women as sisters and on politicizing women according to the slogan "the personal is political." This motif offered women a chance to explore their individual position within the context of collective ideas and debate. The slogan was to indicate the basis of a feminist epistemology, shattering the traditionally imposed boundaries between private and public life. In the same period, the socialist feminist, Margaret Benton writes as the epigraph for her essay: "The position of women rests, as everything in our complex society, on an economic base" (qtd. in Hennessy and Ingraham 10). She positions that economic arrangement—the division of labor that is the base of class—has a definite determining effect under capitalism. Benston's lead in seeing women's labor as socially necessary and historically essential to capitalist accumulation. Michele Barrett considers that the essential feature of capitalism's gendered division of labor is gender ideology which presents women's oppression as natural. She identifies the ideology of gender division that "operates independently of biology to establish the relationship between sexuality and procreation as much closer for women than for men" (Barrett 69-70). By breaking down the components of the ideology of gender division, Barrett argues that it can be changed, despite its pervasive acceptance as simple fact rather than ideology.

It was in the 1970s that feminism investigated the theory and practice of Marxism and Socialism. A re-evaluation of class politics became an integral part of

socialist-feminist theater. At the same time, Caryl Churchill produced *Vinegar Tom* to examine the custom of witch-hunt from the socialist feminist perspective. Vinegar Tom is the name of a cat-like beast that has engraved along with Matthew Hopkins, the famous witch hunter in the seventeenth century. This play extends the persecution and political witch hunting to a discriminating projection of evil onto women, particularly old, poor, unconventional, and sexually assertive women. As mentioned before, Churchill wrote *Vinegar Tom* while in association with in a women's theater collective named Monstrous Regiment. In an interview with Linda Fitzsimmons, she explains about her collaboration with Monstrous Regiment:

> We were all interested in women who were marginal to society being made scapegoats and seen as witches, rather than in witchcraft practices that might have been happening. (Fitzsimmons 34)

In her introduction to *Vinegar Tom*, Churchill explains that her play is meant to be read as a reflection of women's lived reality.

Vinegar Tom, with twenty-one episodes separated by songs, presents events in a village where economic inequalities and patriarchy work together to bring about witch-hunt. Female characters dominate the dramatic content and form the center of a full community. The intersection of gender and class oppression causes the double oppression for these women. Moreover, the different social classes of women result in the different circumstance of their lives. Therefore, in *Vinegar Tom*, I argue that Caryl Churchill refuses to idealize femininity. Power struggle divides women and upholds patriarchy; i.e., for fear of losing their status and privileges, higher class women collude with patriarchy and oppress lower class women. In addition, through the juxtaposition of the songs in the play, Churchill correlates the treatment of the women derogated as witches within the play to the unequal treatment within patriarchy.

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First, I intend to deal with the question of differential power among women in terms of their relation to men and the class structure. In the opening of the scene, when Alice meets an unknown gentleman who has copulated with her in a roadside ditch, she declares, "anytime I'm happy someone says it's a sin" (*VT* 136). She frankly admits that she enjoys sex and does not desire to get married. She is a young, unmarried mother and prostitute from the lower class. She rejects accepted sexual norms and the stereotypical role of a woman. Alice's mother, Joan is an old woman and on the edge of poverty. Her marginal position makes her become an economic burden in the capital society. Through the first song, "Nobody Sings," Churchill presents the individual oppression experienced by Alice and Joan. This song is concerned with the invisibility of women represented by the sign of Woman. While young women like Alice receive their definition of women from patriarchy "blinded by [their] beauty," the old women like Joan are "blinded by [their] age" (*VT* 142) under patriarchal definition. Furthermore, there is also an allusion to the collusion of women in this song, which foreshadows their oppression caused by women later.

> I looked at all the women
> When I passed them in the street.
> Nobody sings about it
> But it happens all the time. (*VT* 141)

"It" in the passage refers to women's collusion with patriarchy. The song laments the women's hopeless attitude to patriarchal framework, "as well as implicating women in this process because of their apparent complicity in patriarchal signification" (Adiseshiah 122). Later, Alice and Joan will be accused of witch and hanged by Margery who comes from the middle class. This song laments the situation that sometimes women can be the victimizer to victimize the powerless women.

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Joan and Alice's social and economic marginalization results from lack of male attachments. The absence of men in their lives let them stand outside the patriarchal control. They have more chances than women who have husbands and fathers to suffer from the persecution as witches. Because the nuclear family is a valuable stabilizing force in a capitalist society. "Women who choose not to identify closely with a man and conform to the heterosexual norm of marriage, family and housewife are even more isolated and ostracized" (Eisenstein 50-51). The capitalist patriarchal economy stabilizes the society through the sexual division of labor in the family, which is a system of hierarchical order and control. Because Joan and Alice do not belong to this system, they threaten the stability of such sexual and economic hierarchy. They become the social outcasts who are accused of witch practies and sentenced to death.

In addition, in *Vinegar Tom*, Alice, the revolutionary character, can be regarded as the feminist voice. When she waits to be hanged in the public square, she vents the anger of women's oppression. "I am not a witch. But I wish I was. If I could live I'd be a witch now after what they've done . . . Oh if I could meet with the devil now I'd give him anything if he'd give me power . . ." (*VT* 175). Although her speech makes no difference to the outcome, it serves a political purpose in that "it breaks the silence that has aided her oppressors throughout history" and "by renouncing powerlessness even at the price of embracing an imagined evil, Alice offers a political response to the narrative from within that narrative" (Kritizer 94). In relation to Butler's concept of agency, agency exists when a repetition of the subject deforms subversively and exposes its construction. As Butler states, in a sense, all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; agency, then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition. (*Gender Trouble* 185)

In Butler's definition, agency is extremely dependent on the subject's surrounding society. She claims that subjects can just exercise agency when they are not restricted by society. Especially, agency of the characters is scrutinized to examine the extent to which they are able to defend their rights or oppose their oppressive force. Churchill has provided agency to some of her characters to resist gender and class oppression. Alice is an active and subversive character who criticizes the patriarchal oppressors directly and who does not simply accept what social standards impose on her. However, Alice's agency is limited by the other powerful women of the middle class. She is unable to exercise agency, as according to Butler when a subject is confined with his/her society, his/her agency is limited. Thus, Alice cannot exercise agency freely even though she struggles to defend herself.

Betty is also in danger of being accused of witchcraft because of her rebellion against patriarchal authority. There is a difference in class between Alice and Betty: the former is a poor village girl; the latter is the landowner's daughter. Betty is saved from being hanged because of her class status. She refuses to accept an arranged marriage, which is to be constructed as sickness by her family. When she is tied to a chair and bled by the doctor for her irrational behavior, she asks herself:

> Why am I tied? Tied to be bled. Why am I bled? Because I was screaming. Why was I screaming? Because I'm bad. Why was I bad? Because I was happy. Why was I happy? Because I ran out by myself and got away from them and – Why was I screaming? Because I'm bad. (*VT* 149)

In *The History of Sexuality*, Michael Foucault suggests that woman's body becomes subject and is given meaning by modern science through the three-fold process of hysterization. He identifies one of these processes as the means "whereby it was integrated into the sphere of medical practices, by reason of a pathology intrinsic to

it" (Foucault 104). The doctor diagnoses Betty's sickness that is caused by female hysteria. He says, "Hysteria is a woman's weakness. Hysterion, Greek, the womb. Excessive blood causes an imbalance in the humors. The noxious gases that form inwardly every month rise to the brain and cause behavior quite contrary to the patient's real feelings" (*VT* 149). The doctor labels Betty as a hysterical patient and uses his treatment as a tool to torture her to accept the forced marriage.

Later, when Betty asks Ellen for help, Ellen tells her, "Your best chance of being left along is marry a rich man, because it's part of his honour to have a wife who does nothing . . . What would you rather? Marry a poor man and work all day" (*VT* 169). This description reminds us of Betty's class privilege, which exempts her not only from labor but also from a witchcraft accusation. Moreover, Betty's final surrender to the marriage results from her suspicion that "maybe I've been bewitched. If the witches are stopped, maybe I'll get well" (*VT* 169). Betty internalizes the continual patriarchal definition of her alleged illness so that eventually she agrees to a marriage. The dreadful social situation makes her believe in the doctor and she is seen to succumb to the power of patriarchy in the process. However, Kritzer claims, "Betty's usefulness as the glue in an economic alliance protects her from accusations of witchcraft" (92). Her situation is different from other women due to her status of upper class, which prevents her from death. Here, Churchill emphasizes that the class difference in women causes the distinct treatment to women, which strengthens the oppression to those marginal women.

In *Vinegar Tom*, the issue of women's complicity in their own and other women's subjugation is openly dramatized. Most women's miserable lives are caused by other women who join the agent of patriarchy unconsciously or by the women who oppress the other women deliberately to pursue their own benefits. Susan, the only married

woman accused of witchcraft, is a poor housewife, the mother of three children, who has had several miscarriages. Although Susan is certain about not wanting the child, she is afraid of taking control of her body. Alison Jagger applies Marx's theory of the alienated wage labor's conditions to women's conditions and believes that women who are mothers experience alienation as well. "Women's sexual alienation is not the only form of specifically feminine alienation in contemporary society. Women are also alienated as mothers. Just as women do not control how and how often they express their sexuality, neither do they control the conditions of their motherhood" (Jaggar 310). Therefore, Susan depends on the religion to comfort herself: "I must think on Eve who brought the sin into the world that got me pregnant. I must think on how woman tempts man and how she pays God with her pain having a baby" (*VT* 146).

Susan constantly gets pregnant and is accused of being a witch because of the abortion she has had. According to the social code, she has been condemned because she is against nature by challenging the society's understanding of motherhood. The community tries to make her feel guilty about what she has done as reflected in the statement made by Packer, the witch hunter: "you went to this good witch, and you destroyed the child in your womb by witchcraft" (*VT* 167). Therefore, she is regarded as the witch who cruelly destroys her child. Furthermore, Susan's trial results from her failure to fulfill her duties as a commodity of exchange in the agreement of marriage. Her abortion and the death of her child represent a crime against the property of her husband; as Packer mentions, her behavior "is a grievous offence" (*VT* 167). Because the oppressing force of male authorities aligns against her, Susan eventually accepts and absorbs the male definitions. After her condemnation, she says, "I was a witch and never know it. I killed my babies . . . I'm so wicked" (*VT*

174). She believes that she was a bad mother and admits her fault. In addition, Susan is also the cause of Alice's death. She tells Packer,

> [Alice] took me to the cunning woman and they made me take a portion to destroy the baby in my womb . . . and she made a puppet . . . but that was my baby girl, and the next day she was sick . . . and dies. (*VT* 167)

Susan blames Alice for making her take Ellen's herbal potion and condemns Alice of witchery which causes her baby's death. She accepts her own guilt and expresses regret for carrying out abortion. Here, a powerful moment signaling the success of witch hunts as a mode of social control is Susan's betrayal of Alice. "Churchill shows how women can remain unconscious of their oppression and victimize themselves and others" (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 33).

Among the characters in the play, Margery, a middle-class farmer and land owner, is wealthier than other women because she has married with Jack. This couple strives for economic success; however, their cattle start dying, and they immediately search for a scapegoat. Margery, the first one who proposes that it is all caused by the witch, points to Joan who has cast a spell on her by boiling her urine. She tells Jack her suspicion so they ask Ellen to confirm their thought. Ellen gives them a mirror and lets them look for the face of their misfortunes in it. They both see Joan, which echoes Churchill's belief that witchcraft exists in the mind of persecutor. They fail to see their images in the mirror and refuse to see that they are the perpetrators actually in the play. Although Margery is exploited as Jack's wife, as domestic labor through her wageless house work, she has collusion with the dominant order and has become a capital oppressor.

Although Margery is never in danger of being hanged because she succeeds in suppressing her anguish and maintaining her expected role by being a submissive

wife. The song is sung at the end of Scene Twelve, “If Everybody Worked as Hard as Me,”:

> Oh, the country’s what it is because
> the family’s what it is because
> the wife is what she is
> to her man.
> Oh I do all I can.
> Yes, I do all I can.
> I try to do what’s right,
> so I’ll never be alone and afraid in the night. (*VT* 160)

This song demonstrates how the suppression of women in patriarchal marriage is fundamental to the existing social order. “Class categories are primarily male defined, and a woman is assigned to a class on the basis of her husband’s relation to the means of production; woman is not viewed as an autonomous being” (Eisenstein 31). The woman’s significance derives from her relationship to the man: she is defined solely by her role as his wife, while he retains the complete autonomy and independence associated with masculinity. Although Margery suffers from the verbal abuse from her husband, she still acts as the submissive wife blindly. “Her economic dependence is reflected in emotional dependence, passivity, and other typical female personality traits. She is conservative, fearful, supportive of the status quo” (Benston 21). She has to keep the female characteristics as an ideal wife who depends on her husband in order to keep her social status stable. Margery pays an extremely high price for being included in the existing social order, which shows in her prayer while Joan and Ellen are hanged. She says,

> Dear God, thank you for saving us. Let us live safe now. I have scrubbed

> the dairy out. You have shown your power in destroying the wicked, and you show it in blessing the good. You have helped me in my struggle against the witches, help me in my daily struggle. Help me work harder . . . Bless Miss Betty's marriage and let her live happy. Bless Jack and keep him safe from evil and let him love me . . . (*VT* 174)

Margery lives in a life of daily struggle in which she works harder and harder to keep retaining her unfaithful husband's love. Her blessing about Betty's marriage ironically contrasts her identity as a dependent wife who is oppressed by her husband. She reveals her refusal to confront the inequities of gender and class that govern her life.

Goody also participates in and benefits from the patriarchal economic structure. While the torture continues with Henry Packer pulling up Susan's skirt in an effort to find "the place on the body of the witch made insensitive to pain by the devil" (*VT* 165), Goody utters a monologue to express pride in her association with Packer and proclaims her allegiance to him who daily exercises life and death decisions over the women he encounters. She affirms:

> Yes, it's interesting work being a searcher and nice to do good at the same time as earning a living. Better than staying home a widow. I'd end up like the old women you see, soft in the head and full of spite, with their muttering and spells. I keep healthy keeping the country healthy. It is an honour to work with a great professional. (*VT* 168)

The Socialist feminist Sheila Rowbotham states that "A dominant group is secure when it can convince the oppressed that enjoy their actual powerlessness and give them instead a fantasy of power" (39). Goody is eager for witch-hunting to earn more money to pursue the economic rewards. Without concerning other women's plights, she gains the power in the process colluding with patriarchy. She keeps healthy both

physically and economically by aligning herself with the oppressor rather than the oppressed group. Churchill uses Goody's monologue to demonstrate how women, in order to survive, are sometimes coerced into alienating themselves to perform like a man. Goody and Margery seem to acquire power from the patriarchal order and benefit economically, but in fact they are complicit in their own oppression. When they oppress other women, they are also oppressed by their male dominators.

These two women, Margery and Goody participate in and benefit from the patriarchal economic structure. Social feminists believe women's work shapes women's thoughts and female nature. "Class consciousness is clearly the opposite of false consciousness, which is a state of mind that impedes the creation and maintenance of true unity. False consciousness causes exploited people to believe they are as free to act and speak as their exploiters are" (Tong 100). So Margery and Goody unconsciously perpetuate the power of exploiters in patriarchal capitalism. Being a wife treated like a labor, Margery is forced to do her womanly duties and chores. As patriarchy is institutionalized in the family that women have to rely on men's economic ability, capitalism reinforces women's oppressive condition. The relationship between Jack and Margery resembles that between employer and employee. Goody's situation is the same as Margery's. Even if she has overcome the oppressed position as a woman, she is still restricted by her male boss, Packer. In *Women's Oppression Today*, Michele Barrett identifies as the key to women's oppression "an ideology of gender division which has been embedded in the capitalist division from its beginning (74). Social feminists insist that the only way of liberating women is to reconstitute the ideology of gender division and the historically dominant meaning of gender.

The cross-dressing[2] appears in the final scene of *Vinegar Tom*. Through the use of cross-gender devices, showing "how exactly gender was encoded" (Aston 17). Churchill emphasizes the construction of gender roles. This concept corresponds to the theory of Judith Butler, who establishes the connection between gender and performativity. According to Bulter,

> Gender is performative in the sense that it constitutes as an effect the very subject that it appears to express . . . the performance constitutes the appearance of a subject as its affect is difficult to accept. (*Inside/Out* 24)

Butler problematizes the existence of such a subject. If there is no stable subject, there can be no equivalent notion of gender. She explains this further in relation to drag:

> Drag constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation. If it is true, it seems, there is no original or primary gender that drag imitates, but gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original. (Butler 21)

If there is no original for gender, the subject appears as a consequence of the process of limitation that will be an effect for which there is no original, and thus the artificiality of gender is emphasized.

In the final scene, Kramer and Sprenger show up and they are the authors of a book about witch-hunt called *Malleus Maleficarum* translated as *The Hammer of Witches* or *The Hammer of Witchcraft.* Published in 1486, it is the oldest extant handbook on European witchcraft. In the production note of *Vinegar Tom*, Churchill mentions:

[2] In Churchill's plays, she always uses the theatrical device of cross-dressing to destabilize fixed sexual identities which are determined by dominant heterosexual ideology. Her well-known play, *Cloud Nine* is one of the most frequently cited examples of a cross-dressing gender critique.

> Kramer and Sprenger should be played by women. They played them as Edwardian music hall gents in hats and tails and some opening rhymes and jokes are theirs. The rest of scene is genuine Kramer and Sprenger from their handbook on witches and women, *Malleus Maleficarum.* (*VT* 134)

They are played by women and dressed as Edwardian music hall comics. They recite lines from *Malleus Maleficarum,*

> Sprenger: Why is a greater number of witches found in the fragile feminine sex than in men?
>
> Kramer: All wickedness is but little to the wickedness of a woman.
>
> Sprenger: Here are three reasons, first because
>
> Kramer: woman is more credulous and since the aim of the devil is to corrupt faith he attacks them. Second because
>
> Sprenger: women are more impressionable. Third because
>
> Kramer: women have slippery tongues and connot conceal from other women what by their evil art they know. (*VT* 176-77)

This conversation draws attention to women's complicity in their own and other women's oppression. "Kramer and Sprenger's apparent defiance–the wearing of men's clothes–masks an actual submission to patriarchal ideology" (Kritzer 92). In *Vinegar Tom*, this cross-gendered display, Kramer and Sprenger played by two women, draws attention to women's unwitting complicity in their own and other women's oppression. Nevertheless, Churchill highlights that patriarchy and oppression are not solely male domains. In other words, women can also practice patriarchy and oppress other women. *Vinegar Tom* demonstrates the marginal and vulnerable position of women as a result of both women and men's roles as patriarchal elements. The male roles present misogynistic ideas through the female

performers, which "serves to interweave accusation with self-accusation" (Quigley 30). Churchill emphasizes here that oppression is not simply the male domains. Women can derogate women but deliver the lines through male image. They create a privileged position for themselves to marginalize other women by repeating and memorizing the patriarchal rules.

In *Vinegar Tom*, there are seven songs which punctuate in the twenty-one scenes, which address more general states of minds from different women's life stage. The songs reveal that "the vestigial remainder of a false perception of the past, these ideas persist in determining aspects of contemporary ideology" (Reinelt 163). Churchill indicates that although the play takes place in the seventeenth century, the songs are performed in modern dress and to take place in the present. She uses songs to disrupt the play text to demonstrate the social construction of women. These songs become the voice, which allows women to articulate their tales from the margins in the context. The first song, "Nobody Sings," addresses women of all ages:

> Do you want your skin to wrinkle
> and your cunt get sore and dry?
> And they say it's just your hormones
> If you cry and cry and cry? (*VT* 142)

The song which entails the full series of the women's reproducing history from the onset of menstruation to menopause and aging. Through this song, Churchill connects the individual oppression experienced by Joan and Alice to the dilemma facing many contemporary women as they approach their middle age. The second song, "Oh, Doctor," is articulated by a woman, positioned as a disempowered patient, who pleads to know what is wrong with her. She asks to let her body put back together again and to be allowed a sense of herself. The song connects the dangerous and abusive

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medical practices of Betty's doctor to the intrusive and insensitive medical practice of contemporary male doctors. Churchill explores the ways in which the male medical profession continues to subordinate women that "are denied ownership of their bodies and cannot be presented as a whole" (Aston 28).

It presents the play's dominant metaphor of witches as scapegoats in the third song, "Something to Burn." It laments the fate of the marginalized:

> Sometimes it's witches, or what will you choose?
> Sometimes it's lunatics, shut them away.
> It's blacks and it's women and often it's Jews.
> We'd all be quite happy if they'd go away.
> Find something to burn.
> Let it go up in smoke.
> Burn your troubles away. (*VT* 154)

This song highlights the marginalization of oppressed groups—not just women, but also lunatics, blacks and Jews. By "placing witch-burnings in the context of holocaust and genocide, Churchill forces her audience to confront the socio-economic basis of fear and prejudice" (Randall 80). The fourth song, "If Everybody Worked as Hard as Me," defines the place of women in patriarchal order: husband and family all depend on women' acceptance of her subordinate position which protects themselves against the dangers of marginality. The fifth song, "If You Float," is a critique of "patriarchal logic which manipulates sign systems, arbitrarily inventing and re-inventing the signs of Women's evil doing" (Aston 29). Women are persecuted for the smallest acts of insistence that do not signify any degree of power.

It connects the covert oppression of women in contemporary society in the sixth song, "Laments for the Witches," sings,

Look in the mirror tonight.

Would they have hanged you then?

Ask how they're stopping you now.

Where have the witches gone?

Ask how they're stopping you now.

Here we are. (*VT* 176)

This song asks the audience directly to think about who the witches are now and to what extent they may also be persecuted and scapegoated. The final scene with Kramer and Sprenger immediately followed by the song, "Evil Women," asks men if they are projecting evilness on women in order to excuse their own inadequacies. In the end of the song, it sings that "Is that what you want to see in your movie dream" where evil women "scream and scream" (*VT* 179). Exploring the intricate linking between masculine sexuality and violence against women in society, the song connects the contemporary pornography to the misogynist sentiments expressed by Sprenger and Kramer. "This [final] scene promotes a realization that the entire recorded history of women has been created in and through patriarchal ideology" (Kritzer 92). Therefore, the ideology manifests here is not confined to the seventeenth century but points to the reality of the oppression of women in the present. The seven songs break the narrative and create a critical distance from historical events to compare with contemporary time. By so doing, Churchill challenges traditional versions of history to articulate the oppression of women at the present.

In conclusion, *Vinegar Tom* refuses to idealize femininity in its representation of female collusion in the play and it is ambiguous in its location of power in a system that is based on class and gender hierarchy. Betty's class privilege exempts her not only from labor but from a witchcraft accusation. Margery's pursuit of economic

expansion and social climbing causes her to oppress the women from lower class. Goody volunteers to be an assistant of male witch hunter which betrays women for economic gain. The performance of Kramer and Sprenger, the impersonation of misogynists by women, emphasizes the concept of women participating in and benefiting from the patriarchal economic structure. Furthermore, the play shows how class and fear divide the women and prevent them from supporting each other. In terms of class, Goody and Margery oppress other women because they have to protect their upper class status. But, in terms of fear, Susan, the lower class woman, is afraid of the persecution too much so she decides to accuse her best friend as a witch in order to save her own life. In addition, the historical space of *Vinegar Tom* is punctuated by songs which relate to past persecutions to present day oppression. In this way, Churchill shifts the audience's consciousness towards a socialist feminist perception of the world. The dual focuses on seventeenth-century material conditions and contemporary consciousness establish a goal to mediate between past and present constructions of women. The women are tortured and hanged on stage because they do not obey the social rules which make them turn into the outsiders of society. The women in the 1970s have to rely on their husbands or bosses' middle class status to survive but they also join the patriarchal camp to oppress the powerless women. In the next chapter, women can achieve success by themselves in the 1980s. However, these successful women follow the patriarchal rules to keep oppressing other women.

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Chapter Three

The Broken Image of Superwoman in *Top Girls*

The 1980s became a time when Margaret Thatcher was elected as prime minister. The tabloid press of the 1980s often represented Margaret Thatcher as a self-made career woman, the daughter of a grocer and the mother of two, transformed into an ultimate symbol of the capitalist superwomen politicians. Her electoral victory could resemble the paradigm women can aspire to. However, Churchill wrote *Top Girls* to reveal that Thatcher's firm belief in capitalism doesn't benefit those women who are not ambitious. Sheila Rowbotham aptly describes Thatcher's view of feminism:

> The fact that a woman could become Prime Minister had a symbolic meaning; modern women, it seemed, could do anything now. However, like many of her generation, Margaret Thatcher, born in 1925, did not want to be seen as a woman in politics. She preferred to be a politician who happened to be a woman and she had little sympathy with the post-war generation's preoccupation with women's right and wrongs. (472)

For women in Britain, the 1980s was the period of rapid advancement and increasing competitiveness in the labor market. The new woman or working woman was meant to aspire towards the career ladder, pursuing an ethics of individualism. It was in this climate that the idea of superwomen emerged: one who excelled in all areas of life, public and private, professional and domestic. Having becoming politicized during the 1970s, Churchill saw in the 1980s a shift from a socialist inclination to a capitalist emphasis as dismal change.

Churchill recalls that her initial motivation to write *Top Girls* resulted from confronting different understandings of feminism:

> There'd been the idea of a play about a lot of dead women having coffee with someone from the present. And an idea about women doing all kinds of jobs. It was also that Thatcher has 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 those ideas fed into *Top Girls*. (Tuss 8)

Churchill wrote this play in 1982, a time when feminism was at a crucial point, and her play provided a timely critique of the socialist feminist trends that were especially prominent in the USA. *Top Girls* "coincided with the moment when women needed to look more closely at the complexities of feminism; to question the 1970s politics of bonding, of sisterhood, through a politics difference" (Aston 38). Elaine Aston recalls that this play first staged in 1982 to question the 1970s feminist politics of sisterhood. By recognizing the social economic differences between women, the play encourages a re-examination of the feminist movement.

The title, *Top Girls*, initially seems to be complimentary, but the play is subsequently revealed to be critical towards top girls such as Marlene, her coworkers and Margaret Thatcher. "By deciding to include girls in the title, Churchill alludes the patriarchal tendency to demean women as permanently juvenile" (Tycer 46). The use of the word "girls," which refers to "women" tends to represent women in narrow terms. The "girls" in this paly has demeaning implications to show the "women" who only enjoy their privileged positions and take advantage of other powerless women.

They are not "mature" enough in their compassion for their follow sisters. The "clever girls" (*TG* 58)[3]at the dinner party and the "tough birds" (*TG* 102) at the employment agency focus on their individual achievements and show no sympathy for the powerless. The word "top" also implies the bottom and the middle, reflecting the social stratification in this play. The title makes explicit the ascent from bottom to top of the corporate ladder, like the careers of Margaret Thatcher and Marlene. Although both women could be seen as having achieved success, they engage in intra gender oppression of their working-class counterparts. In real life, most women suffered under the burden of the super women image. "By 1988, women in Britain still made up only 6 percent of directors and 10 percent of senior managers" (Tycer 17). There were very few top girls, most women well situated at the bottom of hierarchy in terms of low pay and promotion opportunities. Marlene, a highly successful top girl, perfectly embodies the new type of super woman in the 1980s who under the pressure of capitalist society, leaves behind her working-class origin at the expense of her daughter. In this chapter, I will argue that this super woman breaks the fantasy of super woman image who actually has been consigned to and kept in her male defined place; furthermore, I will unmask these top girls' successes which are built on the exploitation of other women.

Act One of *Top Girls* depicts a dinner party celebrating the promotion of Marlene, who has just moved up to a superior position as managing director at the Top Girls employment agency. Although Churchill describes the first Act as a party celebrating women's success, the dinner party stages complex social relations where women are divided by class, race, and ideology. In this Act, six women from different historical periods and social classes are invited to celebrate Marlene's victory.

[3] *Top Girls* (London: Methuen, 1985.) is hereinafter abbreviated as *TG*.

Although the women share the identical gender, each has her unique class and cultural concern. Each woman has a distinctive manner of speaking appropriate to her class. On the one hand, the dominating discourses of the eloquent Isabella and the articulate Nijo control the scene; on the other, the uneducated peasant, Gret almost scarcely utters any single word. According to Georgina Vasile, the notion of class-consciousness has called attention to the ideal of equality and the reality of the differences among women (240). Elisabeth Minnich claims, "equality protects our right to be different" (Minnich 70); she also asserts that it "challenges us to make distinction that are relevant and appropriate to a particular situation or set of consideration or principles" (Minnich 107). Francoise Collin insists that "equality differs from making everyone into equivalent and interchangeable examples of humanity" (18) and "falls apart as soon as the many are dissolved into a single voice, which is the voice of no one at all" (15). Georgiana Vasile concludes that "women's diverse social positioning and contrasting cultural, historical, political, economic and ethnic backgrounds guarantee divergent identities among them" (241). *Top Girls* dramatizes the ways in which distinct groups of women accommodate their contradictions and deal with their communalities in different contexts.

In Act One and indeed the entire play, Churchill makes explicit class and cultural distinctions among the women in order to demonstrate that gender concerns cannot be viewed in isolation from other factors which shape social experience. Isabella Bird and Lady Nijo are the first guests to arrive at the dinner party and they launch into stories about the patriarchal structures which they lived in. Isabella Bird lived a life of travel and adventure which makes her more commonly associated with men. She "always travelled as a lady" and "repudiated strongly suggestion in the press" that she was "other than feminine" (*TG* 62). Her status as a lady was extremely important to

the class-conscious Isabella, who sneered at the "barbaric practices in the east/Among the lower classes" (*TG* 60). However, Isabella has adopted the male privilege of being the adventurer. She describes that her sister, Hennie which is "the sweet soul waiting at home for [her] letters" (*TG* 65). While she explores the world, she expects her sister faithfully waits for her in the home that gives her a sense of power. Isabella's attitude towards Hennie is patronizing, like the successful career women's attitude to those women who remain in the home. Her final assertion further makes her different from other women: "I was the only European woman ever to have seen the Emperor of Morocco" (*TG* 83) which simply symbolizes the individual fulfillment.

Both Lady Nijo and Griselda express themselves in accordance with patriarchal configurations of femininity. Lady Nijo generally concedes to patriarchal and class-based oppression. Born in Japan in the mid-thirteenth century, she "was brought up from a baby" (*TG* 57) to be the mistress of an Emperor. Believing that she belonged to the Emperor, she meekly accepted to be male possession. When she inevitably fell out of the Emperor's favor, she started the wandering life as nun which was not inspired by her desire for self-fulfillment. She had to become a wanderer because of the promise with her father. Nijo told other women that "the first half of my life was all sin and the second all repentance" (*TG* 59), which manifests her internalizing the feelings of guilt and worthlessness to be a woman. Although connecting with the upper class, she has no independent wealth nor an autonomous class position. Her patriarchal context is clearly conveyed: without the Emperor or her father to serve, the absence of male authority was not freedom to her but only caused her life to become nothing.

Griselda is the logical extreme of patriarchal determination. Born in rural England during the fourteenth century to a poor peasant family, she is extricated from

poverty by agreeing to the marriage with the Marquis. She tells Marlene, "of course a wife must obey her husband. And of course I must obey the Marquis" (*TG* 75). As the obedient wife who always complies with her husband's wishes, she is the product of male creativity and thus an almost perfect reflection of the patriarchal imagination.

Pope Joan was an infant prodigy who lived in Italy during the early to mid-ninth century. At that time, the traditional woman in the patriarchal society was not allowed to enter the library for gaining knowledge. When she is twelve years old, she begins to disguise herself as a boy in order to continue her education. Her cross-dressing eventually lets her rose to the top of religious hierarchy and became the Pope. She remarks, "I shouldn't been a woman. Women, children and lunatics can't be Pope" (*TG* 15). In order to succeed in the man's world, she completely alienated from her body. Later, Pope Joan was found to be a woman because she gave birth to a child unexpectedly during a procession and she did not know what was happening. She expresses shock at the situation, "I heard sounds like a cow lowing, they came out my mouth. . . And the baby just slid out onto the road" (*TG* 71). The women unite in laughs at the comical story but the mood soon switches:

> Joan: One of the cardinals said, "the Antichrist!" and fell over in a faint.
>
> *They all laugh*
>
> Marlene: So what did they do? They weren't best pleased.
>
> Joan: They took me by the feet and dragged me out of town and stoned me to death.
>
> *They stop laughing*
>
> Marlene: Joan, terrible.
>
> Joan: I don't really remember.
>
> Nijo: And the child died too?

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Joan: Oh yes, I think so, yes. (*TG* 71)

When Joan recollects her stoning, the women feel the full force of the patriarchal establishment, reflected in their sudden silence. Although Pope Joan obtained great achievement in the male-dominated world, she had to sacrifice her female identity and her own life.

The last story is told by Dull Gret, a woman of the lowest peasant class, born in the Flanders region of Belgium in the sixteenth century. She refuses either to emulate or concede to the oppressor. Instead, she and other peasant women respond to oppression with violent resistance. Gret lost children to a murderous invading army: "We'd all had family killed. My big son die on a wheel. Birds eat him. My baby, a solider run her through with a sword. I'd had enough, I was mad, I hate the bastards" (*TG* 82). The climax of the dinner scene verbally and physically enacts a violent rejection of oppression. Gret calls on her female neighbors to "fight the devils" and go "where the evil come from and pay the bastards out" (*TG* 82). To some degree, Gret leads a woman's fight to unite the lower class as the symbol of effective, collective female resistance. In *Top Girls*, Dull Gret can be seen a figure for collective action. Toward the end of scene, she is attributed a speech without interruption. Before her long speech, she has been following the other women's conversations intently, but has either reiterated what they say, or interjected. Linda Fitzsimmons regards Gret important not only because she represents the working class women, but because she is the only character at the dinner to call for women's collective, as opposed to individual, resistance of oppression (20). The distinctions of class and culture among women which enables Churchill to interrogate critically the apparent lack of unity among people of the same gender.

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The Act One of *Top Girls* includes a sophisticated and intricate matrix of paradoxical and contradictory sites of struggle and submission over gender, class, and racial identities. "[T]he women are largely and self-centeredly caught up in their own narratives. The inability to listen to and to share experiences with women, is indicative of intrasexual oppression" (Aston 39). In fact, the women's conversation records patriarchal oppression that they have suffered in different countries and historical periods. However, except Dull Gret, the other women are indoctrinated with male values and lack of sisterhood. These women desire to move beyond the conventional gender division and feel that they can escape from patriarchal control. As Marlene states, "We've all come a long way. To our courage and the way, we changed our lives and our extraordinary achievements" (*TG* 67). Ironically, the so-called achievements are only personal and built by the exclusion of other women. Like Austin E. Quigley observes, "The scene concludes not with an event emblematic of achieved community, nor with an emerging common vision, but with a summarizing image of isolated and temporary achievement, focused, ironically, on a world dominated by men" (42). The women have internalized patriarchal standards in order to achieve success and that they have a competitive attitude towards each other. Therefore, the characters remain limited by patriarchal expectations and can not listen to each other's parallel struggles as women.

In *Top Girls*, Churchill also explores and challenges the gender stereotype of an inherent maternal instinct. She reveals the complexities and ambiguities of motherhood, a theme central to both the act and play as a whole. Some of the mothers reveal immense complicity with patriarchy and some of the women express their negation of motherhood. Lady Nijo and Patient Griselda share a similar maternal

experience: the loss of children to patriarchy. Nijo can not to keep her children and remain as a courtesan at court. She explains to other women,

> My first child was His Majesty's, which unfortunately died, but my second was Akebono's . . . He cut the cord with a short sword, wrapped the baby in white and took it away. It was only a girl but I was sorry to lose it . . . I saw my daughter once. She was three years old . . . Akebono's wife had taken the child because her own died . . . She was being brought up so carefully so she could be sent to the palace like I was. . . . I never saw my third child after he was born, the son of Ariake the priest . . . My fourth child was Ariake's too . . . It was a boy again, my third son.
>
> But oddly enough I felt nothing for him. (*TG* 70-72)

To Nijo, motherhood became a long succession of experiences of pain and loss which finally culminates in total annihilation of all maternal feeling. Akebono's wife took away Nijo's daughter, which demonstrates how women themselves become agents of patriarchy in relation to other females. Furthermore, Nijo is unable to find her identity as a mother without the dependence of patriarchy. She internalizes the patriarchal ideology that she blames herself for loss of maternal feelings. Her own identity is shattered and her child, a part of herself is foreign to her.

Like Nijo, Griselda also loses her children to their father. According to her husband, the children need to be killed because they are the peasant's children and will be rejected by the people. Griselda states, "I asked him to give her back so I could kiss her. And I asked him to bury her where no animals could dig her up. It . . . was Walter's child to do what he liked with" (*TG* 77). When the women ask how she can allow her husband to kill her children, she simply replies, "it was easy because I always knew I would do what he said" (*TG* 77). Although Walter had Griselda's

children raised by someone else, her acceptance of all Walter's orders leads her to participate actively in the subjugation of her own daughter. The fate of her daughter illustrates how female children are taught by their mother to accept a subordinate role. As Rosefeldt observes, "the hierarchies of class and gender are too strong for Griesldа, who can only see herself as a submissive daughter, an obedient wife and loyal subject" (130). Griselda becomes a parody of the patriarchal ideal of selfless motherhood that she attempts to educate women to be a passive and patient wife. In addition, women who do not have children are signified in terms of their negation of motherhood. Of all the women in Act One, Isabella Bird has not experienced motherhood. She equates children with horses, revealing a decided preference for the latter when she tells Joan, "I never had any children. I was fond of horses" (*TG* 72). The tough birds, Nell and Win also signify opposition to motherhood and domesticity. Nell refuses "to play house but prefers to go on working and not marry" (*TG* 102). She has determined to succeed at all costs that she emulates the men and considers the feelings of no one but herself. Win treats herself like a sexual object who has affairs with different men. Her lover makes her "lie down in the back of the car so the neighbor [won't] see [her] going in" (*TG* 103). Win discounts the humiliation to which she is subjected and characterizes her affair as a "bit of fun" (*TG* 104). She would rather have affair with men than restrict herself in domesticity.

Pope Joan and Marlene experience motherhood as little more than an inconvenient and unwanted physical condition. Joan "wasn't used to having a woman's body" (*TG* 70), and refused to accept her pregnancy. She states, "I didn't want to pay attention. It was easier to do nothing" (*TG* 70). Deluding herself, she believes her pregnancy will disappear by ignoring it. Like Joan, when Marlene is pregnant, she procrastinates until it is too late to abort the fetus. She transfers the

responsibility as a mother to her sister and neglects both her sister and daughter. Marlene's departure from her family is connected to her Thatcherite values: "I believe in the individual" (*TG* 138). She regards that she would not have been able to attain the success if she had kept her daughter. The erasure of motherhood from her identity seems to be accompanied by a more general evasion of the personal. "Her rejection of motherhood is to gain fulfillment from the pursuit of a political ideology that is buttressed by the most conservative ideas concerning motherhood, gender relations and family" (Adiseshiah 145). Marlene's ability to join the workforce is dependent on the exploitation of Joyce's uncompensated labor to take care of her daughter in domestic sphere.

In addition, the scene three of Act Two in the agency is interrupted by the presence of Marlene's slow-witted daughter, Angie, who figures out that her aunt is her mother. The scene of the Angie's unexpected visit makes Marlene feel disconcerting. They are interrupted by Mrs. Kidd, wife of Howard, who has been passed over for the head job secured by Marlene. She suggests to Marlene to resign in order to avoid the situation of her husband having to work for a female boss, which would be unbearable to him and reveals her fear of being maltreated by him. When Marlene rebuffs her suggestion, she says resentfully,

> Mrs. Kidd. (You'll end up) miserable and lonely. You're not natural.
>
> Marlene. Could you please piss off? (*TG* 113)

It is a case of the housewife confronting the career woman that "[is] offered the fleeting, but striking, image of a limiting stereotype of the past confronting a limiting prototype of the future" (Quigley 43). Angie is obsessed with this prototype because she admires Marlene's power: "I knew you'd be in charge of everything" (*TG* 110) and "I think you were wonderful" (*TG* 113). She expresses her desire to work at Top

Girls. To Angie, Marlene represents a possible future of chances and power. However, Marlene lacks compassion to improve not only other women's lives but also her own daughter's. While Angie falls asleep in the office, she tells her colleagues that Angie is "a bit thick" and can only serve as a "packer in Tesco" (*TG* 120). She shows no intention to help her daughter's and simply expresses that Angie "is not going to make it" (*TG* 120). Marlene's capitalist ruthlessness causes her to neglect Angie totally and concerns other people only as a means to her own success. For these top girls, motherhood becomes an oppressive experience fraught with complexities and ambiguities impacted by social and economic realities.

While motherhood often culminates in female oppression and subjugation, however, the image of father generally symbolizes autonomous masculine power and control. In *Top Girls*,

"the absence of the father and his patriarchal representatives is just another way that the patriarchy can assure its ideological repression of women by turning them into doubles of the patriarchal oppressors" (Rosefeldt 128). The dominant role of patriarchy in the lives of Isabella and Nijo is reinforced through their constant references to father: both women are devoted to pleasing their fathers. Isabella follows the path of her father, saying, "I still did what my father wanted" (*TG* 3). She "tried to be a clergyman's daughter" (*TG* 3) and viewed him as "the mainspring of [her] life" (*TG* 58). Nijo also follows her father's wishes. Her father gives her over to the Emperor and she becomes a medium of exchange between two patriarchs. She does not consider the Emperor's action as rape because she states, "No, of course not, I belonged to him" (*TG* 3). Later, she becomes a wandering nun by following her father's wish— "Serve the Majesty, be respectful. If you lose his favor, enter Holy Orders" (*TG* 3). All her life, she "still did what [her] father wanted" (*TG* 30), which is

to continue reenacting the command of the father. Unlike Isabella and Nijo who worship the patriarchy, in the relationship and her father, Marlene blames the problems she had in her family on her father. He was a drunk who beat Marlene's mother and spent a lot of money on alcohol. Marlene decided to leave home to escape the world of her father. She doesn't want to "marry a dairyman who'd come home pissed. Her hatred of the father is projected upon the working class. "I hate the working class . . . I don't like beer guts and football vomit and sagging tits" (*TG* 85). Although Marlene has tried to reject her father, she has followed his path. She is also a drinker who is insensitive to the plight of women and her child. Marlene's brutal father may be absent but he has not disappeared. His behavior influences Marlene unconsciously to become an oppressor. "She stands outside of the family, a disconnected entity enmeshed in an intricate network of power plays in which success means transforming oneself into the patriarchy, not destroying it or changing it" (Rosefeldt 135). The absent father stands behind a social structure based on the ideological system that repudiates fatherhood at the same time it reinforces the patriarchal rule.

Act Two of *Top Girls* is in the employment agency where women seek job and promotion. In this Act, Churchill critiques the Top Girl employment where Marlene works while reinforcing gender oppression. Instead of presenting a means to unite women, the situation ultimately confirms the status quo. Here, Marlene becomes an oppressor who is "a living image of a power structure that negates her female identity" (Despenich 178) and is distanced from the women around her. She is male-identified and never considers improving women's inferior status. One of the interviewees, Jeanine, desires for better prospects of a new job. However, she is placed by Marlene in the male domain where she can hardly get any promotions or

economic privileges. Once, Jeanine reveals her engagement, Marlene envisions Jeanine as a mother and subsequently assumes that Jeanine will not follow a significant career path. She suggests Jeanine to conceal her marital status because Marlene's evaluation of Jeanine reveals her thought of patriarchal capitalism, like the inconvenience of pregnancy. Marlene does not try to challenge patriarchal power; she even obstructs female unification.

In the other interviews, the "tough birds" (*TG* 102) in the office, Nell and Win display the same ideas and approaches as Marlene. They seem to have earned a place only by "replicating the behavior of aggressive, career-oriented males" (Quigley 43). In an interview with Win, Louise explains that she has "spent twenty years in middle management [and] seen young men who [she] trained go on, in [her] own company, or elsewhere, to higher things" (*TG* 106). Louise remains alienated from other women. Distancing herself from the girls with whom she works, Louise attempts to transform herself into a man: "I don't care greatly for working with women. I think I pass as a man at work" (*TG* 106). While Win interviews Louise who wants to "pass as a man at work" (*TG* 106), she decides to offer her a job that is "easier for a woman" (106) and she even reminds her not to mention her age. In order to prevent marginalization from the patriarchal system, older women have to hide their age, which is viewed as physical appeal. Win does not care about the disregard that Louise experienced; furthermore, she judges women from men's view. Shona, the hyper-aggressive young working-class woman fells stuck and her only choice is to fake her resume for one of the high-flyer positions. However, when Nell conducts an interview with Shona, she realizes that Shona is lack of experience to be a top girl. The interviewees are advised to suppress parts of their true stories which might limit their chances of employment by the higher ranking operators in the patriarchal order.

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In Top Girls agency, these female employees look for chances to break the limitation for women in the work field. As Marlene declares, “If they’re stupid, or lazy, or frightened, I’m not going to help them get a job, why should I?” (*TG* 140). However, Marlene, Win and Nell internalize the capital value system to judge women and they request these employees to adapt to male expectations. Ostensibly assisting the women applicants, the agency opts to narrowly define what low-level jobs suit women’s skills. Top Girls agency makes a slogan: every woman can become a top girl. “But beneath the rhetoric the agency is secretly a place of classification, in which the prevailing class-system is further entrenched” (Lane 67). Therefore, this employment agency makes the glass ceiling remain daunting, because the women who claim to be deconstructing it actually reinforce the oppressive structure.

The final Act stages a confrontation between Marlene and her working-class sister Joyce, illustrating two different classes and two opposing points of view. Kritzer comments, “Marlene’s labor in the public market-place, like that of a traditional husband, depends on Joyce's labour in the home for its profitability” (147). Joyce, the working class and mother figure, is represented as economically, socially and culturally deprived in comparison with Marlene. She is a single mother who only can find some labor jobs with meager pay so she is unable to pay for babysitting. “Accepting the traditional role of wife and mother has brought Joyce nothing but hardship” (Burk 73). Moreover, she loses her own child because taking care of Angie. She does not enjoy being a mother simply because she is exhausted by her economic pressure. Apparently, Joyce is filled with angst to be an obedient daughter, submissive wife and caring mother. Compared with Marlene, Joyce seems to be doubly victimized by the old patriarchal mindset and the new woman ideology in the 1980s.

Churchill sees feminism and socialism as intimately conjoined; she states, "I do find it hard to conceive of a right-wing feminism. Of course, socialism and feminism aren't synonymous, but I feel strongly about both and wouldn't be interested in a form of one that didn't include the other" (Mann 82). *Top Girls* builds a debate between us and them that recalls Marxist concepts about class structure. Joyce represents the world as being broken down into a clear dichotomy between us and them.

> 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. (*TG* 140)

From the Marxist perspective, us refers to those who are economically downtrodden and them to the members of the upper class who profit off the labor class. The theme of class difference is shown in the division of roles and experiences of Marlene and Joyce. Marlene defines her as a super achiever and condemns the working class as lazy and stupid. She is the middle-class woman who looks down on the working-class women because she implies that their values are unacceptable. Us represents the working class, like Joyce. She takes over the responsibility of taking care the family which makes her stuck in the working class. In contrast to Marlene, she is one of them, the group of economic oppressors. When Marlene condemns the working class as "lazy and stupid" (*TG* 140), she has increased her power by cutting herself from her family.

In addition, in *Vinegar Tom* and *Top Girls*, Churchill questions the subversive power of the cross-dressing. As Michelene Wandor suggests, cross-dressing could be simply "functional" (Wandor 25) because it is used to achieve the practical purpose.

Judith Butler also warns that "parody by itself is not subversive" and she poses the question: "what performance where will compel a reconsideration of the place and stability of the masculine and the feminine? And what kind of gender performance will enact and reveal the performativity of gender itself in a way that destabilizes the naturalized categories of identity and desire? " (*Gender Trouble* 189). Therefore, the key question lies in how one makes parodic repetitions, and how one subverts the existing gender norms by repetition. "There are some forms of drag that are not subversive, but serve only to reinforce existing heterosexual power structures" (Salih 58). In both plays, some women dress as men to gain male supremacy and repeat the value of patriarchy, instead of challenging the sex/gender system. Neither of these drag performances are subversive, since they serve to reinforce existing distinctions between male and female. In *Top Girls*, Pope Joan illustrates the play's theme of performed gender roles. She literally effaces herself in order to achieve success by pretending to be a male. She repeatedly emphasizes her detachment from womanhood: "I didn't live a women's life. I don't understand it" (*TG* 78). When she left home, she "dressed as a boy" and then "forgot [she] was pretending" (*TG* 63). Joan did not realize she was pregnant because she "wasn't used to having a woman's body" (*TG* 70). She cannot understand other women's plights because she does not perceive herself as a woman. Pope Joan's pretense of being a man allows her to escape from the life of poverty and win the power and knowledge. However, her cross dressing doesn't have the effect of subverting the patriarchy because it merely proves that the submission to male supremacy and betrayal of her own gender.

In *Top Girls*, the role of clothes is an important theme in the text of the play. Joanne Entwistle observes dress that catches people's eyes on the sex of the wearer; as a result, dress creates people's identity (40). According to Thorstein Veblen, he

argues that dress conveys information about the social and economic status of the wearer in the upper class. He regards women as the passive beings who dress luxuriously to show their male dominator's wealth. Women's dress displays "her master's ability to pay, his pecuniary strength to remove her entirely from the sphere of work" (qtd in Entwistle 162). The elaborate dress of upper class women conditioned themselves to be incapable of work and causes them to stick in the home. Their impractical dress aims to demonstrate the wealth of the male which symbolizes her subordinate position, "symbolic of her role as man's chattel" (qtd in Entwistle 161). Like Lady Nijo and Griselda in *Top Girls*, they overemphasize their favor of costume in order to manifest the social status dependent on male. Griselda shows a strange class-conscious pride in her existence as the ultimate obedient wife: "I'd rather obey the Marquis than a boy from the village" (*TG* 75). She speaks of her luxurious dressing, "white silk dress and jewels of [her] hair" (*TG* 76) and regards her story as a fairy tale, despite the inhumane treatment by her husband.

Nijo is hyperaware of her clothes, which are symbolic of social status in the Japanese court. She expresses her preference for a life of luxury with the Emperor, when she could wear thin silk, to a rough life. Janet Wolff discusses that women's dressing is restrained in the patriarchal society. Women have to care for her costume cautiously in order to be seen as respectable women. Women "had to take a good deal more care about signs of their dress, which would be scrutinized for an indication of her social rank" (Wolff 40). In her world, dress is used as a classifying tool, a means of marking out women's class distinction in the power order: "The Empress had always been my enemy, Marlene, she said I had no right to wear three-layered gowns. But I was the adopted daughter of my grandfather the Prime Minister. I had been publicly granted permission to wear thin silk" (*TG* 66). Her understanding of the

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masculine and the feminine is informed by confining images, the external appearances. Both Griselda and Nijo are willing to sacrifice part of themselves for the material comforts offered by men, and this self-interested compliance reinforces the system of oppression.

The cost of Western representation of women is clearly encoded in the figure of Marlene. She is constructed as the conventional man. In an office, women "have developed particular strategies of dress for managing the gaze of others" (Entwistle 34). Marlene demonstrates how acceptance and success of a woman in the workplace require very careful self-representation. Like Isabella who "always travelled as a lady," Marlene takes care not to wear trousers in the office. (*TG* 62) While trousers are commonly associated with men, Marlene decides to avoid wearing it. As Annie Woodhouse notes, "clothing forms part of a system of social signaling; it is used to indicate belonging . . . above all, it is used to demarcate gender" (xiii). Therefore, Marlene's feminine clothes help to maintain an arbitrary gender distinction. The projection of a 1980s superwoman image is dramatized in the office scenes, which shows her adept role play between high-powered lady and ball-breaking boss. It connects to Judith Butler's work on performativity; Butler "looks at the way in which gender is the products of styles and techniques such as dress rather than any essential qualities of the body" (qtd in Entwistle 21). Gender, for Butler, is achieved through repeated acts, where the acts themselves actually continue the gendered subject instead of expressing it.

> Such acts, gestures, enactment, generally constructed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporal signs and other discursive means. (*Gender Trouble* 173)

The acts and gestures themselves, the fabrications, are created and continued through corporal and discursive means, that is, through the body and language. Butlers contends,

> The subject is not *determined* by the rules through which it is generated because signification is *not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition* that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects. (*Gender Trouble* 185)

The image of superwoman is signified, through its construction in feminine clothes. Gender is dislocated from the body and shown to be performed through styles. "Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the repercussions expected if she was found to possess it" (Riviere 39). In the office, Marlene with masculine ambition has to hide behind a facade of femininity to act as the exploiter conveniently. *Top Girls* also illustrates Butler's gender perspective, in which a person with female sex does not necessarily own a feminine gender. Sex refers to the biological differences between male and female; gender is a matter of culture which refers to the social classification into masculine and feminine. Judith Butler asserts that gender is performative, which points out "gender is always a doing" (33), the gender performativity is a "parody" (177), which is "an imitation without an origin" (177). Although Marlene projects the superwoman image, her success rests on her acceptance of those patriarchal patterns of behavior. She pretends to follow the gender-encoded costume to be feminine but she is actually the construction of male to subjugate men as well as other women.

In Act Two, when Angie comes to visit Marlene, she wears a dress that was bought by Marlene which is now too small for her. "The dress signifies the misfit or gap between Angie's desire to be like the well-dressed Marlene, and Marlene's

dismissal of her own daughter's career aspiration" (Aston 41). If those top girls in reality are like Marlene who believes in Thatcherism and has no contribution to help other women, there is no possibility for Angie to change her pessimistic future. Michael Swanson argues that Angie is a victim who is not only mistreated by Joyce, but also ignored by her real mother Marlene who judges her abilities from the male standard (56). From this perspective, it is difficult for Angie to have a chance to enter the competitive world. Later, this play closes with Angie's awakening from a nightmare. She utters the final word of the play: "frightening" (141). It seems to suggest that the future for women will be frightening if women like Marlene only focuses on her own success. In order to achieve success, women have to unfix themselves, appropriating male values of power. As Marohl states,

> The play in performance moves the audience from the apparent dichotomy of female/male, which Marlene's discourse asserts, to the underlying dichotomy of oppressor/oppressed which is the effect of phallocentric hierarchism and which operates outside of the classification of sex and gender. (387)

In this play, it takes more attention on the female oppressors who exploit other women to strengthen their power. Furthermore, capitalism emphasizes personal independence and the ability of private enterprise to meet social needs, which contradicts the need for collectively provided social service. This contradiction causes the antagonistic relationship between Marlene and Joyce. Marlene achieves degrees of patriarchal power to degrade Joyce because she ignores production values of working class. She degrades women in the eyes of men and provides a rationality for male dominance.

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In conclusion, *Top Girls* is written, performed and set in the aftereffect of Margaret Thatcher's election victory, and focuses on Marlene's achievement of her career. In an interview, Churchill states,

> What I was intending to do was to make it first look as though it was celebrating the achievements of women and then—by showing the main character, Marlene, being successful in a very competitive, destructive, capitalist way—ask, what kind of achievement is that? (Betsko and Koening 82)

In Marlene's world, success is measured by male standard. To unmask the super women image, Marlene's success is built by sacrificing her female identity and conspires with a male-dominated world. Churchill predicts the despairing future for those underprivileged social groups in the Thatcherite years. Apparently, the uncaring nature of Thatcherism might pull back the progress of women's right in British society.

To sum up, Churchill creates the play of an all-female community in the 1970s and 1980s. *Vinegar Tom* of the 1970s focuses on the relationship between the upper class women and the lower class women. The upper class women have to rely on male to keep their social status and gain interests by exploiting other women. They also need to act as the submissive wives who follow the male-defined rules. The lower class women not only suffer from the exploitation but also are accused of witches because of their non-conformity behaviors. In *Vinegar Tom*, the upper class women have enjoyed to be the member of the upper class to oppress other women and cause the marginalization of the lower class women in the society. In Churchill's production of the1980s, the women in *Top Girls* can take over the control and power to occupy the male privileged spaces. Like Marlene, she achieves the career success

and becomes a so-called “ball-breaker.” While many women obtain the high position in the political field or the big company that are privileged for men, most of them forget to speak for women’s right. The employment choices for most women are shown as narrow and restrictive because they are oppressed by the superwomen who embrace the patriarchal capitalism. For those disadvantaged women in the 1980s, such as Joyce and Angie, they might have to face a bleaker future under such circumstances.

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Chapter Four

Conclusion

The concept of socialist feminism is addressed in Churchill's works which link the gender oppression and capitalist system. In her plays, Churchill makes explicit the ways in which class-stratified societies produce a wide range of contradictory consciousness and power relations. In the 1970s, a new wave of socialist feminist writing began to circulate. Whilst radical feminists tend to view women's oppression to lie exclusively in patriarchy, socialist feminists look at socio-political structures and historical and material conditions to explain gender oppression:

> From a materialist perspective women's experiences cannot be understood outside of their specific historical context, which includes a specific type of economic organization and specific developments in national history and political organization. Contemporary women's experiences are influenced by high capitalism, national politics and worker's organizations such as unions and collectives. (Case 82)

The new position incorporates historical, political and economic dimensions as accounting for the oppression of women, and views women exploited by the mechanisms of capitalism, social class and political regimes.

Many socialist feminists argue that there are two interlocking and mutually dependent systems of oppression—patriarchy and capitalism. They focus on the primary social economic factors on the spheres of labour and production. In the market place, the female worker has generally been paid lower wages than her male counterpart and retained in a subordinate position without upward mobility. In the domestic sphere, unpaid housework, unpaid reproductive and child-rearing labour have been instrumental in shaping the condition of women. In *Vinegar Tom* and *Top*

Girls, Churchill develops an integrated socialist feminist political analysis to explore women's oppression under patriarchal capitalism.

In addition, from the socialist feminist perspective, class determines the situation of all people within capitalism. Class biases determine the attitude of individuals in the spheres of labour and interpersonal relationships. As a result of the specific economic conditions of women, in which they are exploited by virtue of their gender, some social feminist feminists have established women as a class, thus accommodating the gender oppression of women within the class analysis. However, In *Vinegar Tom* and *Top Girls*, it is problematic to treat women as a class. Churchill depicts the distinctive classes of women in both plays: there are differences between upper class and working class women. In both plays, there is little notion of sisterhood: the women in the privileged class in fact oppress and/or exploit those in the lower class.

Both plays elaborate that the constitution of women as a class in itself is equally problematic. It tends to mask the material disparities and power differentials that exist between women. The theorization of women as a class, while useful in its analysis of the common oppression suffered by women as women, eclipses the differences between women, pays inadequate attention to women's oppression in different historical, economic, and cultural contexts.

In *Vinegar Tom*, Churchill uncovers traditional history from a socialist feminist perspective, revealing the economic and gender bias of the seventeenth-century witch-hunts. It grapples with issues of class and gender in patriarchal society. The women in this play are not witches but are the victims who do not conform to the male construction of female identity, or are economically disadvantaged. The seventeenth-century narrative in *Vinegar Tom* is interpolated by contemporary songs that question

that they have been taken for granted as witches. The seven songs demonstrate to the audience that in the contemporary world women are still condemned as evil women, if they do not conform to conventional gender roles. The performer's modern costume emphasizes that the women are confined to the male-defined standards in the present.

Moreover, Churchill also explores the position of women and their social roles in *Vinegar Tom*. The study of women's dilemmas and their difficulties is significant because it not only focuses women's situation in relation to men, but especially to other women in the society. One bourgeois famer's wife oppresses an older unmarried mother and her daughter because she regards that they are the witches who have damaged their property. The female assistant of witch hunter accuses women as witches for the purpose of practical benefit. The play shows how class and fear divide the women and prevent them from supporting each other.

Top Girls reproduces the intersection of class and gender oppression. It plays out the vulnerability of a class insensitive feminism, while simultaneously implicating a class politics that ignores a feminist agenda. In the first scene, the historical and fictional characters share their life stories. Margarete Rubik argues that Churchill does not provide an "authentic female voice" (Rubik 177) and Ruby Cohn describes the women as "selfishly alone" (Cohn 132). Janet Brown describes the act as "almost a parody of feminist glorifications of women's community," representing "egoists who interrupt one another continually" (127). The majority of critics portray the characters as egoists focusing on their own narratives. The communication of these women is lack of bonding which manifests their inability to escape the male standards and values they have internalized.

In Act Two, the feminist space where tough birds dominate is acutely ironic because the employment agency perpetuates insecure temporary work for women by

neglecting their rights and conditions. In Act Three, Churchill reveals that Marlene's economic success in only caused by her ambition, but is dependent on her sister's domestic labour. The economic situation has created two choices for women: the relative economic poverty of child-rearing or the emotional alienation of successful achiever within the structure of capitalism. *Top Girls* is a play about two classes of women in society and how middle classes oppress working classes in the patriarchal capitalist society in Margaret Thatcher's time. Some women who are successful within class hierarchy have to victimize the members of same sex. This class hierarchy has an impact on women's social and familial relationships. Although middle class brings wealth, predominance and reputation to some women, it breaks the familial relationships when women of the middle class do not pay attention to the members of the working class.

In addition, Churchill is a prominent figure of the modern canon that attempts to disrupt the unity of the patriarchal aesthetic vision and develop a social feminist analytical approach through her works. In both plays, using her theatrical devices, she depicts the women who collude with the patriarchy: some women act as male to achieve their private purpose, like the cross dressing in *Vinegar Tom*. Some women stress their favor of costume to please their male oppressor and stabilize their upper social status, such as Nijo in *Top Girls*. Marlene does not wear trousers on purpose to pretend that she stands on the same line with other women.

Both *Vinegar Tom* and *Top Girls* show that the notion of women as the oppressed group and men as the oppressors is problematic because not all women share a common oppression. Denise Riley articulates, "the problem is that a homogenous group do not exist, whereas feminism must posit that women do exist in some sense as a group" (1). She further elaborates on a possible solution: "feminists need to

distinguish between false homogeneity constructed by silent exclusion (or silent equations)—such as assuming that white middle class women represent women per se—and a real viable collectively of women rich in diversity" (112). Riley cautions against the use of notions postulating that all women share a common essence called women as being limiting and narrow and calls for a truly realistic collectivity of women based on diversity.

In both plays, the women in the female community lack unity and solidarity which damages the bonding of sisterhood. Churchill focuses on women in the different classes to dramatize the distinct groups of women to show how they accommodate their contradictions and deal with their communalities in different contexts. As Eisenstein states, "feminist theories must be written from the self, from the position of one's life—the personal articulates the political. Yet such theories have to move beyond the self to the conception of a collective woman, which requires recognizing the diversity of women and the contexts of oppression" (484). Therefore, Churchill refuses to generalize womanhood's common oppression. She emphasizes the diversity of women to manifest the real situation that some women will turn into the patriarchal oppressors to oppress other women,

In conclusion, Churchill focuses on the connections between patriarchal capitalist ideologies and the material conditions of a particular historical situation. Women characters occupy central positions in both plays. There are women of different ages and classes, in various historical periods, who express specific desires and grapple with significant choices in their own lives and the society around them. By focusing specifically on women, Churchill arranges women who are from different social strata in both plays and elaborate how the powerful women oppress other women, including their sister and daughter. By clarifying the situation, Churchill

stresses not only men oppress women but some women also collude with patriarchy, which should be unmasked in order to emancipate those oppressed women to transcend the limitations of their material conditions. Therefore, she asserts the need for a redistribution of economic and political power, rather than a simple accommodation of the individual aspirations of a few women.

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