

**POLITICS OF BONDING AND DIFFERENCE THROUGH POETICS OF THEATRE:
A FEMINIST/POSTFEMINIST READING OF *TOP GIRLS*
BY CARYL CHURCHILL**

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Abstract

Theatre has always been acclaimed as a powerful medium of literature. Caryl Churchill has emerged as a dominant figure in the contemporary British theatre. She is the only woman playwright to be included in Benedict Nightingale's *An Introduction to Fifty Modern British Drama*. In her play *Top Girls* she has presented the various concerns of the women with coruscating virtuosity and in delineating characters right from the fourteenth to the twentieth century presented a compendium of feminist/postfeminist concerns, explicating in the process how the issues of women have changed/ remained the same during the course of time and how empowerment/ progress can have different connotations. The subjectivities of the individual characters collide, contest, affirm or negate each other and their issues that are (not) common to reveal that there is blanket that can cover all the women centric issues under the same rubric.

Keywords: Theatre, British Playwright, feminism, postfeminism, Subjectivities

The only woman playwright to be included in Benedict Nightingale's *An Introduction to Fifty Modern British Plays* and to be featured in two volumes of Methuen's *Landmarks of Contemporary British Drama*, Caryl Churchill's eminence as the foremost British woman dramatist is indisputable. Written in 1980-82 and first staged in 1982 at the Royal Court Theatre, Churchill's play *Top Girls* is hailed as "the best British play ever by a woman dramatist" (The Guardian) and was awarded the prestigious Obie prize. The play depicts the diverse strands of concerns of women from feminism to postfeminism by introducing characters from as far back as the ninth century to the twentieth century. The play also brings to fore the quandary of maintaining the balance between professional and domestic life for contemporary women. Churchill does not favour any one side but simply presents the reader with a blend of feminist viewpoints.

The play is divided into three acts. The opening act unfolds in the form of a transhistorical tableau introducing Marlene, the main protagonist, sharing a dinner table with five disparate women from history, art and literature. Moving away from the supernatural milieu of the first act, act two introduces Marlene working in the employment agency along with her colleagues Win and Nell. Marlene is presented as a successful woman who has reached to the very 'top' of her career. The final act, set in the kitchen of Marlene's sister Joyce, reveals the secret that in order to move beyond her working class existence, Marlene had to give up her daughter, Angie, who was raised by Joyce. The focus shifts to the family life and sacrifices of the two sisters.

When Churchill wrote *Top Girls* in 1982, Margaret Hilda Thatcher was in the early years of her first term as the Prime Minister of United Kingdom. She was the first British woman Prime Minister and continued to serve for three consecutive terms. Margaret Thatcher "as a grocer's daughter who rose to become Britain's first female prime minister" and a mother of two, stood out as an example to women "that there is no glass ceiling that can't be shattered" (Blundell 116). It was at this time that the idea of 'superwoman', a woman who excelled in both her domestic and professional life, emerged in England. Most critics denounced Thatcher's free market feminism claiming that postfeminist critics herald Thatcher as a heroine exclusively because of her symbolic representational value as a woman with power, while completely disregarding her condescension of feminist politics and women's rights.

The opening act of the play, embarked as "one of the most brilliant openings in the entire history of modern British drama" (Sternlicht 99) introduces six women - five women from history and fiction and Marlene, the main protagonist, a successful professional hosting a party on the occasion of her promotion as the managing director of the employment agency 'Top Girls'. The scene is presented as a dialogue between these women where the women from the past recall their lives, their struggles, their courage, their accomplishments and success that present them as 'top girls' of their times, following their own will and desires. At the same time, their stories also highlight the difficulties they endured in a patriarchal society deemed on oppressing their voices and independence, and the pain and suffering underlying their stories of success.

The first historical woman introduced in the play is Isabella Bird, a nineteenth century Scottish traveller and daughter of a clergyman of the Church of England. Typical of a woman living in the patriarchal society of nineteenth century, Isabella recalls how she "tried to be a clergyman's daughter. Needlework, music, charitable schemes" (3). At the age of forty, when she sensed that her life was over because of the overwhelming grief of her father's death and her own poor health, the doctor's advice to undertake frequent travels that gave a new meaning to her life as she experienced a sense of freedom and contentment she had never felt before; "I woke up every morning happy, knowing there would be nothing to annoy me. No nervousness. No dressing" (8). Later at the age of fifty, she married Dr Bishop whose devotion towards her sister, Hennie, during her illness won her over. While married, Isabella does not leave her husband and tries to satisfy her adventurous spirit by riding "a tricycle, that was my idea of adventure then" (12). However after his death she again sets off on great adventures travelling in different parts of the world, becoming the only European woman to meet the Emperor of Morocco at the age of seventy. However, this feeling of freedom was accompanied by a sense of guilt for leaving behind her sister, Hennie, all by herself.

Whenever I came back to England, I felt I had so much to atone for. So I hurled myself into committees, I nursed the people of Tobermory in the epidemic influenza; I lectured the Young Women's Christian Association on Thrift....I wore myself out with good causes. (20)

This sense of guilt however seems to subside by the time Act 1 ends. Isabella realizes that she and her sister were two different women with different likes and dislikes and different perspectives on life. While Hennie stayed back in Scotland, she herself could not bear the drudgery of ordinary domestic life. She asserts, "I cannot and will not live the life of a lady . . . Why should I? Why should I?" (30) to which Marlene confirms, "Of course. Not" (30). Thus, Isabella emerges as a bold, adventurous and determined woman who defied contemporary expectations by refusing to be tied down to a domestic life, the natural sphere of a lady in the nineteenth century.

Lady Nijo, a thirteenth century Japanese courtesan, represents the oppression of women in the East. Her story echoes the suffering of women in the pre-feminist era while at the same time giving a glimpse of the proto-feminist attitude. At the young age of fourteen, Lady Nijo was handed over by her father to an ex-Emperor, almost twice her age, as his concubine. As a young girl living in a patriarchal society she was conditioned to believe that the sole purpose of her life was to please men and so when the Emperor rapes her, she does not protest.

She reconciles herself to the role of Emperor's concubine and continues to serve him despite his cruelty and infidelity. However, when she falls out of the Emperor's favour, she keeps two secret lovers, Akebono and Ariake, an act that may be interpreted as an unconscious protest on her part against the Emperor and the patriarchal system in general that allows men to have multiple partners while expecting women to remain loyal and pious. However, when she runs out of his favour, remembering her father's order to submit to holy order if she fails to serve His Majesty, she becomes a Buddhist nun. Ironically, even after her escape from the Emperor's patriarchal court, she remains entrapped in the vicious cycle of two patriarchal domains, father and husband, "How else could I have left the court if I wasn't a nun? When father died I had only His Majesty. So when I fell out of favour I had nothing" (7).

Dull Gret is the subject of Pieter Breughel's painting entitled, *DulleGriet*, depicting a woman in apron and armour leading a group of women and waging a war against the "devils" (30). Gret hardly contributes to the conversation, merely offering monosyllabic comments here and there until the very end of the act when she gives a long speech disclosing the events of her life. She loses all her ten children at the hands of the murderous Spanish soldiers. Therefore, she leads her own feminist revolution against her oppressors by inviting all the women in her neighbourhood to fight the war against the devils and take revenge for their children.

We'd all had family killed. I come out of my front door that morning and shout till my neighbours come out and I said, 'Come on, we're going where the evil comes from and pay the bastards out'. And they come out just as they was . . . oh we give them devils such a beating. (31)

Through her speech, Dull Gret points out the need for women to group together and collectively fight the 'devil'. Moreover, she also says, as if advising the women of future, that the fight will not be easy and so "You just keep running on and fighting/ you didn't stop for nothing" (31).

Pope Joan, a ninth century woman, is introduced by Marlene as an “infant prodigy” (4). Like all the other guests, Joan grew up in a patriarchal society that barred women from receiving education. However, because of her love for knowledge she disguised herself as a boy and ran off to Athens at the age of twelve with a male friend. “There was nothing in my life except my studies. I was obsessed with the pursuit of the truth...” (13). Soon she occupied the ‘top’ position in the Church, first as a cardinal and then as the Pope. This provided her with the opportunity to now rule and exert power over the male sex which had prevented her from acquiring this position in the first place, “I never obeyed anyone. They all obeyed me” (23). However she could not retain her ‘top’ position for long due to her pregnancy, a result of her affair with one of her chamberlains. For Joan, the only way to educate herself and fulfil her thirst for knowledge was to adopt the male disguise and become a part of the patriarchal system in order to defeat it and she succeeds in so far as she successfully attains the highest position in the Church. However, her abandonment of her feminine side leads to her unfamiliarity with her own self. Not accustomed to being a woman, when therefore she becomes pregnant she fails to realise it and simply assumes that she’s becoming fat as a result of the luxurious lifestyle she is leading as a Pope and much to her surprise gives birth in public. As she recalls,

I wasn’t used to having a woman’s body . . . We were in a little street that goes between St Clement’s and the Colosseum, and I just had to get off the horse and sit down for a minute. Great waves of pressure were going through my body, I heard sounds like a cow mowing, they came out of my mouth . . . And the baby just slid out onto the road. (18)

This leads to fatal consequences for Joan. As her true identity is revealed, the cardinals declare her as “The Antichrist” (19), drag her out of the town and stone her to death. Due to the injustice meted out to her simply on account of her sex, Pope Joan expresses her regret at being a woman and blames her pregnancy as an obstacle in the way of her success, “If it hadn’t been for the baby I expect I’d have lived to an old age like Theodora of Alexandria . . . I shouldn’t have been a woman. Women, children and lunatics can’t be Pope.” (16)

Griselda, the last guest to arrive at the party epitomizes the stereotypical perfect wife, willing to obey her husband unconditionally. Marlene introduces her to the other ladies by telling them “Griselda’s in Boccaccio and Petrarch and Chaucer because of her extraordinary marriage . . . Griselda’s life is like a fairy-story, except it starts with marrying the prince” (22). Griselda, a poor peasant, was chosen by the ruling Marquis, Walter as his future wife. Unlike Lady Nijo, however, who was forced into accepting the role of Emperor’s concubine, Griselda had the option of refusing the Marquis’ proposal. The Marquis had given her father the option to refuse his proposal if he so desired, however, he explained that if she agreed to marry him then she would have to obey him unconditionally for the rest of her life. Griselda accepts his proposal for she recognizes her obedience towards her husband as an expression of her love for him. “But of course a wife must obey her husband. / and of course I must obey the Marquis . . . I’d rather obey the Marquis than a boy from the village” (23). Walter tests her loyalty in the cruelest ways. He treats her as an object devoid of any emotions yet she never raises her voice. In the end, however, when she successfully passes all her tests, she is duly rewarded.

In contrast to the other women like Lady Nijo and Joan Pope who protest against the unjust rules laid down by patriarchy and as a consequence of their defiance are punished by the men in their lives in the form of death or separation from their children, Griselda the loyal and

submissive wife, is rewarded for her relentless patience and unquestioning attitude. She is united with both her children and her husband.

Thus, an academic postfeminist stance that “rejects the ideas of a homogenous feminist monolith and an essential female self” (Genz and Brabon 28) can be traced in Act 1. As Elaine Aston notes, “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 of difference” (Aston 38). The opening act provides a platform for the emergence of plural identities of women. Coming from different cultural, political and economic milieu, the women express and represent different attitudes towards class, gender and ethics. What Griselda considers her loyalty towards her husband is seen as her exploitation by the other women just as what is considered a natural course of event by Lady Nijo is equivalent to her rape for Marlene. Marlene’s remark, “We don’t all have to believe the same” (7) further propagates the view that each woman has her own individual identity and ideology and so just because of the virtue of being women they do not have to agree on every aspect. Their difference however, does not affect the existence of a feminist consciousness within the group. All women fight against patriarchal oppression but in their own individual way. Moreover, each woman participates in the conversation and speaks in her own peculiar manner appropriate to her respective class. Thus, while Isabella and Lady Nijo eloquently dominate the conversation, Dull Gret, an uneducated peasant, merely utters monosyllabic comments. The simultaneous and overlapping dialogues also exemplify the diverse voices of women breaking the monolithic approach of presenting a unified voice in the fight against the common oppressor. Moreover, as Christopher Innes notes, the stories of these women provide “the perspective for evaluating the contemporary model of success in Marlene” (518). Thus, these women from the past serve as a referent in order to understand and appraise Marlene’s position in the play.

Most of the women in Act 2, are employed and financially independent and are on the lookout for better prospects; Win was “headhunted” (71) by the Top Girls agency and was offered more salary so she broke her contract with her previous firm and joined the agency. Similarly, Jeanine and Louise who already work in their respective firms visit the agency for interviews in hope of securing a job that pays more. Moreover, because of their economic independence these women are now in a position where they can not only support themselves but also the men in their lives: Win recalls how she once supported a man with whom she had been living, for four years, as he was unemployed. According to Bill Naismith, “Marlene, Win and Nell- the young women executives of the ‘top Girls’ Agency- do not discuss radical feminism; for them, apparently, there is no need. They are not intimidated by men. Far from it. They expect to do everything that men do, and to do it better” (xxvi). While discussing their weekend activities in Act 2, Win casually announces her affair with a married man. Nell on the other hand, goes out with two different men on the weekend, “One Friday, One Saturday” (49) and just like Win shows no great interest in either of them, “Sunday night I watched telly. Sunday was best . . .” (49). Thus, unlike Lady Nijo who was forced to serve His Majesty or Griselda who had to make great sacrifices in order to attain her husband’s love and affection, these women have casual flings with different men and enjoy their sexual freedom.

The play also exhibits how women’s success in workplace affects men who still possess the typical patriarchal mind-set considering women as less powerful and inferior to themselves. Howard has difficulty in accepting the fact that Marlene, a woman, has been promoted over him.

As Mrs Kidd explains, if instead of Marlene, a man had been promoted over him, it would not have hurt Howard so much. However since it is Marlene, he has not been able to sleep and is in a “state of shock” (64).

While Marlene assures Mrs Kidd that she would treat her husband no different than the rest of her colleagues, Mrs Kidd insists that her husband be given a special treatment and that Marlene must ensure to take extra care while dealing with him because “It is different ... he’s a man”(65). Moreover, when Marlene refuses to comply by her demands, she turns up on her and criticizes her for her unnatural ways, echoing her husband’s ideology, “You’re one of these ballbreakers/ that’s what you are. You’ll end up . . . miserable and lonely. You’re not natural” (65-66). While Nell and Win acknowledge Marlene’s success and celebrate it, Mrs Kidd vituperates her success as unnatural, a snag in her desirability as a woman. Thus, Mrs Kidd’s attitude towards Marlene exhibits how women who rise to positions of power are lambasted for stepping outside their ‘natural’ space. Also, while Mrs Kidd clearly blames Marlene and her ambitious nature for her husband’s poor plight, in the course of her conversation, she also reveals her own oppression at the hands of her husband. She tells Marlene how Howard directs his disappointment at work on her and on women in general and it is she who has to bear his paroxysm of rage. “It’s me that bears the brunt. I’m not the one that’s been promoted. I put him first every inch of the way. And now what do I get? You women this, you women that. Its not my fault.”(65) However, instead of blaming her husband, she continues to harangue Marlene. As Christiane Bimbergnotes, “In five minutes Mrs. Kidd undoes everything that those women from the past have achieved in a millennium” (405).

While Churchill presents Marlene as a confident and independent ‘top girl’, at the same time, through her interaction with the interviewees and by revealing the secret of her personal life, her sacrifices and decisions, she criticizes her for her self-centred and elitist behaviour. As a manager in the employment agency she has the opportunity to help other women acquire jobs and become independent however instead of helping them she intimidates and patronizes them. During her interview with Jeanine, Marlene warns her not to reveal her wedding plans in her future interviews. She adds that the previous employee who worked under the same marketing manager was quite satisfied with her job but had to quit in order to have a baby and therefore she should abstain from revealing her personal plans to the employer as it can work against her. Later in the play, this attitude of Marlene towards motherhood is further exemplified when she consciously leaves her own daughter, Angie, with her sister in order to tread the path of success.

The introduction of the smart, young and independent women in the Top Girls agency, a firm run mostly by women, certainly exudes glamour and charisma; however what Churchill reprobates is the attitude of these prosperous women. Besides the presence of inter-sexual oppression still prevalent in the modern society, Churchill highlights the emergence of intra-sexual oppression in the wake of the Capitalist environment. Within the agency, the women follow a system of hierarchy. Marlene has no compunction in discriminating against women. It is her utter lack of solidarity towards women and her masculine behaviour that prompts one of her colleagues to claim “Our Marlene’s got far more balls than Howard” (47). Marlene, Nell and Win overlook the predicament of the female job seekers and show complete disregard for these, “half a dozen little girls” (51), by limiting their professional horizons.

In an article in *The Guardian*, Lyn Gardner praises Churchill for her ability to foresee the future. With reference to *Top Girls*, she says:

It was not just a horribly accurate forecast of how ruthless the 1980s would be, but also an uncannily accurate prediction of the dilemmas facing the post-feminist, post-Marlene generation. Long before anyone coined the phrase “having it all”, Churchill in *Top Girls* was exploring whether you could be a mother and have a successful career, whether getting to the top involved killing some aspect of yourself, what sisterhood really meant. (“Material Girls” *Guardian*)

The necessity of making a choice between a domestic and professional life holds true for Marlene – she gives up her relationship with her daughter in order to pursue her career and undergoes two abortions trying to maintain her professional success that follows at the cost of her initial sacrifice. Joyce’s condition – a woman with a failed marriage, encumbered by her responsibilities towards Angie and her parents, living in a “dump” as she herself admits, in a way prefigures Marlene’s sombre and dismal future had she like Joyce decided to stay back in Suffolk and lead a domestic life. Churchill herself admits, “women are pressured to make choices between working and having children in a way that men aren’t” (Luckhurst 88). Therefore, it appears that what stands at criticism through Churchill is not Marlene’s act of leaving Angie with Joyce in her quest for power and success, but her lack of interest in Angie’s life and her complete disregard for the help that her sister offers which eventually helps her in realizing her dream. Neglected by both, her biological mother and her aunt Joyce, Angie grows up to become a spoilt child. On account of her unsettled childhood, she experiences a sense of disorientation and exhibits contumacious behaviour. She drops out of school, becomes rebellious and uses defamatory language with Joyce and Kit. Devoid of any social skills, she befriends a girl much younger than herself, Kit, who also discerns that there is something “funny” (40) about Angie. As Aston observes, “Like the disempowered interviewees at the agency, she is no match for her brighter friend who sees a future for herself as a nuclear physicist” (42).

Though sisters, Marlene and Joyce are very different from each other. While Marlene leaves her home at a young age and sets out to become a successful and independent woman, Joyce chooses to stay back, look after her mother and get married. Meeting after six long years, they seem rather distant and disconnected, unaware of the current status of each other’s lives. Her impassive response, “Yes in fact” (1), to Isabella’s question in Act 1, “Do you have a sister?” (1) clearly depicts her reluctance to acknowledge her family. While Marlene is oblivious to the fact that Joyce has been single for the last three years since her husband left her, Joyce herself is unaware of Marlene’s professional and relationship status which becomes apparent when she questions her regarding the same. During Marlene’s visit to Joyce’s house in Act 3, the conversation between the two sisters clearly bring out their different ideologies, and the subsequent tension between them soon climaxes into a heated argument. While Marlene eventually succeeds in claiming the title of a ‘top girl’, Joyce because of her circumstances and working class status is left behind stranded. She is a victim of the same society of which Marlene seems to be the champion.

Both Marlene and Joyce stand in stark opposition to each other with their respective Thatcherite and Leftist visions. Marlene, a firm adherent of Thatcher, who believes in the ‘individual’ stands completely blind to anyone’s interest but her own. She believes that her success is solely the result of her hard work and determination and never acknowledges the collective effort of her sister in taking care of her forsaken daughter. She chooses to remain

ignorant of the realities that Joyce outlines, branding it simply as her lack of ambition. Joyce, on the other hand, is “hidebound by a crude leftism whose political interventions are reduced to scratching or spitting on the occasional Mercedes or Rolls Royce” (Gobert 4). She refuses to accept their abusive father’s oppression of his wife as a purely sexist act claiming that he too was a victim of class oppression, thereby trying to defend his action. Similarly, by integrating Mr Connolly’s homicide with his class snobbery, she implicitly attacks Marlene. The difference between their political ideologies becomes apparent in Act 3:

MARLENE.who’s got to drive it on? First woman prime minister.Terrifico.
Aces.Right on. / You must admit. Certainly gets my vote.
JOYCE.What good’s first woman if it’s her? I suppose you’d have liked
Hitler if hewas a woman. Ms Hitler. Got a lot done, Hitlerina. / Great
adventures.

MARLENE. Bosses stil walking on the worker’s faces? Still Dadda’s little
parrot?Haven’t you learned to think for yourself? I believe in the individual.

Look at me.

JOYCE.I am looking at you. (93)

Positioning Marlene and Joyce according to postfeminist critic, Naomi Wolf’s two traditions of feminism, that is, victim feminism and power feminism, Marlene emerges as a power feminist “free thinking, pleasure loving and self-assertive” and Joyce as a victim feminist “severe, morally superior and self-denying” (qtd. in Genz and Brabon 68). Marlene complies by Wolf’s claim that “the master’s tools can dismantle the master’s house” (qtd. in Genz and Brabon 70), with money being one of the master’s tools besides electoral process and the press. Marlene adopts masculine traits in order to advance in her career. Like Wolf who “sees all characterizations of the lack of power for women as admissions of their weakness, rather than an attempt to analyse current social formations” (Imelda Whelehan 237), Marlene too refuses to acknowledge any discrimination against women. For her, working class does not exist anymore and if women fail to achieve their goals in today’s society it is solely due to their being imbecile and indolent. Wolf’s concept of power feminism which according to Whelehan, “seems to be a great deal about becoming streetwise to the new Capitalist world order and very little about feminism in any of its past incarnations” (237), also holds true in case of Marlene. Throughout the course of the play, Marlene’s primary aim is her own preferment and she does little to aid other women, be it her colleagues or her own family members.

The play ends with the eerie simulacrum of Angie, stumbling blindly in her nightdress, calling out for her mother. The fact that Angie holds on to the dress gifted by Marlene years ago so dementedly even though it does not fit her anymore symbolizes “the ‘misfit’ or gap between Angie’s desire to be like the (well-dressed), career woman Marlene, and Marlene’s dismissal of her own daughter’s career aspirations” (Aston 41). Thus, Angie typifies the causatum of Marlene’s competitive labour; forgotten, forsaken and shunned as the detritus left in the wake of her success.

Alexis Carreiro in her article “Superhero Rhetoric in Post-feminist Television” notes that the postfeminist, pop culture concept of “superwoman” presents a vision of women with “successful careers and beautiful babies, lean boyfriends and fat bank accounts, good friends and bad attitudes. They do not need to choose between these categories because they can have it all” (qtd. in Brummett 123).However,she asserts that this image of superwoman “is often idealistic”

and unrealistic (136). Churchill also expresses a similar view in her play and warns women from getting trapped in this concept of superwoman. Only one woman in the play is portrayed as 'having it all' and consequently emerging as a superwoman, the managing director breast feeding her child in the board room. However, the fact that this woman is only mentioned by Marlene during her conversation with Joyce and does not actually make an appearance in the play evinces that she is an exception compared to the majority of women. As Bimberg observes, the play highlights that "the unfortunate decision a lot of women arrive at even today is still the difficult alternative of 'no profession' or 'no family', and this despite the fact that the twentieth century has opened up to women new possibilities of self-determination through birth control and a more favourable legislation"(404). The women in Act 1 and the modern women highlight the gap between the past and the present. As the play progresses it becomes evident that over the years, women's condition has improved considerably. Women like Marlene, Joyce, Jeanine, Louise and Shona do not have to face cruelties like child marriage, prostitution, rape, etc. As Verna A. Foster notes, "...some of the problems of Marlene and her co-workers (Nell and Win's difficulties in finding suitable men, for example) seem trivial in comparison with those of women of the past who had to struggle against much more adverse conditions of patriarchal oppression" (250). And so Marlene's claim, "We've all come a long way. To our courage and the way we changed our lives and our extraordinary achievements" (14), seems to hold significance. Even the women from the past acknowledge this progress when they congratulate Marlene, "I'm sure it's just the beginning of something extraordinary" (14) However, at the same time, through the "cacophonous collapse of the celebration at the end of the first act" (Jernigan 234), where Lady Nijo is laughing and crying simultaneously while Joan lies sick in the corner, and also through Marlene's comment in response to Isabella's sense of guilt in leaving her family behind in order to fulfil her love for travelling, "Oh god, why are we all so miserable" (20) the dramatist highlights the parallels between the women of past and present. The necessity of making sacrifices in order to attain success, a necessity common amongst all women, points to the fact that much needs to be done. Churchill does not present any solution to the conundrum of women who covet to balance domestic and professional life. She highlights the need to imagine new alternatives and possibilities.

Through her play, Churchill presents Feminism as a diverse and varied site of conflict and discord rather than unity and solidarity. Instead of presenting a single feminist standpoint, Churchill presents the reader with a blend of different feminist voices and contradictions inherent within feminism. In the very opening act of the play, the five women exhibit individuality and the dissimilitude in priorities and values among different women. Isabella is an intrepid explorer who feels stifled by domesticity; Lady Nijo is apprehensive about social conventions and her place in court; Joan is an intellectual woman interested in theology and metaphysics; Gret is a caricature of the peasant woman, stealing plates from the dinner table; and Griselda typifies the submissive and pliable wife, happy in her acquiescence. As Naismith observes, "Altogether the marked differences of personality militate against any simple 'definition' of what constitutes a woman" (xxix). Later through the two sisters, Marlene and Joyce, with their individual ideologies and choices, their dichotomy of working woman/housewife, right/left wing politics, privileged/ penurious status, the dramatist again presents different and contradictory images of women. Churchill presents a conglomeration of voices of different women (sisters, mothers, daughters, courtesans, wives, spinsters and comrades) each with her own discrete historical,

political, social and cultural background. Thus, the play clearly exhibits the postfeminist ideology “motivated less by an attempt to determine and fix its [feminism’s] meaning than by an effort to acknowledge its plurality and liminality” (Genz and Brabon 7).

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