

Of the Glory and its Price: Re-Reading the Culture / Identity Interface in Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*

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Within the hierarchized social space, concepts such as success and achievement are formed and framed by culture. The individual, therefore, is left with the options of either passively conforming to the success-driven cultural norms or of raising the banner of revolt that helps one assert one's identity albeit at the cost of social stigma and strictures. According to Anthony O'Hear, culture comprises of 'those aspects of human activity which are socially rather than genetically transmitted' (185-186). Therefore, culture can be defined as the cumulative deposit of certain permanent explicit and implicit symbols, codes, knowledge, experiences, beliefs, values and attitudes whose meanings are acquired and importance acknowledged by a group of people either through collective striving or through group belonging and inheritance. Joseph Butler, on the other hand, defines 'identity' as the sum total of those intrinsic features of an individual, which he/she may or may not share with others (185). Identity, therefore, refers to a set of personal attributes and characteristics that constitutes the uniqueness or individuality of a person and differentiates him/her from those who are the others to his/her self.

Since culture provides individuals with the security of group belonging but only through a strategic enculturation of the accepted social beliefs and practices, it is often perceived to rob the individual off the uniqueness of his/her self by overwriting it with models of normality and respectability. People who are unable to conform to these parameters are excluded from both the family and the society, and subjected to uneasy/

painful consequences. In *Top Girls*, nearly all the female characters are seen to suffer from this cultural hegemony whereby all their attempts at self-actualization are constantly monitored by a constrictive society that can neither expect nor accept women who dare or desire. In the present paper efforts will be made to see how in *Top Girls* culture exerts a constrictive influence on the female characters who wish to secure a place in the world irrespective of their gender, sexual or social standing. Efforts will also be made to show how Churchill traces an alternative history of female resistance that has seldom been allowed entry into the accepted versions of patriarchal history.

Top Girls was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre, London, on 28th August 1982, under the direction of Max Stafford-Clark. It is as much the story of Marlene, the female protagonist, and of her sister Joyce, as of the five historical women who appear in the first act or of the three contemporary women who approach the eponymous employment agency for job. In fact, *Top Girls* is Churchill's problem play that tells of the glory as well as the price of female freedom and success in a patriarchal culture that asserts itself and its powers through thwarting all subversive attempts at deviance and difference with a predetermined set of standardized behaviour and norms of respectability.

Top Girls talks of girls who in spite of their 'girl'-hood (immaturity, helplessness as compared to the manliness of a male) dare to subvert the culturally established and socially promoted gender hierarchy and aspire to reach the 'top' (the position exclusively reserved for the mighty male). As a result of their aspiration to topsy-turvy the cultural hierarchy, these 'top girls' expose themselves as potentially disruptive agents to the judging, punishing breed of patriarchal categorizers who always try to coerce the female to what the famous poet Kamala Das calls 'fit in' and 'belong' to the culturally accepted feminine roles of a 'girl', a 'wife', an 'embroiderer', a 'cook' or a 'quarreler with servants' (60). However, such coercion and the repressive cultural ploys it entails instead of impeding the journey of these top girls boosts their spirits to move on undeterred. What Churchill's audience, therefore, is left to grapple with is a series of disturbing tales of female sacrifice, suffering and sustained hope for a livable if not lovable world order.

The first staging of *Top Girls* in 1982 Britain was quite a significant phenomenon for both Churchill and the English stage. Churchill in the play openly takes up a series

of uneasy questions that troubled the British politics of the 1980s. After the nerve wrecking Winter of Discontent (1978-79), the proverbial rise of Margaret Thatcher was perceived to be a double edged sword. Though Thatcher's uncompromising conservative capitalism and authoritarian liberalism seemed to rescue the stagnant British economy from an inevitable post-imperial decline, it was originally paving way for greater crisis. While the deregulated financial sectors popularly known as the Big Bang profited only the foreign investors, the decimation of the manufacturing base resulted in an unprecedented mass unemployment. On the international front too, Thatcher's popularity was greatly decreasing on account of her growing intimacy with the controversial Chilean Military Ruler Augusto Pinochet and her open criticism of the Anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa.

Appearing at this precise moment, *Top Girls* with its projection of Thatcherite values through the heroine Marlene and of the suffering working class as symbolized by the second lead lady Joyce highlights what none of the other male playwrights of Churchill's generation did dare to present. *Top Girls* opens with the picture of a restaurant where the female protagonist Marlene has invited five ladies to celebrate her promotion. This much celebrated Dinner Scene records the personal histories of women who, going against the cultural constrictions, did dare and desire. Interestingly, the women Marlene invites are separated from each other by race, class, ethnicity, nationality, religion, age and time. But what links them together is the story of their lives — their experience of a constrictive cultural framework, their past of sufferings and sacrifices and their presence of anonymity and unfulfilled aspirations. As Dimple Godiwala puts it, 'each is linked to each by virtue of being an occupant of the same episteme: the unbroken episteme of patriarchy which dictates their oppression' (8).

The five invitees are Isabella Bird, the first woman to be elected the Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, Lady Nijo, the 13th century Japanese concubine of Emperor Go-Fukakusa and later a Buddhist Nun, Dull Gret, a Femish Folklore figure, Pope Joan, the Medieval Female Pope and a transvestite, and Patient Griselda, the heroine of a number of Renaissance tales. The first female invitee, Isabella Bird is a Victorian female explorer who did pay little heed to the cultural injunctions about woman staying inside the house as expressed not only in the scriptures but also in the popular literature of her time that consigned man to the field while left the hearth to the woman (Tennyson 261). After the death of her husband Dr. John Bishop, Isabella's decision to study medicine and surgery and her act of travelling out to India as a

missionary once again signify her desire to come out of a normative femininity and thereby entering fields and embracing responsibilities which have traditionally been kept exclusive for the male (Kaye 156).

If Isabella's indomitable spirit lurks behind her decision to establish herself first as an explorer and then as a missionary, then Lady Nijo's performance of the identity of an imperial concubine is just a façade to pay patriarchy back in its own coin. Born and brought up to become a consort for the emperor, Lady Nijo was thrust into a compulsory heterosexuality at the mere age of fourteen. Though she could do nothing to protect herself from the traditional gifting of female children to the service of the royalty practiced by her Fujiwara Nijo clan, her decision to take a series of lovers outside the royal family is indicative of her resistance against the patriarchal double standard that propagates male polygamy even if it borders on adultery but refuses to acknowledge the woman's right on her own body and being. That Lady Nijo bore children not to the legal owner of her body, the Emperor, but to her lover and had actually succeeded in making the Emperor take them as his own heirs exemplifies how she duped patriarchy to make it a virtual puppet in her own hands. Even when she fell out of the Emperor's favours, her decision to move out as a nun is emblematic of her indomitable spirit. However, it is through her writing of her memoir that she not only attempts to record a potentially disruptive retelling of what a woman can do but also what she endures. Thus it is not without any significance that Lady Nijo ultimately decides to come out of anonymity names her memoir *Towazugatari* which roughly translates into English as "An Unasked-For Tale".

The third invited lady is Dull Gret. Unlike Isabella Bird or Lady Nijo, she is not a historical but a legendary figure. Her story appears in a Femish Folklore where she is also called Mad Meg. The story was later on recreated in 1562 by the Renaissance painter Peter Bruegel, the Elder. Gret happens to be the female version of an epic hero who undertook perilous journeys with a noble ambition. In the legend as also in Bruegel's painting, Gret represents the opposite of traditional feminine virtue — a masculine, ruthless figure leading a band of blood-thirsty women warriors through the regions of Hell and ultimately coming out not only safe but also victorious. Interestingly, the figure of Gret, as Margaret A. Sullivan points up, has always symbolized 'covetousness' and 'quarrelsome' nature (57-58). In fact, Gret seems to be the perfect embodiment of quality which stands in sharp contrast to what has traditionally been understood to constitute femininity. She thus is the forbidden woman — the disruptive

one — who can only bring death and disaster as opposed to and by the pro-life image of the female popularized by patriarchy. Thus, it is not without significance that Gret has only been remembered by the patriarchal history either as ‘dull’ (and thus to be despised) or as ‘mad’ (and thus to be eschewed).

If Dull Gret’s strong personality poses a serious threat to the socially idolized version of femininity as weak and submissive, then Pope Joan’s figure disrupts the many assumptions of a male dominated religion by performing a man’s identity. According to the 13th century *Chronica Universalis Mettensis* written by Dominican Jean de Mailly, Joan is the name of a transvestite female Pope (Rustici, 4). Her story was later on made popular by the writers like Giovanni Boccaccio and Bertolt Brecht. In the history of Roman Catholicism, Joan is a subversive figure. She was condemned by both religion and society not only for hiding her true identity by practicing deadly sins like fraud, treachery, heresy and blasphemy but also for transgressing boundaries of femininity as decided by heteropatriarchy. Thus when Joan’s pregnancy was revealed, it shook the very basis of Roman Catholicism. Thus, it is not surprising that Pope Joan’s story has been obliterated from every standard available versions of history.

The last guest invited by Marlene is another fictional character Patient Griselda. Patient Griselda’s story was by Renaissance poets like Petrarch, Boccaccio and Chaucer. If a single word could effectively sum up Griselda’s nature is patience, and it is this patience that becomes her policy to fight patriarchy back. Instead of resorting to active resistance strategies, what she does is to refuse to be affected by the patriarchal ploys and continues to test the patience of her detractors until they give up. While critics like Dimple Godiwala have criticized Griselda for her apparent ‘obedience’ and ‘idealized gender identity’ in spite of being ‘subjected to years of mental torture and agony’ at the hands of the ‘wealthy saviour-paterfamilias’ Marquis Walter, they have failed to see through Griselda’s performance of wifehood the adamant determination with which she denies to give in to patriarchy (9).

According to R. Darren Gobert, this surreal dinner party ‘signals the play’s fractured temporality by bringing its subjects impossibly together’ (4). This ‘fractured temporality’ is what accounts for the fragmented and often incoherent conversations of these six top girls through which Churchill reveals how the condition of women have remained the same throughout history in spite of history’s much-hyped changing course. The juxtaposition of Marlene’s tale with that of the historical and/or mythic-

literary figures creates an environment of cross-cultural, atemporal mutual sharing whereby the characters' act of narrativizing their tales takes the form of verbal resistance through which an alternative history of female defiance gets formulated. The fumbling for words, the gasping for breath and the seemingly endless confusion with which these ladies talk among themselves and interrupted each other result as much from ages of silenced existence forced onto them by an authoritarian cultural bulwark as from their own experiences of violence and violation in their previous avatars. Marlene's invitation to the five ladies stands in sharp contrast to the coldness and contempt with which their own society rejected to receive or tolerate them. The dinner, therefore, becomes as much a celebration of Marlene's ability and achievement as a woman as that of the indomitable spirit of these ladies which in their own time they never got to relish. This is emphasized when Marlene raises a toast to their collective achievement, 'We've all come a long way. To our courage and the way we changed our lives and our extraordinary achievements' (P2. 67).

According to Andrew Wyllie, *Top Girls* 'explores the pros and cons of attempting to better the lot of women within the existing framework' (17). To put the observation into perspective, we can see that the second act of the play presents three more life stories of three contemporary women Jeanine, Louise, and Shona who consider changing jobs to be a suitable strategy to bring change in their monotonous lives. Jeanine is a young lady, lost in her own thoughts and too confused or scared to visualize the future (P2. 84). While her anxiety with her present may have been caused by her past experiences of indecision and deference, her unwillingness to think about the future can easily be seen as an offshoot of her frustration with the several conditions life has thrown her way.

The second character to approach *Top Girls* employment agency is the forty-six years old Louise who after serving a particular company for twenty-one long years wants to change her job (P2. 105). While talking, Louise reveals both her attachment to her company and her frustration with the youth-oriented and productivity-driven attitude that it has now adopted as a business strategy (P2. 105-106). When Louise expresses her desire to leave the job, she reveals herself to be some kind of a modern Dull Gret who, failing to make her society reckon her worth, took the extreme step of quitting it and thereby tried to make an in absentia impression of herself. The third job seeker Shona proves to be the most difficult one to decipher. Telling lies after lies with no strings of truth attached, Shona is the female version of the archetypal questor hero

who in an utter dissatisfaction with the order of things keeps himself moving on (P2. 117). While Marlene and her employees navigate through the list of confused wishes and jumbled up requirements of these three women and try to find them suitable positions, what they encounter is not their customer's lists but a projection of their own personal histories. If in Jeanine's unwillingness to think about the future Marlene sees a reflection of her own fears, then in Louise's frantic attempts to get recognition, she sees her own desire to be praised. Similarly, Shona's thousand false claims reflect the series of lies that Marlene and for that matter any woman daring to be different has to tell to herself as auto-suggestions, as consolations and as self-deceptions.

It is at end of the second act that *Top Girls* provides both Marlene and the audience with an opportunity to face some unpalatable truths that such lies give birth to. Marlene's long forgotten daughter Angie returns quite instinctively in search of her mother (P2. 107). Though Marlene is clearly disturbed at and entirely unwilling to entertain such show of tenderness and affection, she can hardly escape her responsibilities. Resultantly, she has nothing to do other than offering Angie to stay with her for some time (P2. 114). Opening at this precise moment, the final act of the play takes the audience into an analeptic journey just a year before the first act of *Top Girls* opens. Besides providing Churchill with a means to her characteristic avoidance a proper closure of the play, this jump cut actually serves a twin purpose. If on the one hand, it provides Marlene with a chance to review her own story and thereby prepare her balance sheet of losses and gains, then on the other hand, such a manipulation of time allows Churchill to pit Marlene's story against that of another potent female character Joyce, who happens to be Marlene's sister and the adoptive mother of her daughter Angie.

In the third act when these two sisters face each other, their encounter bring out truths that both of them tried to forget in order to fight for their respective lives. If Marlene's act of buying expensive presents for Angie and Joyce is indicative of her attempts to make up for her inability to perform the roles of a mother and a sister, then her confusion regarding the right size of Angie's dress together with her ignorance of Joyce's divorce is a painful indication of how futile her attempts have been, 'I don't know if it's the right size. She's grown up since I saw her' (P2. 121). Joyce's formal replies to Marlene and her occasional admonishments to Angie therefore highlight not her anger but her frustration at not having received any sort of help from Marlene in moments of crisis (P2. 121)

However, such possibilities of mutual identification of similarities are always fraught with the chances of identification of mutual differences as well. The more Marlene talks of women's economic freedom the more Joyce sees in her the ruthless capitalism that Thatcherism promoted. Joyce's remembrance of her past together with her experiences of the present — how and why her parents died and how her own life and that of Angie is going on — highlights the dismal condition of the contemporary British society. That Marlene's attempted social 'equality' is but an empty dream comes clear when Joyce accuses Marlene of being ashamed of her if she visits her office and Marlene actually accepts it by announcing her hatred for the working class, 'I hate the working class' (P2. 139). But what saves this conversation from getting further heated up is again their mutual identification of each other as victims of cultural constrictions. The more the sisters accuse each other the more they realize what the other had to bear with. The painful remembrance of Joyce's multiple miscarriages merges with Marlene's memory of terminating her own pregnancies one after another (P2. 135). Marlene's fear regarding her sterility refers as much to her biological infertility as to her mental sterility that she has acquired during her years away from the protective surroundings of her family (P2. 135).

In fact, it is through Marlene and Joyce's story that Churchill presents her take on the ills of Thatcherism. If Marlene's is a glorious tale of progress and achievement, then the price for such glory is paid as much by Marlene herself as by her sister Joyce. Not only did she took up the role of a mother when Marlene refused to be one to her own biological daughter, but also sacrificed her own pregnancies for the sake of protecting Angie. She is a lady for whom it is her ability to accept responsibilities and willingness to perform them well that becomes a medium to express and assert her selfhood. Therefore, when Marlene refuses to accept Angie, she has no qualms to embrace her, knowing it fully well that such a decision would eventually thrust her into both financial and personal crises.

It is during this conversation that Joyce reveals herself as a modern Patient Griselda — a woman strong enough to continue with whatever life has to offer her. When Marlene was busy playing the demigoddess for her clients finding them jobs and thus organizing their lives in a more appropriate and acceptable fashion, Joyce was silently fighting odds which were quite outside her control. Her initial reluctance to receive Marlene at her home and her studied avoidance of her sister during her visit form parts of her strategy to keep herself away from all kinds of emotions; for just like

Marlene she too hates revealing her emotional vulnerabilities and thereby getting categorized by patriarchy as weak and unstable. However, this apparent coldness never handicaps Joyce to notice the inner torments of Marlene, and thus whenever she breaks down under the tremendous pressure of playing the successful woman, Joyce is there for her.

Christiane Bimberg accuses Marlene of falling a prey to her own booby trap; for, according to him, in trying to master ‘the men-made system’ she gets ‘caught in the last refuge of men, the working world’ and becomes ‘nothing more than just *another* man, perhaps not even a better one’ (404). However, it must be understood that Marlene sees the history of gender oppression in society as having its roots in the financial disparity that exists between the sexes and therefore tries to resist the patriarchal pull by economically establishing herself first as an equal of and then as a superior to her gender others. Her decision to free herself from the clutches of motherhood is not an indication of her inability or reluctance to perform the duties of a mother but a necessity to be able to perform greater tasks. Through her dedication to her work what Marlene seeks to achieve is not merely the status of a ‘top girl’ but also the ability to provide thousands of other top girls with an opportunity to speak of their experiences and thereby help them in breaking the culture of silence that patriarchy has taught them to conform to. True that in her struggle to represent a silenced gender, Marlene fails to become a mother, but she never becomes oblivious of her familial responsibilities. While her sister fights her struggle within the family, Marlene does so staying outside of it. Her sacrificed motherhood with her denial to love and Joyce’s embraced responsibility with her promise to care both reveal identity performance as empowering strategies for countering cultural constrictions.

According to Michele Foucault, culture is not merely ‘a hierarchical organization of values, accessible to everybody, but at the same time the occasion of a mechanism of selection and exclusion’ (179). And it is this ‘mechanism’ that the female characters in *Top Girls* attempt to overthrow in order to assert their individual identities. Since, culture, as a meta-institution, thrives on appropriating pliant individuals into models of perfect compliance while branding the deviant ones as potentially disruptive entities, these women are immediately brought under the social panopticon. It is, however, their indomitable spirit and willingness to move ahead that ultimately enables them to, what Vincent Crapenzanocalls, ‘take possession’ of their ‘own otherness’ and ‘not be aware simply of the otherness about him[/her]’ (89). The closing one-liner of *Top*

Girls ‘Frightening’ uttered by Angie, needless to say, vocalizes the fears and dangers of that otherness which every female in the making must ultimately accept and embrace (P2. 141).

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