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**THE FEMALE VOICES IN
CARYL CHURCHILL'S *TOP GIRLS* (1982):
SISTERS OR FOES?**

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INTRODUCTION

My interest in theatre goes back to my student years in Bucharest in the mid 1990s. The choice of dramatic performances available in recent post-communist Romania was scarce, consisting mainly of political plays, an infusion of previously censored texts both by Romanian and foreign authors and modern revivals of classical plays – the scene being overall isolated from the international one.¹ What is known as fringe theatre emerged relatively later, approximately ten years after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Considering the political and economical instability of Romania, alternative theatre could only manifest itself timidly, in underground bars or derelict venues, entirely financed by the dedication of some passionate people working in the mainstream industry, driven by their desire to break away from the conformism and mimesis of state-budgeted theatre and the urge to reconnect Romanian drama to the contemporary international scene. Gradually, independent theatres started to appear – *Green Hours*, *Teatrul Act*, *La Scena*, *Teatrul Mic* – promoting young Romanian playwrights and staging alternative international drama.

Due to its unusually brief history, the new wave of Romanian playwriting had to fill in huge gaps in terms of both aesthetics and ideology to catch up with its Western counterpart. That explains why certain trends and movements in the evolution of contemporary theatre are missing altogether. This is particularly the case of feminist theatre. Women playwrights like Lia Bugnar and Gianina Carbuariu began to claim ground on the male-dominated dramatic arena, but without any clear feminist engagement.

On a personal level, this period coincides with a shift in my positioning from theatre consumer to a more creative stance. I had recently started writing short stories and I was experiencing a growing interest in screenwriting and playwriting, which soon materialized in a script for a 23-

¹ In this respect it is interesting to point out that Caryl Churchill's play *Mad Forest* was one of the first plays about the Romanian Revolution to be staged at the Romanian National Theatre early in 1991.

minute fantasy short film and a monologue play. This latter endeavor made me aware that I was giving a voice to a female character from a woman's perspective, which compelled me to look for similar works by other Romanian women playwrights. It came as a shock to realize I hardly had any counterparts to relate to. This was the start of a long period of non-academic research and indiscriminate reading of drama written by women.

It was only later, while studying for my Master's degree in Construction and Representation of Cultural Identities at the University of Barcelona, that my interest achieved a more coherent form and substance, culminating with the discovery of Caryl Churchill's plays and her unique vision and representation of female characters. I decided to write about her play *Top Girls* in my project due to the complexity of female discourses existent in the play and the convergent/conflicting interactions between them, which provide fertile ground for analysis from a feminist perspective.

This work, therefore, analyzes the different female voices in Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* and the ways in which they interact/compete with each other, with a view to establishing whether a feminist politics of difference is compatible with a feminist collective consciousness. Chapter I begins with an overview of the present-day attitude of women toward feminism. It looks into the reasons why most women today don't identify with the feminist movement anymore. The next step in this chapter is to define some of the various types of feminisms that have appeared in the Anglo-American world since the beginning of the modern feminism movement in the 1960s, namely bourgeois or liberal, radical or cultural and materialist or socialist or Marxist feminism. In my account of the key features of each of these three tendencies, I take into consideration the following aspects: origin, core principles, founding texts, position on changing the *status quo* and the source of female oppression. Next, I focus on the contradiction between the feminist ideal of equality and the reality of the differences between women. Further, I insist on the need to acknowledge the multitude of female voices and the

different contexts of oppression as the only way that a feminist consciousness can truly resonate.

Chapter II begins with a brief description of the socio-political and economic context of the play, i.e. Thatcher's England (early 1980s), paying special attention to its influence on women's choices regarding labor, family and childcare. The following step in this chapter is to proceed with the description of the three acts. Next, I examine the female voices that appear in the play, insisting on their diverse natures and their different economic, social, political, economic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Further on, the chapter explores whether feminism can acknowledge such differences and still claim a collective consciousness. It further inquires about the possibility for women to speak with a unified voice, by analyzing the different female voices as they appear and communicate with each other in Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*, in an attempt to establish whether the women are sisters or foes. In order to determine that, I apply conversation analysis to different samples of overlapping dialogue in the play. While some critics take the overlapping dialogue in *Top Girls* as a sign of communication breakdown and implicitly as a lack of bonding between sisters, I see it as an indication of enthusiasm and support. After that, I argue that the interpretation of simultaneous speech as ineffective communication reflects a gender-biased approach to women as a group, whereas the view of simultaneous speech as a sign of enthusiasm and support indicates a pluralist approach to women, taking into consideration the multiple voices of women and thus acknowledging the different points of view within feminism.

Finally, the Conclusion discusses the possibility of a feminist ideology that would have relevance for all women. It further points out Churchill's pluralist approach to feminism and finally ponders over the future of feminism.

CHAPTER I.
THROUGH THE FEMINIST EYE

It is a difficult enterprise for the young generation of today, when women in Liberia, India, Rwanda and Burundi are elected presidents or prime ministers, to even begin to imagine that less than 50 years ago women in these countries still did not have a right to vote.² Nevertheless, only two generations ago women in the Western world were denied protection from domestic violence, equal pay and access to contraception, were not entitled to own property and to initiate divorce proceedings and did not have the liberty to pursue higher education or a career. All these political, social, cultural and economic changes were brought about in Western society by the women's liberation movements in a series of campaigns beginning in the early 1960s. And yet, when asked about their attitude toward feminism, young women today frown in disapproval, rejecting any association with or implication in the movement. "I'm not a feminist!" is invariably the most common answer. Feminist critics argue that since the mid-1990s young women have stopped making feminism "their central political and personal project" (Moi 2006: 1735), which prompts cautious remarks about what lies ahead: "the future of feminism is in doubt" (Moi 2006: 1735). But what are the reasons why women today don't call themselves feminists? Are they no longer marching or just reluctant to use what has become the 'f-word'? The label is seen by most women as negative, extremist and passé. Some share the belief that equality has been achieved and that feminism is no longer relevant to our modern societies, while others believe that newer issues like climate change, terrorism, globalization and consumerism have become more important and therefore, women are increasingly less likely to subscribe to labels of identity. Some consider feminism to be an extremely rigid and restrictive members-only club, affecting all aspects of a person's lifestyle from clothes to food and drinks, while

² The countries are listed in chronological order, according to the year when women were granted the right to vote: Liberia 1946, India 1950, Rwanda and Burundi 1961.

others worry that "other people would think that they must be strident, domineering, aggressive, intolerant and – worst of all – that they must hate men" (Moi 2006: 1736). However, when asked whether they are in favor of freedom, equality and justice for women, the answer is always yes. Nevertheless, they cannot or would not or simply do not identify with the feminist movement. It seems that young women today are ambivalent about the movement as a whole, and yet, they live feminism in their everyday lives, whether they are challenging sexist jokes or breaking all types of barriers. Australian journalist Kathy Bail coined the term 'DIY Feminism' to describe the rise of this phenomenon. In 1996 Bail wrote *DIY Feminism*, a collection of essays by young women, in an attempt to find out why they don't embrace the label 'feminist' anymore. In her introduction to the book, Bail responded that young women were in fact living a new kind of feminist politics, one "allied with a do-it-yourself style and philosophy characteristic of youth culture" (1996: 4). This attitude rejected the 'woman as victim' strain of the 1970s in favor of living a feminist politics that was "diverse, creative and fun" (1996: 5). It is precisely this disengagement that attracted much of the criticism against it, being often viewed as 'commodified feminism' and criticized for its failure to be oppositional "because it is part of a saleable youth culture, which implies no political maturity" (Driscoll 2002: 137). In exploring the reasons for young women's "aversion to using the word 'feminist' as a personal descriptor" one decade later (2006), social researcher Rebecca Huntley identified the 'I'm not a feminist, but...' syndrome, arguing that women today "believe that they should have the right to equality and fairness but don't class themselves as feminists and are in fact turned off by feminism's harder edges" (Huntley 2006: 44-5). Huntley explains that this generation of women has been brought up believing in their own independence and the opportunities available to them, particularly in the education and the workplace, and they simply refuse to see themselves as victims or in need of a political movement to help them succeed in life.

It is far from being an overstatement that feminism has been one of the most far-reaching movements that marked the 20th century. Indeed, the influence of feminism has been felt in every area of social, political and cultural life worldwide. Everyone knows, or thinks that knows, what feminism is. Yet defining feminism has proved to be nothing short of controversial even for feminist theorists. The difficulty comes from the coexistence of multiple and contradictory definitions within feminism.

In her groundbreaking book about feminism and theatre, Jill Dolan expounds her theory about the origin of feminism, situating its starting point in women's acknowledgment of their own subservience to men:

Feminism begins with a keen awareness of exclusion from male cultural, social, sexual, political and intellectual discourse. It is a critique of prevailing social conditions that formulate women's position as outside of dominant male discourse. (1988: 3)

Dolan continues by asserting, "the routes feminism takes to redress the fact of male dominance [...] are varied" and that consequently "feminism has in fact given way more precisely to feminisms" (1988: 3). Here Dolan explains that feminism can take many forms, which converge in their fight against the inequality between the sexes, but diverge in their approach to identify and remedy the causes of this inequality.

In this paper I use as a frame of reference the three dominant feminist positions as they are recognized in the British and American contexts by Elaine Aston: bourgeois (or liberal), radical (or cultural) and materialist (or socialist or Marxist) (1995: 8).³

³ See Alison M. Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Brighton: Harvester, 1983) for her definition of "four alternative conceptions of women's liberation [...]: liberal feminism, traditional Marxism, radical feminism and socialist feminism (1983: 8). See also Michelene Wandor, *Carry On, Understudies: Theatre and Sexual Politics* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986) for her classification of feminism in three major tendencies "as they have emerged in the 1970s": radical, bourgeois or emancipationism and socialist feminism (1986: 131). See also Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988) for her special focus on American feminism and the three main categories that she considers as the most inclusive and most useful for clarifying "the different feminist ways of seeing": liberal, cultural or radical and materialist (1988: 3). Dolan also mentions several gradations within and among the three categories, such as socialist feminism, lesbian feminism and spiritual feminism.

Drawing on the work of Alison Jaggar (1983), Dolan traces the origins of bourgeois feminism in the US to the late 1960s, when the egalitarian ideals of the civil rights movement and the New Left started to gain ground. The appearance of consciousness-raising groups, allowing women to exchange personal experiences, provoked a political and ideological movement focused on gaining equality for women. In its search for equality between sexes, bourgeois (or liberal) feminism mainly takes its inspiration from liberal humanism. Rather than proposing radical structural change, it suggests that working within existing social and political organizations will eventually secure women social, political and economic parity with men.

Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) is credited as one of the founding texts of liberal feminism. Friedan was one of the first to diagnose what she calls "the problem that has no name" (2001 [1963]: 15) or "the housewife's syndrome" (2001 [1963]: 20): the vague and undefined wish for something more than a prosperous suburban domesticity. For Friedan the solution lay in the education and professional training of women.

Regarding family life and the choice to have children, liberal feminists stress women's rights as individuals to choice and self-determination, irrespective of biological sex. While the institution of the family is tolerated, the sexual division of labor is not. Liberal feminists argue that the domestic labor and childcare offer little scope for self-development and self-realization, due to women's economic dependency and their lack of choice in the sexual division of labor. They see the answer to these issues to lie in the professionalization of domestic labor and childcare. Liberal feminists see change through reform, by developing strategies to influence the existing social, economic and political systems and they emphasize the importance of the individual/self over the group/class.

In *Women's Time* (1993), Julia Kristeva characterizes liberal feminism as resting on identification with masculine

values and pursuits.⁴ Kristeva argues that it emphasizes sisterhood up against an entrenched brotherhood. Moreover, that it deemphasizes differences among women in favor of interests women supposedly have in common with one another. At the same time, Kristeva stresses that liberal feminism deemphasizes the privileged positions of those (relatively few) women who could expect, given the equivalent treatment, to compete effectively with men of privilege. This means that it downplays some women's privilege by exaggerating their kindredness with all other women, while dramatizing their subordination to those men of privilege with whom they actually have a lot in common and it also minimizes or even denies substantial differences between women and men (and thus any substantial grounds for treating men and women differently).

Feminists of color and white lesbian feminists, in particular, also challenged this "sisterly" feminism. They underscored their own erasure from the calculus of interests where "equal opportunity" had a white, heterosexist cast and middle-class underpinnings. Theorists like Angela Davis saw that in the hands of some influential feminists, equality often amounted to the quest for the same unfair advantages enjoyed by their white, middle-class fathers, brothers, husbands, colleagues and friends. Theorists like her threw sisterhood into serious question and put "differences" squarely at the forefront of feminist theorizing (1983: 42).

Gradually a rhetoric of differences gained force, while the idea of sisterhood got deflated. In its most dramatic forms, this later rhetoric is defined as radical feminism, which took hold "with its logic of disidentification, emphasizing rejection of patriarchal values and separation from patriarchal institutions" (Rogers 1998: 445). Radical or cultural feminism locates women's oppression within the dominating sexist patriarchal system. Contrary to liberal feminism, radical feminism no longer looks for success within

⁴ "Women's Time" in *New Maladies of the Soul*. 1995 (1993). New York: Columbia University Press. 201-224. The essay "Le Temps des Femmes" was originally published in 1979.

the system, but struggles to create separate female systems, strongly believing in the total uprooting and reconstruction of society in order to achieve its goals.

Shulamith Firestone's *Dialectic of Sex* (1970) epitomizes the radical or cultural tendency within feminism, with its critique of the sex-class division within a society dominated by patriarchy. Dismissing earlier feminists like Friedan and their concern with legal inequalities as "conservative", Firestone calls for a sexual revolution that will overthrow a male-run society that define woman as an inferior class (1979 [1970]: 3). Unlike liberal feminists, who see change through system reform, radical feminists contend for change through revolution.

In opposition to liberal feminism's belief in the equality between the sexes, radical feminism stresses that women are both different from and superior to men, and often claim the creation of alternative female systems. As Austin states,

The radical point of view frequently addresses the question of a 'female aesthetic' as well as the desirability of a separate female culture. (1990: 5)

This need for cultural segregation has been criticized for being essentialist, or for using as a basic premise that there is an absolute essence of woman and that the most important difference between men and women is their biological constitution.

In radical feminist theory, where the biologically based subordination of women is seen as fundamental form of oppression, prior to class or race, there is no room for family in the traditional sense. The family is identified as the key instrument in the oppression of women through sexual slavery and forced motherhood. The central political issue for radical feminists is for women to reclaim from men control of their own bodies.

As Kristeva remarked, liberal feminism and radical feminism pitted "equality" and "difference" against one another as the only choices with "the implicit masculine standard of reference going unchallenged" (1995 (1993): 210).

Kristeva held out the prospect of a third phase focused on "dismantling the very terms of the opposition altogether, of stepping over the threshold to post-modernity, where sexual beings are no longer polarized" (1995 (1993): 221). Kristeva thus pointed to the need for a third feminist phase where equality gets reworked as a goal and differences find expression without censure.

Materialist or socialist or Marxist feminism, the third phase, emphasized the differences, particularly the social and economic differences between women, by situating the gender oppression in the analysis of class.⁵ Whilst radical feminism tends to view women's oppression to lie exclusively in patriarchy, materialist feminism looks 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 1988: 82)

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

One of the most influential texts for socialist feminism is Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, with its famous phrase "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (1989 [1949]: 267), which introduces the notion of gender as a social construct rather than as a natural, undisputed fact of identity. Her theory asserts that our sense of self can be produced only in opposition to something that is not-self. Man has claimed the category of self or subject exclusively for himself, and relegated woman to the status of the eternal "other". It is this social construction of woman as the

⁵ This understood within the meaning of the Marxist definition of class: a hierarchical structure in which the owners of the means of production accumulate their privileges through the oppression of the workers.

quintessential "other" that de Beauvoir identifies as fundamental to women's oppression.

Nearly two decades later, in 1966, Juliet Mitchell published her pioneering article "Women: The Longest Revolution", one of the founding texts of British modern feminism.⁶ Mitchell argues that the situation of women is different from that of any other oppressed social group in that women are at once fundamental to the human condition, but exploited and marginalized in their economic, social and political roles. Inspired by Marxist theory, Mitchell sees the solution to women's oppression in a revolution in the spheres of labor and production, which determine the economic condition of women – lower wages than man in the market place, and unpaid housework and unpaid reproductive and child-rearing labor in the domestic sphere. As Mitchell puts it:

Until there is a revolution in production, the labor situation will prescribe women's situation within the world of men. [...] Women are exploited at work, and relegated to the home: the two positions compound their oppression. Their subservience in production is obscured by their assumed dominance in their own world – the family. (1971: 95)

Thus, materialist feminism views the family as a unit of private property, in which the wife-mother is not only exploited by the male, but also by the larger organization of capitalism.

Materialist feminism also emphasizes the definite role that class plays in social organization, highlighting the crucial differences between upper-, middle-, and working-class women – not only are all women not sisters, but women in the privileged class actually oppress women in the working class. This is precisely the source of the criticism against it, as 'sisterly' feminists claim that a feminism that is blind to the category of gender is a contradiction in terms.⁷ Case eloquently describes the two poles in the argument about the incompatibility between materialism and feminism:

⁶ The article "Women – The Longest Revolution" was first published in *New Left Review* no. 40, December 1966.

⁷ Heidi Hartmann and Amy Bridges introduced the term "unhappy marriage" to describe the relationship between materialism and feminism in their draft essay "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism", first published in *Capital and Class* in July 1975.

The overriding gender-neutral quality of the materialist analysis has produced what has been termed the 'unhappy marriage' between materialism and feminism. When notions of class and production do not account for patriarchal institutions, they seem irreconcilable with a feminist consciousness. As in most unhappy marriages, there are two sides to the contradiction: from the materialist perspective, the radical-feminist position displays a dominant class bias in its universalist and essentialist mystification of economic and historical factors; from the radical-feminist perspective, the materialist-feminist position obscures the oppression of gender, creating bridges between men and women of the same class and mythical divides between women of different classes. (1988: 83-84)

Therefore, radical feminists claim that the materialists are oblivious to gender oppression and the materialists contend that the only way to understand sexual oppression is within the economic modes of production. As will be seen in the next chapter, Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* demonstrates how a materialist class analysis can work together with a feminist analysis of sexual oppression to create dramatic action.

The influence of the materialist analysis has created new insights into the feminist movement. The notion of class-consciousness has called attention to the ideal of equality and the reality of the differences among women. Elisabeth Minnich's work illustrates these theoretical advances. Arguing against equality as sameness, she claims: "equality protects our right to be different" (1990: 70). She also asserts that it "challenges us to make distinctions that are relevant and appropriate to a particular situation or set of considerations or principles" (1990: 107). Thus, equality entails neither consistently dismissing nor consistently considering the differences among us, instead it makes differences a matter of variable, context-bound significance. Francoise Collin echoes those ideas. She insists that equality rights in no way necessitate a common identity. Equality differs from making everyone into "equivalent and interchangeable examples of humanity" (1994: 18). It allows for people's idiosyncrasies and "falls apart as soon as the many are dissolved into a single voice, which is the voice of no one at all" (Collin 1994: 15).

Thus, Minnich and Collin reject essentialism postulating sameness based on gender within a grouping such as women. Women's diverse social positioning and contrasting cultural, historical, political, economic and ethnic backgrounds guarantee divergent identities among them.

But, how can feminism acknowledge such differences and still claim a collective consciousness? As Denise Riley articulates: "the problem is that women as a homogeneous group do not exist, whereas feminism must posit that women do exist in some sense as a group" (1988: 1). She further elaborates on a possible solution:

Feminists need to distinguish between false homogeneity constructed by silent exclusions (or silent equations) – such as assuming that white middle-class women represent women per se – and a real viable collectivity of women rich in diversity (Riley 1988: 112).

Riley cautions against the use of notions postulating that all women share a common essence called "woman" as being both limiting and narrow and calls for a truly realistic collectivity of women based on diversity.

Another possible answer lies in the misinterpretation of the term "difference", as, according to Trinh T. Minh-ha "difference" means "division" to many people (1989: 82). Indeed, women can claim their right to be different in certain aspects and yet be sisters in certain other respects.

On her part, Zillah R. Eisenstein also argues for the recognition of the differences between women and the diverse contexts of oppression as the only way that a feminist collective consciousness can truly be effective:

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. (Eisenstein in Rogers 1998: 484)

As white feminist Adrienne Rich observed, the phrase "all women" is a "faceless, raceless, classless category" (1986: 219). Also, black feminist Evelyn Brooks-Higginbotham contends that it is impossible to generalize womanhood's common oppression (1989: 125).

Exploring feminism as a "transformational politic", bell hooks stresses the importance of sex, race and class that feminist theorists must emphasize as factors that determine the social construction of femaleness. In order to exemplify, she proposes an imagination exercise:

Imagine a group of women from diverse backgrounds coming together to talk about feminism. First they concentrate on working out their status in terms of sex, race and class, using this as the standpoint from which they begin discussing patriarchy or their particular relations with individual men. Within the old frame of reference, a discussion might consist solely of talk about their experience as victims in relationship to male oppressors. Two women – one poor, the other quite wealthy – might describe the process by which they have suffered physical abuse by male partners and find certain communalities which might serve as a basis for bonding. Yet, if these same two women engaged in a discussion of class, not only would the social construction and expression of femaleness differ, so too would their ideas about how to confront and change their circumstances. (hooks in Rogers 1998: 460)

This is precisely the premise of Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*, as the play dramatizes the ways in which distinct groups of women accommodate their contradictions and deal with their communalities in different contexts. Act One depicts a surreal, transhistorical coming together of five women from the past to celebrate the job promotion of a British woman from the 1980s. In Act Two, scene one and three, we see how women in different hierarchical positions interact in a professional environment (typical office scenes and three interviews), while scene two leaps to playground politics, as we witness two girls communicating outside the adult world. Act Three moves to the domestic sphere (a kitchen) and the close circle of family members (two sisters and their daughter/niece). Both similarities and contrasts emerge from the confrontation of these female groups, being extremely difficult to ascertain whether they are actually sisters or foes. The next chapter provides a socio-political and historical context for the play in an attempt to shed light on the nature of the women's communalities and contradictions.

CHAPTER II.
WHOSE VOICE IS IT ANYWAY?

As we have seen in the previous chapter, feminist critics like Minnich and Collin reject essentialism postulating sameness based on gender within a group such as women. Women's diverse social positionings and contrasting cultural, historical, political, economic and ethnic backgrounds guarantee divergent identities among them. This chapter explores whether feminism can acknowledge such differences and still claim a collective consciousness. It further inquires about the possibility for women to speak with a unified voice, by analyzing the different female voices as they appear and communicate with each other in Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*, in an attempt to establish whether the women are sisters or foes. But first, before going into the analysis of the play itself, some consideration is given to the socio-political context of the play.

Many of the ideas and issues approached by Caryl Churchill in *Top Girls* become more relevant when placed against the backdrop of the period when it appeared. The play was written and performed in 1982, during the early years of Margaret Thatcher's first term as Prime Minister of United Kingdom. Churchill herself articulates the source of inspiration and background for *Top Girls*,

It was also that Thatcher had just become prime minister; and also I had been to America for a student production of *Vinegar Tom* and had been talking to women there who were saying things were going very well: they were getting far more women executives, women vice-presidents and so on. And that was such a different attitude from anything I'd ever met here, where feminism tends to be much more connected with socialism and not so much to do with women succeeding on the sort of capitalist ladder. All of those ideas fed into *Top Girls*. (Truss 1984: 8)

Margaret Thatcher, or the *Iron Lady* as she was later nicknamed by the Soviet media for her tough-talking rhetoric, holds the double record of being the first woman ever in British history to be elected as leader of the Conservative Party, in 1975, and as Prime Minister, in May 1979. From the beginning,

Thatcher's government was associated with radical right-wing economic policies and overt opposition to the concept of Welfare-Capitalism, which were to have profound social consequences.⁸

At the time when Thatcher acceded to power, Britain was facing severe economic instability due to high inflation, monetary restraints and unemployment, among other aspects. Thatcher's action plan to tackle this precarious situation included socio-economic strategies focusing on reducing state intervention, by encouraging the privatization of major nationalized industries and also of the educational and healthcare systems; by weakening the power of unions through enforcement of new regulations; by stimulating individual initiative, small businesses, through lower direct taxation; by reducing public expenditure and promoting a competitive free-market society. Thatcher's policies succeeded in reducing inflation, at the expense of a dramatic increase in unemployment, causing severe civil unrest. Her famous statement "There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families" (Naismith 1991 [1982]: xxxvii), reiterated the disappearance of state responsibility toward its citizens and the emergence of what was to be known as the 'enterprise culture', the strong believe in a new individualism that will be related to "a sheer competitiveness at the social, political and economic levels" (Monforte 2001: 29). This 'enterprise culture' is based on the fact that "individual initiative and freedom would replace dependency" (Marwick 1990 [1982]: 311).

Thatcher's emphasis on individualism was creating a new climate in Britain, offering a small privileged part of the population the possibility to earn much more money than before, but at the same time depriving the vast majority of employment opportunities, thus producing an ever wider divide between social classes. It is exactly this reality that Churchill captures in *Top Girls*. We have Marlene on one side

⁸Welfare-Capitalism is based on the economic theories of Milton Keynes and it was very popular in UK from the end of the Second World War until the late 1970s. Welfare-Capitalism defines the basic concerns of the Welfare State as "social security, medical services, housing and education" (Marwick 1990 [1982]: 353).

and Joyce and Angie on the other. Marlene is a 'high flyer' woman in a chief executive position, who has no pity or consideration for the likes of Joyce and Angie, representing the working-class, without any prospects of climbing the corporate ladder.

For women in England, the 1980s were years of rapid advancement and increasing competitiveness in the labor market. It is in this climate that the idea of the 'superwoman' emerged: one who excelled in all areas of life, public and private, professional and domestic. The tabloid press of the 1980s often represented Margaret Thatcher as a self-made career woman, the daughter of a grocer's and mother of two, transformed into an ultimate symbol of the capitalist 'superwoman' politician. This is precisely the role model Marlene looks up to,

MARLENE. I know a managing director who's got two children, she breast feeds in the board room, she pays a hundred pounds a week on domestic help alone and she can afford that because she's an extremely high-powered lady earning a great deal of money. (Churchill 1991 [1982]: 80)

However, in real life most women suffered under the burden of the 'superwoman' image. Studies on the employment situation of women at that time show that the reality was in fact very harsh: there were very few 'top girls', most women being situated at the bottom of hierarchies in terms of pay and promotion opportunities.

The concern with this disproportionality in the labor market and the growing popularity of the myth of the 'superwoman', who had to compete with men at the workplace and do most of the domestic tasks at home, have provided Churchill with a strong impetus for writing *Top Girls*. Also, her own experience as a successful playwright and mother of three resonates with one of the key issues in *Top Girls*: the difficulty of working mothers to reconcile a career with a family. As Lizbeth Goodman wrote,

The play encourages people to look at the situation of working mother and career woman, without suggesting that

there are easy answers or that everyone should try to be a superwoman. (1993: 227)

During the late 1970s and early 1980s women in Britain were facing the difficult challenge of choosing between a career and children, as working mothers were denied organized childcare services and maternal allowances. Besides, the access to top jobs was easier for women who had few or no family responsibilities, which determined women to choose to have fewer children. Throughout the 1980s, the media started to bombard women with negative messages relating to careerism. Careers, singledom and feminism were all considered to make women depressed and old before their time. By the mid-eighties these attacks became so mainstream that feminists began to speak of a media war against women and the emergence of post-feminism. Susan Faludi's *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (1991) is the most comprehensive feminist analysis of this phenomenon to date. Faludi documents how media encouraged a public negative reaction to the achievements of the women's movement.⁹

The character of Marlene, a highly successful 'top girl', perfectly embodies this new type of woman emerging in the climate of the 1980s, who, under the pressure of a capitalist consumer society, leaves behind her working-class origins and rises her way up the corporate ladder, but at the expense of abandoning her daughter. Marlene is one of the 'fortunate' *miss yuppies/swells* born in the wake of the consumer culture boom, who chooses a career over motherhood.¹⁰

⁹ According to Faludi, postfeminism is a strong reaction against the achievements gained by second wave feminism, meant to attract women away from the subversive potential of feminism by the simple tactic of declaring it out of fashion. As Faludi aptly notes, "Feminism is 'so seventies', the pop culture's ironists say, stifling a yawn. We're 'post-feminist' now, they assert, meaning not that women have arrived at equal justice and moved beyond it, but simply that they themselves are beyond even pretending to care" (Faludi 1992 [1991]: 95). For Faludi, post-feminism is the backlash, a U-turn back to the very inequitable *status quo* which feminism had attempted to overthrow. To prove her point that post-feminism, by its very definition, represents a relapse back to a pre-feminist era, Faludi quotes Brenda Polen's claim that "Any movement or philosophy that defines itself as post whatever came before is bound to be reactive. In most cases it is also reactionary" (Faludi 1992 [1991]: 15)

¹⁰ Due to the Western economic boom in the 1980s, advertisers attributed acronyms to groups of consumers: *miss yuppie* – young urban/upwardly-mobile professional, *swell* – single women earning lots of loot.

Act One of *Top Girls* depicts a dinner party celebrating the promotion of Marlene, who has just been promoted to the position of Managing Director at the 'Top Girls' employment agency she works for. Marlene, a woman living in Britain in the early 1980s, has invited a very unusual group of women to celebrate her victory with: Isabella Bird, a Scottish lady from the XIXth century, who "traveled extensively between the ages of 40 and 70" (Churchill 1991 [1982]: lvi); Lady Nijo, a Japanese woman from the XIIIth century, who "was an Emperor's courtesan and later a Buddhist nun who traveled on foot through Japan" (Churchill 1991 [1982]: lvi); Dull Gret, "the subject of the Brueghel painting, Dulle Griet, in which a woman in an apron and armour leads a crowd of women charging through hell and fighting the devils" (Churchill 1991 [1982]: lvi); Pope Joan, who "disguised as a man is thought to have been Pope between 854-856" (Churchill 1991 [1982]: lvi), and Patient Griselda, "the obedient wife whose story is told by Chaucer in The Clerk's Tale of *The Canterbury Tales*" (Churchill 1991 [1982]: lvi). These five "dead women" (Churchill in Naismith 1991 [1982]: xxii) are sharing the same table with someone living and breathing in the XXth century, crossing the conventional boundaries between reality/fiction, cultures, place and time. As they share their experiences as mothers, daughters, sisters, wives and mistresses, outstanding lifetime achievements are revealed, but often in parallel overlapping monologues, lacking common ground and interlocutory exchange, thus exposing contrasting characters and attitudes. The cheerful celebratory mood that marks the beginning of the scene gradually turns bitter, with each of the women deploring something that was lost in their struggle to survive and succeed.

Act Two shows typical office scenes at the employment agency where Marlene and her co-workers, Win and Nell, are running their ordinary day-to-day activities, including three interviews. In scene one, Marlene interviews Jeanine, a secretary looking for a job with better prospects, whose hopes she heartlessly crushes by offering her a position with a lamp shade manufacturer. Scene two moves to the backyard of

Marlene's sister Joyce's house, in a small town up north of London, where Marlene's abandoned daughter Angie, whom Joyce has raised as her own child, and her friend Kit exchange confidences and malicious remarks, at the end of which we are informed of Angie's resolution to go to London to live with her aunt Marlene. Scene three goes back to the office of the 'Top Girls' employment agency on a Monday morning, where Win and Nell are discussing over coffee their weekend adventures and the impact of Marlene's promotion on Howard, the other challenger for the manager position. Then follows the interviewing of Louise by Win. Louise is a mature, experienced forty-six year-old woman, who has been working in the same place for twenty-one years and wants a change. Win advises her to look towards "fields that are easier for a woman" (Churchill 1991 [1982]: 52), and also that she might have to accept a drop in salary in order to achieve that change. Angie makes her appearance at the office unannounced, much to Marlene's distress, who immediately dismisses the girl with her brisk efficiency. The unexpected arrival of Mrs. Kidd, Howard's wife, who attempts in vain to soften Marlene's heart in order to make her step aside from her position, is a chance for Angie to see her aunt in the act of exercising her power as a resolute and highly competent businesswoman, which attracts even more admiration from her part and at the same time makes an ever wider gap between Marlene, the 'top girl', and Angie, who's "not going to make it" (Churchill 1991 [1982]: 66). When the news about Howard's heart attack reaches the office, the women receive it with irony and disdain. Meanwhile, Nell interviews Shona, an inexperienced twenty-one year-old woman, who is so eager to demonstrate her toughness in the competitive sales sector that she goes to great lengths: "I never consider people's feelings", "I'm not very nice" (Churchill 1991 [1982]: 61), only to get a job.

Chronologically, Act Three takes place one year before the previous two, when Marlene visits Joyce, secretly invited by Angie. Seeing each other for the first time after six years, the two sisters appear to be disconnected and alienated, hardly knowing anything about the latest

developments in each other's life, such as Joyce's separation from her husband or Marlene's new job. Their conversation turns into a bitter quarrel, as they seem to be at opposite ends in every matter. Marlene exposes her belief in middle-class individualism and Thatcher's monetarism, regarding her career success as a triumph of women collectively and herself as an independent, self-made person. As representative of the working-class, Joyce's political views are Marxist and pro-Labour, constantly criticizing her sister's egotism and reminding her that her success is only individual and that it wouldn't have been possible without the sacrifice of people like Angie, Joyce and their parents. In order for Marlene to have a successful career, she abandoned her daughter, her class and her family. She left them behind. Joyce stayed in her hometown, raising Marlene's daughter as her own, thus depriving herself of any opportunity of professional advancement. The two sisters are unable to settle their differences, with Marlene trying to cover everything under a simulated reconciliatory tone, whereas Joyce staying firm in her position until the end. The last word of the play "Frightening" (Churchill 1991 [1982]: 87), murmured by Angie after a nightmare, comes as an awareness of her real mother's lack of concern for her and also of her own future.

Before proceeding with the analysis of the play, a very important aspect has to be highlighted about the theatrical techniques used by Churchill. The presence of historical and fictional characters in Act One, through the deconstruction of history and geography and the related unities of time, place and action, echoes Bertolt Brecht's defamiliarization of the ordinary techniques used to create an Alienation effect (*Verfremdungseffekt* or *A-effect*). Elin Diamond's seminal reading of Churchill's work outlines the intertextuality of feminist and Brechtian theory in order to illustrate how the resulting feminist-Brechtian 'gestus', which entails the synthesis of the Alienation effect, historicization and the "not...but", can make visible to the reader "the social

attitudes encoded in the playtext" (1997: 52).¹¹ Diamond explains how a 'gestic moment' opens a play "to the social and discursive ideologies that inform its production" (1997: 53) and the use of 'historicization' allows the reader/spectator to understand "women's material condition in history" (1997: 49). Drawing on the work of Patrice Pavis, who claims that "*Gestus* makes visible (alienates) the class behind the individual, the critique behind the naïve object, the commentary behind the affirmation" (Pavis 1982: 42), Diamond argues that a feminist analysis of the 'gestus' signifies a moment of theoretical insight into the sex-gender complexities, not only within the world of the play, but more importantly "in the culture which the play, at the moment of reception, is dialogically reflecting and shaping" (1997: 53).

As Joseph Marohl aptly points out, the issue of plural feminisms "as opposed to homogeneous (i.e. authoritarian) Feminism emerges in the play through the demonstration of differences of class and history among the members of the same sex" (1987: 381) as early as the opening scene. 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. The six women in the first scene come from different historical periods and different cultural, economic and political backgrounds, representing diverse attitudes towards class, religion, family, ethics and gender. Even if, at first glance, the all-female cast might suggest that gender seems to be the dramatic focal point of the play, as soon as the play begins to unravel the characters one by one there is a shift in perspective. Gender is de-centered from its dominant position within the play, as the diversity of female natures in the first scene dramatizes the lack of unity among persons of the same sex. The dramatic conflict arises not only out of a battle of the sexes, but

11 Brecht's definition of the *Alienation effect*: "[The] A-effect consists in turning [an] object ... from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible into something peculiar, striking, and unexpected" (1964: 143); of the "not...but": "When [an actor] appears on stage, besides what he actually is doing he will at all essential points discover, specify, imply what he is not doing" (1964: 137); and *historicization*: "When our theatres perform plays of other periods they like to annihilate distance, fill in the gap, gloss over the differences. But what comes then of our delight in comparisons, in distance, in dissimilarity - which is at the same time a delight in what is close and proper to ourselves?" (1964: 276).

also out of class struggle, as it persists through many generations of history. The first hints about the women's class, origin and occupation derive from their costumes: Isabella is wearing a Victorian blouse and skirt, Lady Nijo is in kimono and geta, Dull Gret in apron and armour, Pope Joan in cassock and cope, Patient Griselda in medieval dress, Marlene in a 1980s-style modern dress and the waitress in the typical occupational costume. Marohl argues that the visual lesson of the opening scene "is to recognize the cultural relativity of certain norms" and that it functions "as the medium whereby certain lines are drawn so that the subsequent political discourse will be clear and understandable" (1987: 383). Indeed, each of the characters has a specific discourse, which, like her costume, distinguishes her from the other members of the group and identifies her with the ideology of her own culture. Moreover, each woman has a distinctive manner of speaking appropriate to her class, the more extreme examples being the eloquent Isabella and articulate Nijo's dominating discourses and Gret's, the uneducated peasant, almost single-worded utterances.

In the following pages, I apply conversation analysis to a sample dialogue in order to determine how the women are communicating within the group, whether they are bonding as sisters or disputing like foes:

ISABELLA. [...] I studied the metaphysical poets and hymnology. / I thought I enjoyed intellectual pursuits.

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

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

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

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

NIJO. Oh but I'm sure you're very clever.

ISABELLA. eh Gret? A rough life in the open air.

NIJO. I can't say I enjoyed my rough life. What I enjoyed most was being the Emperor's favourite / and wearing thin silk.

ISABELLA. Did you have any horses, Gret?

GRET. Pig. (Churchill 1991 [1982]: 3-4, my emphasis)

When Isabella tries to put a new topic of conversation on the dinner table, mentioning her study of metaphysical poetry, Nijo breaks in bluntly, very eager to reveal her descendancy from a line of eight generations of poets. At first glance, Nijo's intervention seems self-centered and meant to redirect the attention to her, but after a careful consideration, it becomes obvious that Nijo is trying to connect with Isabella, as she is trying to find a common interest they can relate to. Completely oblivious to Nijo's attempts to establish a connection, Isabella intervenes with a totally unrelated piece of information about her Latin education, while Nijo expands on her literary heritage. It is Marlene's turn to interrupt Isabella in order to assert her own experience with Latin, and then Nijo again, in an attempt to reassure Isabella that in spite of her preference for manual work over intellectual pursuits, this must have no effects on her intellectual capacity. Both Marlene and Nijo are obstructing Isabella's chain of thought aimed at sympathizing with Gret, whose one-word utterance is unable to build a bridge in the conversation.

In the paragraph quoted above I have underlined the key words that constitute the interconnecting elements in the sequence of lines exchanged between the interlocutors. Thus, the word "poets" appears in the first two interventions, "father" in the second and the third and "Latin" in the third and the fourth, followed by a break. Rewritten according to one of the fundamental norms of a successful conversation, which requires a turn-taking organization of the speech acts, the rest of the paragraph would read as follows:

ISABELLA. [...] But really I was more suited to manual work. Cooking, washing, mending, riding horses. / Better than reading books, eh Gret? A rough life in the open air.

NIJO. Oh but I'm sure you're very clever. I can't say I enjoyed my rough life. What I enjoyed most was being the Emperor's favourite / and wearing silk.

ISABELLA. Did you have any horses, Gret?

GRET. Fig.

Here we have "rough life" as a speech connector, appearing in Isabella and Nijo's interventions, followed by a simple answer-reply sequence. Technically speaking, the conversation is perfectly valid. Notwithstanding the frequent interruptions, there is a flow of information that runs back-and-forth between the interlocutors, proved by the presence of such communication links. It is, therefore, opportune for me to deduct that the women do connect, if only on a linguistic level.

Regarding the way the women communicate in Act One, Amelia Howe Kritzer observes that rather than confirming an imminent glorification of feminist progress or an expansion of opportunities, the display of trans-historical and trans-cultural female experiences in the first scene shows a group of women who "prove unable to communicate and identify with one another, despite attempts to understand and sympathize" (1991: 144-145). Janet Brown also mentions that it is important to recognize that these women do not comprise a community of women as much as a group of competitors "egoists who interrupt one another continually" (1988: 127). Aston makes a similar observation about the women being "largely and self-centredly caught up in their own individual narratives" (1997: 39), underscored by the use of overlapping dialogue. In a similar way to Kritzer, Brown and Aston, Margarete Rubik takes the overlapping dialogue in *Top Girls* as a sign that communication is not being effected among the characters, and goes on to attribute this lack of communication, and thus lack of bonding, to the women's inability to escape the "male standards and values" (1996: 181), which they have each internalized.

While critics like Aston, Brown, Kritzer and Rubik take that overlapping dialogue as a sign of communication breakdown, lack of interest and self-centeredness, others like Melody Schneider consider it as an indication of enthusiasm and support. Drawing on the work of Jennifer Coates and her definition of 'collaborative talk', according to which women "tend to organize their talk cooperatively, while men tend to

organize their talk competitively" (1993: 194), Schneider argues that,

the overlapping dialogue is not [...] (an) evidence of ineffective communication. [...] the dialogue in Act One is as accurate an example of 'authentic' female voices as one is able to find in the plays of modern theatre. (2005: 146)

What Schneider means by "'authentic' female voices" is the definition given by Coates to describe how women communicate within an all-female group. According to Coates, women are trained to facilitate discussion with each other, working "collaboratively to produce talk" (1993: 194), while men are trained from youth to establish a hierarchy within all-male groups by obtaining control of the conversation (1993: 137, 188). Thus, in groups of all women, it is common for one speaker to make comments or ask questions while another person is speaking, to complete another speaker's sentences, to repeat or rephrase what another speaker has just said, or even to pursue a separate sub-topic of the major theme that is being discussed (Coates 1993: 138-139). Therefore, while in all-male groups overlapping speech acts are likely to be viewed as an attempt to interrupt the speaker and gain control of the conversation, women use these speech patterns to show their "active listenership and support for each other" (Coates 1993: 138). Applying the idea of the 'collaborative' speech to *Top Girls*, Schneider claims that the simultaneous speech acts do not cause malfunction in the conversations, but they serve a practical purpose, that of allowing speakers "to request clarification or to demonstrate support and interest" (2005: 146). Indeed, taking the example of the dialogue above, we see that Nijo interrupts Isabella twice, but each time with a clear purpose. Nijo's first interjection shows her interest in Isabella's story by expanding on it and secondly she is complimenting Isabella, thus creating a bond. Isabella's intervention on Nijo and Marlene's intervention on Isabella can also be read as attempts to find common ground for discussion, as both interventions follow from the preceding dialogue lines.

Regarding the critics' opinion on the overlapping dialogue in *Top Girls*, I agree with Schneider's interactive approach to the overlapping dialogue, which demonstrates that in all-female groups it is a way of showing not only enthusiasm and support, but also active listenership. Drawing on the work of linguist Suzanne Romaine, Schneider further argues that it is much more important to consider "how those whose talk is overlapped perceive the overlap" (Romaine 1999: 158). And since it is clear that the characters do not react negatively to such interpellations or simultaneous speech acts (i.e. becoming angry, losing the flow of thought or pointing out interruptions), then it can be assumed that the characters are "comfortable speaking collaboratively" (Romaine 1999: 160).

There is another example where the overlap of speech can be viewed as conducive to creating a bond between the interlocutors. As Isabella recalls how grieved she was by her father's death, Nijo sympathizes by interjecting a comment and then she goes on to discuss her own father's death:

NIJO. Of course you were grieved. My father was saying his prayers and he dozed off in the sun. So I touched his knee to rouse him. 'I wonder what will happen,' he said, and then he was dead before he finished the sentence. / If he'd died saying

MARLENE. What a shock.

NIJO. his prayers he would have gone straight to heaven. (Churchill 1991 [1982]: 4)

Nijo's comment "Of course you were grieved" is obviously not meant to interrupt the flow of conversation, but to show her empathy for Isabella's loss. Simultaneous speech is used in all-female discourse not only to signal that the interlocutors wish to demonstrate support of others, but also to signal that the speaker is actively listened to by the rest of the group (Coates 1993: 138). Through their use of minimal responses, paraphrases and anticipatory statements, the characters reveal that they are carefully listening to each other. The term 'minimal responses' refers to short phrases or words such as "yeah" or "mhm" which are used to indicate "the listener's

positive attention to the speaker" (Coates 1993: 109). One example of a minimal response is Marlene's reaction to Nijo's account of her father's death in the paragraph cited above. "What a shock" simply demonstrates Marlene's interest in the story by commenting upon it. Nijo is clearly not disturbed by Marlene's interjection, as she continues with her story. Further in the text, there is another example of paraphrasing used as a sign of active listenership:

NIJO. Haven't you ever felt like that? Nothing will ever happen again. I am dead already. You've all felt / like that.

ISABELLA. You thought your life was over but it wasn't. (Churchill 1991 [1982]: 7)

When Nijo is revealing the others her state of utmost distress after falling out of the Emperor's favor, Isabella interrupts her, without actually replying to Nijo's interrogation, but merely paraphrasing what Nijo has already said. Nevertheless, Isabella's comment is a clear sign of her being fully immersed in the conversation and making the best effort to understand Nijo's situation. Another example of simultaneous speech act that can be used to demonstrate active listenership is the anticipatory statement. In the following dialogue:

ISABELLA. [...] One morning very early in Switzerland, it was a year later, I had a vision of him as I last saw him / in his trapper's clothes with his hair round his face,

NIJO. A ghost!

ISABELLA. and that was the day, / I learnt later, he died with a

NIJO. Ah!

ISABELLA. bullet in his brain. / He just bowed to me and vanished. (Churchill 1991 [1982]: 9-10)

Nijo's interjection, "A ghost!", anticipates what Isabella is going to say and thus confirms Nijo's active involvement in the conversation. Nijo's second intervention "Ah!" is another example of minimal response indicating the listener's positive attention to the speaker.

Therefore, I believe that the interpretation of simultaneous speech as ineffective communication in all-female

groups reflects a monolithic approach to women as a category, considering women a gender-based community/sisterhood that must speak with a unified voice in its fight against a common oppressor. Or, as we have seen in the first chapter, Collins argues that a single voice "is the voice of no one at all" (Collin 1994: 15) and Brooks-Higginbotham insists that: "it is impossible to generalize womanhood's common oppression" (1989: 125). Whereas, the view of simultaneous speech as a sign of enthusiasm, support and active listenership demonstrates a pluralist approach to women as a group, taking into consideration the multiple voices of women and thus acknowledging the different points of view within feminism. As previously mentioned, critics like Minnich and Collin have also rejected the essentialism postulating sameness based on gender within a grouping such as women. Women's diverse social positioning and contrasting cultural, historical, political, economic and ethnic backgrounds guarantee divergent identities among them.

Thus, women as a class do not have to agree on every aspect, as they are each an individual self, which by no means contradicts the co-existence of a feminist consciousness. Indeed, women can claim their right to be different in certain aspects and yet be sisters in certain other respects. As Trinh T. Minh-ha states, the key is not to misinterpret the term "difference" as "division" (1989: 82). Marlene herself holds the same opinion: "We don't all have to believe the same" (Churchill 1991 [1982]: 6). This statement is emblematic for the interpretation of how women as a group are represented in *Top Girls*. On the surface the women seem to be disconnected and engaged in parallel narratives, but in fact each of them is rightfully claiming its own place within the group. Marlene represents the unifying force of the gathering; the proof that a certain degree of coherence exists. She is the hostess of the dinner party and she acts accordingly, welcoming each of the characters as they arrive and introducing them to the rest of the group, bringing new topics to the table and asking many questions to maintain the flow of conversation and to make

sure nobody feels left out, constantly doing her best to entertain her guests:

POPE JOAN *arrives.*

MARLENE. Oh Joan, thank God, we can order. Do you know everyone? We were just talking about learning Latin and being clever girls. Joan was by way of an infant prodigy. Of course you were. What excited you when you were ten?

JOAN. Because angels are without matter they are not individuals. Every angel is a species.

MARLENE. There you are.

They laugh. They look at menus. (Churchill 1991 [1982]: 4).

In the dialogue above we see Marlene updating Joan on the current topic of conversation so that she can instantly participate in the discussion, then making a short but complimentary introduction of Joan to the rest of the attendees and finally making a comment on Joan's opening lines that brings laughter and good humor to the table.

In real-life group situations, women use questions "as part of a general strategy for conversational maintenance", seeing them as facilitating the flow of conversation" (Coates 1993: 189). In her capacity as moderator, Marlene operates as the main facilitator of conversation, the term "facilitator" referring to "those responsible for ensuring that interaction proceeds smoothly" (Coates 1993: 12). Therefore, she asks many personal questions ("What excited you when you were ten?"), frequently interrupts and overlaps the other speakers and often controls the course of the conversation (she deviates the other speakers' attention from a potential argument about religion). Also, Marlene speaks simultaneously to two interlocutors:

ISABELLA. This is the Emperor of Japan? / I once met the Emperor of Morocco.

NIJO. In fact he was the ex-Emperor.

MARLENE. But he wasn't old? / Did you, Isabella?

NIJO. Twenty-nine.

ISABELLA. Oh it's a long story.

MARLENE. Twenty-nine's an excellent age. (Churchill 1991 [1982]: 2)

making sure to include them both in the conversation, so that neither of them feels left out.

Considering Marlene in terms of being responsible for ensuring smooth interaction, then, it is no surprise that for some critics she appears to direct "the progress of the dinner", while in fact her goal is that of ensuring that conversation continues (Kritzer 1991: 144).

Marlene seems to be the only character in Act One with sisterhood-consciousness/awareness, the others seeing themselves as members of other collectives: for Gret, it is a battle with her townspeople against the devils; for Griselda, it is her marriage to the Marquis; for Joan, it is the Church of Rome; for Nijo, it is her father's household or the Emperor's court; and for Isabella, it is the British Empire. It is only Marlene that expresses a bond with the others:

MARLENE. Magnificent all of you. [...] I want to drink a toast to you all.

ISABELLA. To yourself surely, / we're here to celebrate your success.

[...]

ISABELLA. To Marlene.*

MARLENE. And all of us.

JOAN. *Marlene.

NIJO. Marlene.

GRET. Marlene.

MARLENE. We've all come a long way. To our courage and the way we changed our lives and our extraordinary achievements.

They laugh and drink a toast.

(Churchill 1991 [1982]: 12-13)

Marlene expects the others to see her promotion as a sign of progress for women collectively, whereas the others insist that she acknowledges it merely as an individual success. When Marlene proposes a toast to everyone present, Isabella points out that this is a celebration of Marlene's victory and hers alone, and, in order to make sure that everybody understands that, she proposes a new toast "To Marlene" (Churchill 1991 [1982]: 13), which is quickly joined by the rest of the members (excluding Griselda, who has not arrived yet). The five women in Act One are very perceptive about Marlene's act of pseudo-sisterhood. Marlene would like to believe that her

individual accomplishment automatically leads to collective success, but in fact she is very aware that her advancement helps no one but herself. Marlene's claim to an imagined 'sisterhood' is merely an indication that her feminism fails to encompass her less fortunate fellow sisters, who do not make it to the top. The fact that "There's not many top ladies about" (Churchill 1991 [1982]: 59) and that "There's not a lot of room upward" (Churchill 1991 [1982]: 46) implies a very strict hierarchical stratification. In the same way as the women in Act One, Marlene's co-workers, Nell and Win, are very much aware of the differences between them.

WIN. We're tactfully not mentioning you're late.
MARLENE. Fucking tube.
WIN. We've heard that one.
NELL. We've used that one.
WIN. It's the top executive doesn't come in as early as the poor working girl.
MARLENE. Pass the sugar and shut your face, pet.
(Churchill 1991 [1982]: 49)

When Marlene is ironically using an excuse for being late, she is overtly admonished by her colleagues, who are quick to emphasize Marlene's superior and privileged position, thus making a clear distinction between the 'working' girls and the ones at the 'top'. Marlene's comment, "Pass the sugar and shut your face, pet", only reinforces Win's rant and confirms Marlene's position of power at the workplace.

As a representative of right-wing feminism, Marlene endorses the very phallogentric system oppressive to women. Marlene has attained professional success by the appropriation of masculine behavior and domination techniques, "Our Marlene's got far more balls than Howard and that's that" (Churchill 1991 [1982]: 46). Marlene's model of success brings into attention Churchill's social feminist critique of bourgeois feminist values, as it demonstrates that the acquisition of power by a woman who has no concern for the powerless does not constitute a feminist victory. Benedict Nightingale eloquently captures the essence of this reality:

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? (1982: 27)

As Michelene Wandor finely notes about bourgeois or liberal feminism:

[It] simply seeks a larger share of social power for a small number of women – the 'women at the top' syndrome. It often takes the apparently liberal line of 'men and women are different, but can be equal', but in practice this usually means that the real basis of power relations between the sexes (personal and political) is concealed. Bourgeois feminism accepts the world as it is, and sees the main challenge for women as simply a matter of 'equaling up' with men; in other words, what men normally do is seen as the norm [...] [It] places total stress on individual effort, which produces the token woman surrounded by men, and served by other women; this means that bourgeois feminism has no interest in any idea of solidarity or sisterhood – the reverse, since such an idea is bound to conflict with the notion of individual self-advancement. And because the bourgeois feminism accepts the status quo (with a bit more power for women) it also – like radical feminism – has no interest in a class analysis, and certainly no interest whatsoever in socialism or the labor movement. (1986 [1981]: 134-5)

Marlene is the representative of bourgeois or liberal feminism. She is a highly successful 'top girl', who, by sheer individual effort, has left behind her working-class origins and has risen her way up the corporate ladder. She has a false idea of sisterhood, pretending that the others see her success as a triumph of women collectively, whereas she as well as the others are very aware that her success helps no one but herself. Marlene is actually class-blind, as she feels no solidarity for Angie and Joyce.

Unlike Marlene, who is an upwardly mobile professional, her sister Joyce is confined to the domestic sphere of unpaid housework, child rearing and cleaning houses. As opposed to Marlene, Joyce does not see the perpetuation of class differences within a hegemonic system as an acceptable feminist model for society. Joyce's character introduces the concept of materialist or socialist feminism in the play, with

its focus on class-consciousness. As Wandor observes, socialist or materialist feminism:

[A]ims to analyze and understand the way power relations based on class interact with power relations based on gender – again, at both individual and the social level. Socialist feminism recognizes that there are times and issues over which solidarity between women can cut across class or cultural barriers, but it also recognizes the importance of struggles based on class, which necessarily involve men, and that women can have important differences between themselves, based on class difference. Socialist feminism [...] 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 relations. Thus while [...] bourgeois feminism can account for certain kinds of reform change for women, only socialist feminism can offer an analysis which provides for genuine, revolutionary change [...] Men are challenged by socialist feminism on the basis of their class power, and their gender power – as male in a society which values the male higher than the female. (1986 [1981]: 136-7)

The influence of the materialist analysis has called attention to the ideal of equality and the reality of the differences among women. Recognizing the differences, particularly the social, economic and political differences between women, assists in uncovering the way power is distributed among and between women. It allows an understanding of power and oppression, discrimination, inequality and domination between women themselves. Joyce is the representative of materialist or socialist feminism in the play, since she has a very acute sense of the distribution of power relations within a capitalist society. Joyce represents the oppressed at the expense of which 'women at top' like Marlene can move their way up the social hierarchy. Joyce is doomed to remain trapped in her home village to clean houses and raise Marlene's unrecognized daughter, Angie, from her own resources and labor. Like Joyce, Angie is also doomed to the same destiny or even worse, "as she lacks the class consciousness that bolsters Joyce's strength" (Monforte 2001: 209). Angie is an indication of how divisive the system really is, for not taking into account the situation of the helpless, those who come from poor social backgrounds and thus incapable of

entering the competitive workplace market. Joyce is very aware of Angie's employment potential: "She's not going to get a job when jobs are hard to get", while Marlene predicts even a harsher future for her daughter: "Packer in a Tesco more like". Angie is the ultimate victim of both her mother (who had abandoned her) and the system (who gives her no opportunity), the more so as she represents the next generation.

The class differences between the two sisters become more and more obvious as they expand their views on politics, lifestyle, attitude towards the other members of the family, hopes for the future and regard for the past:

MARLENE. [...] She's a tough lady, Maggie. I'd give her a job. / She just needs to hang in there. This country

JOYCE. You voted for them, did you?

MARLENE. needs to stop whining. Monetarism is not stupid.

JOYCE. Drink your tea and shut up, pet.

MARLENE. It takes time and determination. No more slop. / And

JOYCE. Well I think they're filthy bastards.

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 he was a woman. Ms Hitler. Got a lot done, Hitlerina. / Great Adventures.

MARLENE. Bosses still walking on the workers' 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. (Churchill 1991 [1982]: 84)

As Marlene exposes her political views embracing Thatcher's role model, Joyce's response is questioning whether it was an advance to have a woman prime minister if it was someone with policies like hers. As Churchill herself explains:

She may be a woman but she isn't a sister, she may be a sister but she isn't a comrade. (Churchill in Betsko and Koenig 1987: 77)

Another example of mentality clash between the two sisters:

MARLENE. [...] I think the eighties are going to be stupendous.

JOYCE. Who for?

MARLENE. For me. / I think I'm going up up up.

JOYCE. Oh for you. Yes, I'm sure they will.

[...]

JOYCE. [...], the eighties is going to be stupendous all right because we'll get you lot off our backs (Churchill 1991 [1982]: 83, 86)

While Marlene is very optimistic about her future and, as before, tends to generalize her positive predictions to the others, Joyce is quick to point out that the future is bright only for Marlene and her class. Marlene is the superachiever/top girl/oppressor, whereas Joyce is the underachiever/working-class girl/oppressed.

Moreover, Joyce's clear separation from her sister in the last scene further articulates the drama of the gap between 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 Mom and Dad's us.

JOYCE. Yes, that's right, and you're them. (Churchill 1991 [1982]: 86)

Joyce clearly marks the class distinction between them, making the emphatic point that Marlene has become "them" (the oppressors), even if she insists to identify herself with "us" (the oppressed).

Joyce voices the socialist or materialist critique of Marlene's bourgeois or liberal feminism. As Keith Peacock finely observes:

Churchill's socialist-feminist interrogation of women's status in Britain under Thatcher therefore concludes that in spite of its high profile during the 1970s, the feminist movement had not significantly advanced the cause of women because it had not spoken with a unified voice. The mere presence of a woman Prime Minister, herself a bourgeois feminist, offered no greater opportunities for the majority of women who could not or did not aspire to be 'top girls'. (Peacock 1999: 95)

What Peacock suggests is that Churchill sees the feminist movement's little progress in pushing forward the cause of

women after the 1970s to lay in the lack of political unity and in Thatcher's promotion of the 'enterprise culture', which did little to further the social and economic interests of women.

Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* appeared at a time when, for the first time after the unprecedented wave of excitement generated by the women's movement in the 1970s, women became aware of the difference and diversity within the movement. As Elaine Aston points out:

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. (1997: 38)

This was a period when women came to realize the need to accept and engage with the complexities of feminism and to explore what Ann Oakley and Juliet Mitchell termed as "feminism's essential contradictions" (1997: 9). What they found was a feminism that was fractured, conflicted, divided against itself; a feminism that was not unified but rather diverse, contradictory and complex. It is this definition of feminism that Churchill portrays in *Top Girls*, as a site of contradiction and tension rather than unity and solidarity. However, as we have seen earlier in this chapter, the female voices also find common grounds in certain aspects. As Minnich argues, equality entails neither consistently dismissing nor consistently considering the differences between us, instead it makes differences a matter of variable context-bound significance (1990: 107). Churchill documents and examines the contradictions inherent within feminism during the time when she wrote the play. *Top Girls* does not find the causes nor the solutions for the female oppression, nor does it privilege one feminist tendency over another, but simply records the voices of different women (daughters, mothers, sisters, grandmothers, wives, mistresses and co-workers), each with her own historical, social, cultural, political and economic background and her different context of oppression, struggling to survive and rightfully claiming its own place within the complex and contradictory world of feminism(s).

CONCLUSION

As much as feminist critics have tried to agree on a common definition of feminism so that it addresses everyone, it has been impossible to formulate a movement ideology that has relevance to all women (of all ages, races, ethnicities, religions, citizenships, historical times, political systems, economic resources, classes, talents, careers, cultures, experiences, sexualities, gender expressions, etc). Our differences are significant enough to allow or require a myriad of distinct qualifying labels in front of the word feminist: radical, liberal, materialist, socialist, Marxist, cultural, black, lesbian, multiracial, libertarian, post-structuralist, eco-, postmodern, post-, post-colonial, third-world, etc. However, the acknowledging of the differences between women has called into attention the contradiction between a politics of difference and a collective feminist consciousness. Feminist theorists have stressed the need to recognize the multitude of female voices and the different contexts of their oppression as the only way to build a viable collective feminist consciousness. Treating women as a homogeneous group would imply that women are a gender-based community/sisterhood that must speak with a unified voice in its fight against a common oppressor. Or, the existence of a common essence called "woman" has been rejected, as it fails to incorporate other factors like race and class that determine along with gender the social construction of femaleness.

Caryl Churchill's play *Top Girls* is an example that women as a group are nonuniform, as each of them has a unique voice with a specific set of circumstances. By situating women's oppression in the analysis of gender and class, the play uncovers the way power is distributed among and between women, allowing for an understanding of power and oppression, discrimination, inequality and domination among women themselves.

While critics like Aston, Brown, Kritzer and Rubik take the overlapping female voices in *Top Girls* as a sign of competition and communication breakdown, others like Schneider consider it as an indication of support and enthusiasm. I believe that the first approach reflects a monolithic approach to women as a category, considering women a gender-based community/sisterhood that must speak with a unified voice, which in fact is no one's voice. The second approach, on the other hand, demonstrates a pluralist take on women as a group, incorporating the multiple voices of women and thus acknowledging the different points of view within feminism. On the surface the women seem to be disconnected and engaged in parallel narratives, but in fact each of them is rightfully claiming its own place within the group.

Therefore, women as a class do not have to agree on every aspect, as they are each an individual self, which by no means contradicts the co-existence of a feminist consciousness. Indeed, women can claim their right to be different in certain aspects and yet be sisters in certain other respects. As Trinh T. Minh-ha states, the key is not to misinterpret the term "difference" as "division" (1989: 82). Marlene herself holds the same opinion: "We don't all have to believe the same" (Churchill 1991 [1982]: 6).

On another level, the play shows how a materialist class analysis can work with a feminist analysis of sexual oppression in order to create dramatic action, as reflected in the confrontation between the two sisters, Marlene and Joyce. Marlene is a successful 'top girl' in a managerial position, embracing Thatcher's monetarism and 'enterprise culture', while Joyce is confined to the domestic sphere of unpaid housework, child rearing and cleaning houses. Marlene believes in the individual and despises the working-class for being "stupid or lazy or frightened" (Churchill 1991 (1982): 86), but at the same time views her success as a triumph of women collectively, demonstrating her blindness to concepts like class and ideology. In the end it is revealed that Marlene's class achievement relies on the colonization of Joyce, who uses her own resources and labor to raise Angie, Marlene's

daughter. Marlene's model of success brings into attention Churchill's social feminist critique of bourgeois feminist values, as it demonstrates that the acquisition of power by a woman who has no concern for the powerless does not constitute a feminist victory. Unlike Marlene, Joyce does not see the perpetuation of class differences within a hegemonic system as an acceptable feminist model for society.

Rather than pointing the finger at the cause of female oppression or giving prevalence to one tendency within feminism over other, Churchill's play renders the voices of different women as they appear in the real world, conflicted, tensioned and contrasting, but at the same time compassionate, supportive and enthusiastic, each with her own historical, social, cultural, political and economic background and her different contexts of oppression, struggling to survive and rightfully claiming its own place within the complex and contradictory world of feminism(s).

Given the situation of feminism today, when the large majority of young women refuse to identify themselves as feminists and when "feminism has been turned into the unspeakable f-word" in almost every discourse (Moi 2006: 1739), theorists like Toril Moi are deeply skeptical about the time to come:

If feminism is to have a future, feminist theory – feminist thought, feminist writing – must be able to show that feminism has wise and useful things to say to women who struggle to cope with everyday problems. (Moi 2006: 1739)

Almost three decades ago, at the time when *Top Girls* was published and performed, Churchill had many "wise and useful things" to say to women about the reality they lived in. It remains to be seen whether in the near future other writers will succeed as well as she did.

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