

## The Female Voices in Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* (1982): Sisters or Foes

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### Abstract:

This article analyzes the different female voices in Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*. Chapter I begins with an overview of the present-day attitude of women toward feminism. Next it defines some of the various types of feminisms that have appeared in the Anglo-American world. Next, it focuses on the contradiction between the feminist ideal of equality and the reality of the differences between women. Chapter II begins with a brief description of the socio-political and economic context of the play. Next, it examines the female voices as they appear and communicate in the play. Further on, it inquires about the possibility for women to speak with a unified voice. Finally, the Conclusions point out Churchill's pluralist approach to feminism.

### Resumen:

Este artículo analiza las diferentes voces femeninas en la obra *Top Girls* de Caryl Churchill. El primer capítulo comienza con una visión actual de la actitud que las mujeres manifiestan hacia el feminismo. Después, se definen algunos de los diferentes tipos de feminismos que han aparecido en el mundo anglo-americano. A continuación, se centra en la contradicción entre el ideal feminista de igualdad y la realidad de las diferencias entre las mujeres. El segundo capítulo se inicia con una breve descripción del contexto sociopolítico y económico de la pieza teatral. Posteriormente, examina las voces femeninas que aparecen y comunican en la obra. Más adelante, se plantea la posibilidad, para

las mujeres, que unan su voz. Por último, las conclusiones señalan el enfoque pluralista de Churchill acerca del feminismo.

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## **Through the Feminist Eye**

It is a difficult enterprise for the young generation of today, when women in Switzerland, Bangladesh or the Central African Republic are elected presidents or prime ministers, to even begin to imagine that less than 40 years ago women in these countries still did not have a right to vote.<sup>1</sup> 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,

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<sup>1</sup> The countries are listed in chronological order, according to the year when women were granted the right to vote: Switzerland 1971, Bangladesh 1972 and Central African Republic 1986.



terrorism, globalization, consumerism and the new financial crisis 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 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 favour 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 favour 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» [2006: 44-45]. Huntley



explains that this generation of women has been brought up believing in their own independence and the opportunities available to them, particularly in 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 20<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, the influence of feminism has been felt in every area of social, political and cultural life worldwide. Everyone knows, or thinks s/he 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) [1995: 8].<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 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



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 the 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.

In *Women's Time* (1993), Julia Kristeva characterizes liberal feminism as resting on identification with masculine values and pursuits.<sup>3</sup> Kristeva argues that it emphasizes sisterhood up against an entrenched brotherhood. Moreover, she also maintains that it smoothes out differences among women in favour of interests that women supposedly have in common with one another. At the same time, Kristeva stresses that liberal feminism de-emphasizes 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 other women, while dramatizing their subordination to those men of privilege with whom they actually have a lot in common. Finally, liberal feminism also

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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.

<sup>3</sup> In *New Maladies of the Soul*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1995 (1993), 201-224. The essay «Le Temps des Femmes» was originally published in 1979.



minimizes or even denies substantial differences between women and men (and thus any substantial grounds for treating men and women differently).

Feminists of colour and white lesbian feminists, in particular, also challenge this 'sisterly' feminism. They underscore their own erasure from the calculus of interests where «equal opportunity» has a white, heterosexist cast and middle-class underpinnings. Theorists like Angela Davis saw that in the hands of some influential feminists, equality often amounts 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 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.

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, «[t]he 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.



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» [ed. 1995: 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» [ed. 1995: 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 feminism, the third phase, emphasizes the differences, particularly the social and economic differences between women, by situating the gender oppression in the analysis of class.<sup>4</sup> 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.

Materialist feminism also highlights 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

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<sup>4</sup> 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.



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.<sup>5</sup> Case eloquently describes the two poles in the argument about the incompatibility between materialism and feminism:

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 materialist 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

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<sup>5</sup> 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.





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. Françoise Collin echoes these 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? Denise Riley articulates that «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» [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. [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. [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.



## Whose Voice Is It Anyway?

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 the United Kingdom. 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.<sup>6</sup>

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, «[t]here is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families» [Naismith, ed. 1991: xxxvii], reiterated the disappearance of state responsibility toward its citizens and the emergence of what was to be known as the 'enterprise

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<sup>6</sup> Welfare-Capitalism is based on the economic theories of J.M. Keynes and it was very popular in the 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, ed. 1990: 353].



culture’, the strong belief 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, ed. 1990: 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*. On the one side there is Marlene and on the other are Joyce and Angie. 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 labour 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, ed. 1991: 80]<sup>7</sup>

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

<sup>7</sup> All the following quotes from the play are from this edition.



girls', most women being situated at the bottom of hierarchies in terms of pay and promotion opportunities.

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 hierarchy, 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, one who chooses a career over motherhood.<sup>8</sup>

Act One of *Top Girls* depicts a dinner party celebrating the promotion of Marlene, who has just moved up to a superior position as Managing Director at the «Top Girls» employment agency 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» [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» [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» [lvi]; Pope Joan, who «disguised as a man is thought to have been Pope between 854-856» [lvi], and Patient Griselda, «the obedient wife whose story is told by Chaucer in The Clerk's Tale of *The Canterbury Tales*» [lvi]. These five «dead women» [Churchill in Naismith, ed. 1991: 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 speeches, lacking common ground and interlocutory

<sup>8</sup> 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.



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.

Chronologically, Act Three, when Marlene visits Joyce, secretly invited by Angie, takes place one year before the previous two. 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.

A feminist reading of the play reveals, as Joseph Marohl aptly points out, the issue of plural feminisms «as opposed to homogeneous (i.e. authoritarian) Feminism [...] 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 also out of class struggle, as it persists through many generations of history. The first hints of the women's classes,



origins and occupations 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, on the one hand, the dominating discourses of the eloquent Isabella and the articulate Nijo; on the other, the almost single-worded utterances of Gret, the uneducated peasant.

In the following pages, I apply conversation analysis to distinct dialogues in order to determine how the women are communicating within their group, to see 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. [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 had no effect 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 italicized 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. We have «rough life» as a speech connector, appearing in Isabella and Nijo's interventions, followed by a simple question-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, however, 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: 144-5]. 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 internalized.

While critics like Aston, Brown, Kritzer and Rubik take the 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 [...] 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: 138-9].

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].

For all the above said, 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. Moreover, as we have seen in the first chapter, Collin 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]. In this light, 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.

Thus, women as a class do not have to agree on every issue, 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 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" [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 her own place within the group.

Marlene is the only character in Act One who seems to claim to have a sisterhood-consciousness/awareness, while the others see themselves as members of other collectives. Gret, for instance, is in a battle with her townspeople against the devils. Griselda is preoccupied with her marriage to the Marquis. Joan is involved with the Church of Rome. Nijo is concerned with her father's household and the Emperor's court. Isabella is occupied with the British Empire. Only Marlene verbalizes 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.* [12-3]

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» [13], which everybody else celebrates (except for Griselda, who has not arrived yet). The five women in Act One are very perceptive of 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. Thus, 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» [59] and that «there's not a lot of room upward» [46] implies a very strict hierarchical stratification.

As a representative of right-wing feminism, Marlene endorses the very phallogentric system oppressive to women. She has attained professional success by the appropriation of masculine behaviour and domination techniques: «our Marlene's got far more balls than Howard and that's that» [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]

Therefore, 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, but at the same time she is very aware that her success helps no one but herself. Marlene is actually class-blind, as she feels no solidarity for Angie or 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.

Joyce has a very acute sense of the distribution of power relations within a capitalist society. She 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, «for she lacks the class-consciousness that bolsters Joyce's strength» [Monforte, 2001: 171]. 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 are 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» [42]; while Marlene predicts even a harsher future for her daughter: «Packer in Tesco more like» [66]. Angie is the ultimate victim of both her mother (who had abandoned her) and the system (who gives her no opportunities), the more so as she represents the next generation.

The class differences between the two sisters become more and more obvious in Act III, as they expand their views on politics, lifestyles and attitudes towards the other members of the family:

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. [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» [Betsko and Koenig, 1987: 77].

When it comes to expressing their hopes for the future, the sisters' opinions diverge again dramatically:

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. [83]

JOYCE. [...], the eighties is going to be stupendous all right because we'll get you lot off our backs. [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. [86]

Here, Joyce clearly marks the class distinction between them, making the emphatic point that Marlene has become «them» (the oppressors), even if she insists to include Joyce in the same circle as hers.

To conclude, 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 differences 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]. That 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. For this reason, a classification of the female voices present in the play as 'sisters' would therefore be incongruous. However, as we have seen earlier in this chapter, the female voices also find common grounds in certain aspects, which make it impossible to identify them as 'foes', too. 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]. What Churchill does is to document and examine the contradictions inherent in feminism during the time when she writes the play. *Top Girls* does not find the causes nor the solutions for female oppression, nor does it privilege



one feminist tendency over another, nor does it categorize women as sisters or foes, but simply records the voices of different women (daughters, mothers, sisters, grandmothers, wives, mistresses and co-workers), each with its own historical, social, cultural, political and economic background and its different contexts of oppression, struggling to survive and rightfully claiming its own place within the complex and contradictory world of feminism(s).

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