Negative Self-Actualization in Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*

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1. Introduction

British playwright Caryl Churchill in her *Top Girls* (1982) depicts the life of a woman Marlene, who succeeds in career but fails in family. Situating the play against the backdrop of the 1980s in England, Churchill foregrounds a new form of oppression of women in capitalist society and reveals her suspicion of liberal feminism.

Comprised of three acts, *Top Girls* begins with a dinner party hosted by Marlene with five imaginary women to celebrate her promotion. Whereas Act Two presents the work life of Marlene and her colleagues in their Employment Agency, Act Three takes the audience back to a year earlier when Marlene visits her sister Joyce and her deserted daughter Angie at Joyce's place. Marlene in the play is the one who symbolizes the new woman, liberated and empowered by the Women's Liberation Movement. She has been recently promoted to be the manager of "Top Girls Employment Agency." But not every woman can grasp the opportunity to realize herself professionally. Her sister, Joyce, is such an example since she still remains as a hard-working laborer. She is also handicapped by her low social status and by the child. She has enjoyed almost none of the benefits from the Women's Liberation Movement. Apparently, women have experienced good and bad impacts of such a development and have come across a new era. This paper intends to examine the double–edged results of the feminist movement or Women's Liberation Movement in *Top Girls*.

2. Theoretical Framework

To analyze the positive and particularly the negative impacts the feminist movement has caused on women's self-actualization in the play, I will resort to spatial theorists' concept of space, which is initiated by Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin and French theorist Henri Lefebvre, and further developed by American scholar Edward W. Soja. Bakhtin believes chronotopes embedded in any given work help explain the work because this "living impulse" and "form-shaping ideology" are the ground for

activity.[1] Both Lefebvre and Soja interpret the doing of humans from the interconnections of space, history, and social theories.[2]

However, as pointed out by the feminist spatial scholars, their male counterparts have hardly taken the gender issue into consideration.[3] Doreen Massey in her "Flexible Sexism" brings forth the concept of an intricate and close relationship between the public and the private domains, and spatial theories. In her book *Space, Place and Gender*, she reminds us that the public and private spaces are in fact highly gendered. According to her, space is "conceptualized as created out of social relations" and it is "full of power and symbolism, a complex web of domination and subordination of solidarity and co-operation" (*Space* 265). She stresses the mutually affected relationship of space, place, and gender: 'spaces and places are not only themselves gendered but, in their being so, they both reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed and understood" (*Space* 179). Linda McDowell also believes that gender is fundamental to the way in which life is organized. In "Gender Division" she moves the spatial topic further to the parts of gender as well as class. She argues, "the gender division of labour—that is, the allocation of work on the basis of sex, both within the home and in the workplace—is as important as are class divisions in Britain today" (161). Her book *Gender, Identity and Place* further examines gendered geography and is especially concerned about how globalization and capitalism have restructured men as well as women in the work field and labor market. She also notices "the division of urban space into worlds of home and waged work—a so-called private arena associated with industrial capitalism in the West had a huge impact on women's lives and status" (*Gender* 73). Moreover, she also endorses the late recognition of paid domestic labor as a challenge from "the significant rise of service sector employment associated with industrial restructuring in the early 1970s" (*Gender* 79), and points out "the complex intersections of domesticity, class position

[1] In his *Dialogic Imagination* Bakhtin discusses the importance of "chronotope," or time space. He thinks there is "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relations" (84). In other words, Bakhtin treats chronotopes as form-shaping ideologies and they are interrelation of the historical, the biographical, and the social (Morson and Emerson 371). Bakhtin has thus shifted to "how a text is related to its social and political contexts" (Vice 201).

[2] Lefebvre in his *Production of Space* revolutionizes our concept of space and categorizes space into three aspects. He cautions us to look deeper into the lived practices and the ideologies lurking behind the representations of all those spatial practices (33; 38-39). To further illustrate Lefebvre's trialectics, Soja in his *Third Space* prefers to combine the making of history and the composition of social relations or society (7).

[3] The feminist spatial theorists include Doreen Massey, Liz Bondi, Linda McDowell, Patricia Price-Chalita, and Gillian Rose. Massey explores gendered space; Bondi focuses on femininity, spatial tropes, and she opposes to binary opposition; McDowell connects spatial behavior, gender, race, private/public realms, and class; Price-Chalita foregrounds the relationships of dominance, spatial usage, gender, and marginalized groups; Rose articulates spatial politics, and the reception of female differences. For further discussion on the respective female spatial theorists' concepts, see Zhihong Wang, pp. 35-58.

and racial difference that distinguish women and create divisions between them (*Gender* 83).

Both Massey and MacDowell believe the particular sense of time and space is inscribed in our environment per se. Their insights can equip us to have a new perception. In other words, their new reading into the division of public and private realms occupied by man and woman respectively can help us not only deconstruct a new form of exploitation of women and class struggles, with Marlene as the new employer victimizing male and female workers alike, but also see the failure of family life behind the glamorous career success.

3. The Chronotopes

"The Spatial," asserts Massey, "is in that very material sense, socially constructed; and an understanding of the spatial must entail an analysis of the economy and society more generally" (*Space* 22). Two events, which impacted the women of the 1970s and 1980s and the characters in *Top Girls* tremendously, are Women's Liberation Movement and the period of Margaret Thatcher in power from 1979 to 1990. Whereas the former unprecedentedly allowed women to be educated, to work, and to realize themselves, the latter promoted the individual and further accelerates the self-actualization of career men and women as well.

3.1 The Women's Liberation Movement and Liberal Feminism

Women began to perceive their right to be as equal as men in light of basic human rights such as education and employment in the 19th century. But it was not until the 1960s that women in England and other western countries actively sought a new identity distinguished from their traditional, domesticated roles. The Women's Liberation Movement in the spring of 1970 in England further raised women's self-consciousness against sexual discrimination in patriarchal society.[4] They liberated themselves from the bondage of their body, their domesticated identity, and their familial responsibilities. Many of them proved to be as intellectually and professionally competent as their male counterparts and some even forsook the heterosexual relationship, and re-established a new gender identity and sexual relationship. But one should also be aware that more rights endowed upon women did not guarantee better and improved lives for all women, let along new challenges that came with the new roles. Women now receive more pressure and competition at work but after work when they go back home, there are still house chores and family duties

[4] In the spring of 1970 at Ruskin College in Oxford, the Women's Liberation Movement had its first national conference, in which four basic demands were announced: equal pay, equal education and opportunity, 24-hour nurseries, and free contraception and abortion (Wandor 12-13).

to take care of, especially for those career mothers.[5] McDowell, argues that women's dual burdens of waged labour and domestic labour have increased ("Gender Division" 165). Such an ideology of competitiveness in one's profession and responsibility in one's home, radically different from the one in the past, paved the chronotope for the high flyers and losers in *Top Girls*.

3.2 Thatcherism

In addition to the numerous changes brought forth by the Women's Liberation Movement, the immediate political reality, the UK ruled by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and her Conservative Party, also directly influences Churchill's characterization and thematic concern. Many scholars have analyzed why Thatcherism has changed and reshaped the political ecology in 1980s British politics.[6] But to many socialists and feminists, Thatcher and her free market capitalism has caused more harm than good to people in England.[7] Based on Stuart Hall's criticism, Guanghsing Chen also points out that Thatcherism has a long-term aim.

> It aims to restructure the entire society through the functioning of the state apparatuses so as to win "popular authority"—hegemony. In order to achieve this goal, Thatcherism deeply recognized that its task is to completely re-establish a new ideological bloc which has the color of new liberalism, free market function, and the possessive individualist inclination. In view of value system, it aims to retrieve the whole life style in society back to the traditional social standard: being proud of the British, taking patriarchal dominated family as the mainstream, placing national interests as the top priority, and stressing "being respected" in the international arena. (my translation; 71)

Due to Thatcher's policies, the labor union becomes weak, the market is free, and the

[5] According to McDowell's research of gender division in waged labor and domestic labor in Britain of the 1970s and 1980s, women's domestic labor has not been lessened much due to technological innovations for housework. "The limited empirical evidence that is available indicates that the time expended on domestic tasks has actually fallen very little" ("Gender Division" 171). She also clarifies that "Despite women's increased participation in waged labour, men's participation in domestic labour has hardly risen" ("Gender Division" 165).

[6] Bob Jessop, Kevin Bonnett, Simon Bromley, and Tom Ling have a thorough investigation of the term and concept of Thatcherism. They divide all the interpretation and research into six approaches and employ all six of them for their in-depth analysis of Thatcherism. For a more thorough understanding of Thatcherism, see their book *Thatcherism*, pp. 5-9.

[7] Andrew Gamble and Chris Pate conclude from Ralph Miliband's, Andrew Glyn's, and John Ross's studies that Thatcher's policies are actually attacks from the ruling class on the union labor class. See Yutang Zhang's translation of Gamble and Pate, p.115.

State is strong (Chen 72). In such an individualist, capitalist society, everyone has to rely on himself/herself to "sell," to compete, and to accumulate riches, male and female alike. This is a society that allows top girls like Marlene to succeed; however, it also "marginalizes" or "punishes" those ineffective and underprivileged people like Joyce and Angie.

Elizabeth Meehan in her "British Feminism from the 1960s to the 1980s" points out, "It is commonplace now to see feminism in Britain as rising in the 1960s, flourishing in the 1970s and achieving a clutch of legislative victories, then dying in the 1980s under the assault of the New Right" (189). This feminist thriving development, only to be thwarted by Thatcher's rule, is well captured in Churchill's *Top Girls*.

If we resort to spatial theories to examine the socio-political climate, we can read the codes in space and analyze how social spaces are constructed. By applying these feminist spatial theorists' concepts, we may understand that the spaces presented in *Top Girls* is not merely a field of conflicts displayed between classes, but it also actively participates in the process of constructing social hierarchy system. Like what female spatial geographer Helen Liggett claims, space is "an active component of constructing, maintaining, and challenging social order" (245).

4. The Positive Impact: "Empowerment"

Recognized as the most influential contemporary female dramatist, Churchill is also renowned for her political sensitivity. As Austin Quigley puts it,

> Churchill's strength as a dramatist is that her imagination is engagingly theatrical as well as disturbingly political; it portrays the individual in social contexts that emerge as the source of most problems and the necessary site of their potential solution; it confronts history in contemporary perspective and the modern world in the context of historical examples, and it looks to the theatre as the source of therapeutic images that might help us combat the debilitating images our culture has regularly transmitted to us. (50)

Churchill does see the space time of the 1970s and 1980s as both emblematic of and precarious to the self-realization of women. Hence, Marlene, Joyce, and other female characters, are consequently both empowered yet obstructed in their respective experiences and contexts. This paper argues that while the recent social and political trends, i.e., liberal feminism and Thatcherism, "empower" some women, they also

handicap other women, who are the underclass of the unemployed, the new waged poor, and the weak.

Top Girls foregrounds the disturbing repercussions of the political through its spatial metaphors: the empowered career women "subjugate" the public space (the restaurant and employment agency) whereas the disenfranchised laboring women still get trapped in the private space (the kitchen, domestic space, and the backyard). However, to problematize the conflicting public/private realms, Churchill, as aptly pointed out by Quigley above, has the linear development arranged backward.[8] The play begins with an imaginary dinner gathering to celebrate Marlene's promotion in a restaurant in Act One, proceeds to the next Monday at the Top Girls Employment Agency, a regular office day of Marlene visited by Angie in Act Two, and Act Three closes the play with Marlene's visit to her sister Joyce and "niece" Angie in the country a year before. With such a destabilized plot arrangement, Churchill aims to take off the glamorous apparel of the successful career women. Behind the glitter of the high-flyers is sacrifice of themselves and others. Therefore, time is inverted to offer the spectators a glimpse into the truth. Moreover, space is so well connected to time that exegesis of physical space and mental space in which action takes place is also needed to further understand Churchill's art and her insight into the imminent social malady. Like in Bakhtin's analysis of narrative shifts, at any given time, literary texts offer various chronotopes that conceptualize the "image of people, the process of history, and the dynamics of society" (Morson and Emerson 371). By so doing, we may further understand the characters, the times they are placed in, the space they are involved with, and social relations they have in this play.

In *Top Girls* the best representatives who have benefited from the Women's Liberation Movement and Thatcherite administration are Marlene and her coworkers, females too, in the Top Girls Employment Agency. With her hard work and sharp personality, Marlene is "the top girl." The spectators get to see Marlene hosting a dinner party celebrating her promotion in a restaurant in Act One and then demonstrating her efficiency and aggression interviewing people and handling an emergency in her office in Act Two. The space time or chronotopes presented in both locales are closely related to the "positive" impact the feminist movement and Thatcherism have wrought.

4.1 The Restaurant

Though it is Marlene's fantasy, it is a "public" recognition to be celebrated for

[8] Yih-Fan Chang in her "Engaging in the Public Sphere: Caryl Churchill and the Women Characters in *Owners* and *Top Girls*" points out the linear "before-during-after" structure is restructured in *Top Girls* as "during-after-before" with Act One as "during," Act Two as "after," and Act Three as "before" (156).

a promotion. It seems to announce to the general public that women have come a long way to reach to the top eventually. On the surface, the five guests represent self-actualization to some degree; nevertheless, under closer scrutiny, they more or less assume men's views to judge things or judge themselves, which foreshadows the unwitting victimization of Marlene by patriarchal ideology even when she thinks she has realized herself. These five guests from the past include Isabella Bird, a 19th-century Scottish lady famous for traveling internationally in her later life; Lady Ninjo, a 13th-century Japanese courtesan and later a Buddhist nun who traveled on foot in Japan; Dull Gret, the subject of Peter Breughel painting in which a woman in an apron and armor leads women charging through hell and fighting devils; Pope Joan, the apocryphal 9th-century pope; and Patient Griselda, the obedient wife in Chaucer's "The Clerk's Tale" of *The Canterbury Tales*. They all represent different chronotopes from different time and space. Except for Dull Gret who remains quiet most of the time during the dinner, the other four characters talk across each other about their lives, cutting and overlapping each other's conversation.[9]

These top girls in fact live under and for patriarchal ideologies so that they are made alienated from their body (Pope Joan), their sex (Lady Ninjo), their gender (all of them), and their children (Patient Griselda), but they are still embracing or extolling such identification with patriarchal domination. Lady Bird has to sacrifice her interest and talent when she is married; Lady Ninjo lives for the Emperor; Pope Joan lives her life following patriarchal values completely oblivious of her female body; Patient Griselda embodies the subjugated and submissive woman without autonomy. In this restaurant when a modern career woman celebrates her triumph over others, the playwright challenges this kind of success by presenting many predecessors' "successes." Such a brilliant conglomeration of different chronotopes in a restaurant, perhaps still a space more for men to celebrate their achievement, directly unsettles the achievement of these women.

4.2 The Employment Agency

Like these top girls from the past, the top girls at the Top Girls Employment Agency are also deluded by their achievement. They take this chance of the feminist emancipation movement and Thatcherite free individualist economy and get themselves promoted prosperously, thinking that they can beat men or do without them. Under the superficial self-realization they are unaware that they are indeed a replica of domineering patriarch, victimizing other men, other women, and

[9] Many scholars have commented on the technique and the thematic concern of overlapping conversation in *Top Girls*. They agree that the cutting and overlapping signifies ill communication and lack of female community bond. See Quigley, pp. 41-42, and Liz Goodman's "Overlapping Dialogue in Overlapping Media; Behind the Scenes of *Top Girls*," pp. 80-84.

themselves.

Marlene in the office is an example of such a career woman who has received the "positive" benefits from the feminist emancipation and individualist market. Posed as a high flyer, she becomes the manager in the employment agency office. She dictates, dominates, and decides other women's lives. Interviewing Jeanine, she coldly tells her to take another secretarial job without much prospect and also tells her not to mention that she is getting married. During the interview, Marlene asks Jeanine why she needs a change, so she mentions her financial need:

> JEANINE: I'm saving to get married.
> MARLENE: Does that mean you don't want a long-term job, Jeanine?
> JEANINE: I might do.
> MARLENE: Because where do the prospects come in? No kids for a bit?
> JEANINE: Oh, no, not kids, not yet.
> MARLENE: So you won't tell them you're getting married?
> JEANINE: Had I better not?
> MARLENE: It would probably help.[10]

It can be inferred from their dialogue that getting married and especially having children means one does not want a long-term job and will not have any prospect. In order to secure a job, one had better lie.

The ideology lurking in Marlene's mind is patriarchal since she, like a traditional male job-interviewer, regards marriage and child rearing familial, domestic, unproductive, unrelated to man's profession, thus a hindrance to (man's) work. Indeed, this is a place to market top girls, not top married women. While climbing to the top of her work ladder, Marlene hardly notices she has become a man, more man than most men. Comparing Marlene and Howard—a male coworker of Marlene who loses in the competition of the managerial job to Marlene, Marlene's female subordinates Win and Nell conclude, "Our Marlene's got far more balls than Howard" (46). Thus, in this office there is only men-like woman, if she is going to top others. Everything connected to traditional feminine virtue or obligation, such as tender, loving, submissive, motherly, or wifely, is irrelevant to top girls. What matters at the office is only competition, aggression, and achievement.

This image of Marlene the top girl reminds one of Margaret Thatcher. Meehan's statement about Thatcher particularly strikes us with the resemblance between the two.

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[10] Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* (London: Methuen, 1990), p. 31. Subsequent quotations will be noted parenthetically in the text.

> When Mrs. Thatcher became the first woman party leader and then Prime Minister in British history, much discussion ensued as to whether her success was good for women. For some, even a symbolic victory for feminism was victory. Others agreed with the anecdotes that she 'owed nothing to feminism' and was the 'best man' to lead the Conservative government. Numerous policy studies have shown that the social policies of the Thatcher administration, not explicitly or necessarily about women, have particularly adversely affected women. (202)

Marlene and Maggie are both the 'best man' in their offices. One can't help admire Churchill's political sensitivity in perceiving the prototype of Maggie's daughter as early as 1982. No wonder when the Royal Court staged a major revival of *Top Girls* in 1991, the play was heralded as "prophetic" (Goodman 76) and "prescient" (Aston 23).

Imbued with this patriarchal (competitive) office work mentality, Marlene is actually man in skirt in the work field. To "go up up up" in her terms (83), she has forsaken her mother, father, sister, and daughter. She needs men only when she needs sex. She has no family, no emotional life to speak of. Thinking her job as her whole world, she never questions if such patriarchal competitive work mentality can satisfy her physical needs, emotional life, and family life. Her colleagues Nell and Win are also in line with Marlene's thinking. Nell says she is not "a staying put lady" (46) and Win, though doing work better than men, enjoys a secret liaison with a rich married man.

> NELL: Derek asked me to marry him again.
> WIN: He doesn't know when he's beaten.
> NELL: I told him I'm not going to play house, not even in Ascot.
> WIN: Mind you, you could play house.
> NELL: If I choose to play house I could play house ace.
> WIN: You could marry him and go on working
> NELL: I could go on working and not marrying him. (48)

Nell obviously thinks herself quite competent in the work field and would definitely be buried if she walks into the marriage hall. In this way, Nell and Marlene are equally practical high flyers who have no need for family life and whose center of life is but work.

Win's story offers a more paradoxical meaning in that she can outsmart men in work but seems to be dependent in emotional relationship with men. She confesses

her impasse in work since she is efficient and competitive. She explains,

> Men are awful bullshitters, they like to make out jobs are harder than they are. Any job I ever did, I started doing it better than the rest of the (male) crowd and they didn't like it. So I'd get unpopular and I'd have drink to cheer myself up. (65)

No doubt Win is a better worker than her male coworkers. But her competence incurs obstruction from her male coworkers. Although she looks down upon them, she paradoxically needs to satisfy her emotional and physical needs by playing mistress of a rich married man. Exhilarated by the feminist movement and Thatcherite individualist and capitalist market, Marlene, Nell, and Win all try to top others, but in the process of reaching the top, these women unwittingly appropriate and internalize male value and patriarchal thinking. They might have been successful women but they definitely reproduce in the office space the same kind of work attitude, ethics, and ideology as their male predecessors'.

Top Girls reflects that people at the present stage generally expect women to be as efficient as men. This concept of job efficiency is a mentality developed long before the 19th century, a time when men were the primary work force. But Churchill would like to raise our awareness to question whether this old job mentality should stay or not. The play pushes us to think whether one should still maintain the theory of the survival of the fittest when a new labor force of women is introduced. Denouncing such a patriarchal work ethics of unfeeling competition, *Top Girls* actually questions such empowerment and further implies that women should find their own subjectivity and femininity to establish new work ethics appropriate for their physical and spiritual needs.

5. The Negative Impact: the Double Victimization

5.1 Joyce

Although the feminist movement and free and individualist market have brought a "good" or "positive" impact on Marlene and others, for a lower class woman like Joyce, the welfare and fringe benefits are scarce. Caught between traditional and new roles of woman, Joyce is stranded. At this particular juncture of time space, Joyce seems to be doubly victimized by the old patriarchal mindset and the new woman ideology. For this difficult impasse, it is then particularly significant for Churchill to arrange the setting of Joyce's part in the kitchen and her job as house cleaning. Both "lived spatial practices" are tied up with highly gendered private space.

5.1.1 The Kitchen

Ever since the past, women have been associated with the realm of the private and domestic and their production has also been closely connected to household chores and particularly kitchen work. A traditional woman at home is supposed to take up the responsibility of cleaning, cooking, and child rearing, “an effect of the long established domestic division of labour within the household” (Massey 187). Hence, Churchill has Joyce appear in the domestic space—kitchen—in Act Three when Marlene comes to visit her after her last visit six years ago.

The significance of inscribing Joyce’s presence with the kitchen is to foreground this woman of underclass still cannot get rid of her traditional role. Between the two daughters of the family, while Marlene the younger one is the one who runs away from “home” setting herself free from all the familial obligation, Joyce is the older one who stays to take care of their father, his funeral, his grave, their mother at the nursing home and Marlene’s illegitimate daughter, Angie. Joyce is the selfless one whereas Marlene poses herself as the selfish one. They simply have very different concepts and attitudes toward family and self-realization. Talking about their abusive, violent, and alcoholic father, their ill-abused mother, and the suffocating village life, Marlene questions why Joyce doesn’t leave.

> MARLENE. You could have left.
> JOYCE. Who says I wanted to leave?
> MARLENE. Stop getting at me then, you’re really boring.
> JOYCE. How could I have left?
> MARLENE. Did you want to?
> JOYCE. I said how, / how could I?
> MARLENE. If you’d wanted to you’d have done it.
> JOYCE. Christ. (76)

Marlene can simply leave without any conscience problem or sense of guilt; however, as a contrast, Joyce is bound to her family duties. Undoubtedly, she envies Marlene who could “get out” traveling to America, to see the world, to own a career, and to realize herself. But because she has more love and conscience, she chooses to sacrifice herself.

This choice of Joyce’s decision to stay home and to be in the house and the result accompanied such a choice seem to imply one gets punished if she chooses to stick to the traditional role. “Accepting the traditional role of wife and mother has brought Joyce nothing but hardship” (Burk 73). She is poor, even if she has four odd

jobs of house cleaning; she is married but now her husband has deserted her for a younger woman. She takes care of her father's grave and goes to the nursing home to see her mother once a week. Because of taking care of Angie who cried a lot when she was an infant, she had a miscarriage and lost the only chance to have her own baby. But the most important of all, she does not enjoy being a mother now since Angie, said to be slow-witted,[11] does not get along well with her. The 16-year-old teenager hates her mother so much that she is always talking to her 12-year-old playmate Kit about killing her mother.

Apparently, Joyce does not feel content to be an obedient daughter, submissive wife, and caring mother, which all seem to double her agony and regret to choose to take up the traditional role, especially when she sees Marlene's return as a winner with a great career achievement. As a critic points out, once a woman chooses between career and family, there are actually very few options open to her "regardless of the current myth that anything is possible" (Burk 73). McDowell also contends, "For women, who were encouraged (and forced in some circumstances) to identify with and restrict themselves to the home, the home is alternatively a site of disenfranchisement, abuse and fulfillment" (*Gender* 73). As a consequence, Joyce is trapped in this unrewarding kitchen, doing irritating house chores filled with angst.

5.1.2 The Domestic Work Site

Because Joyce chooses to stay in their hometown, and because she is a married woman, she does not have many options for her profession. The four odd cleaning jobs she can find forefront the limited space of her work site. When Marlene learns that Joyce's husband has moved out to live with a 22-year-old girl, she asks about the most crucial question to a woman deserted by her husband.

> MARLENE. So what about money?
> JOYCE. I've always said. I don't want your money.
> MARLENE. No, does he send you money?
> JOYCE. I've got four different cleaning jobs. Add up. There's not a lot round here. (82)

Joyce cannot seek comfort or financial support from her husband. She has to stay in the hometown if she still wants to take care of her mother. The old town is scarce of job opportunities. She can only find some labor jobs with meager pay. She can make

[11] Although both Marlene and Joyce believe Angie is slow-witted, Critic David Kennedy Sauer has a different interpretation. According to Kennedy's analysis, Angie is not as "thick" as her mothers think and "she always manages to get her way" (147).

do but she is definitely unhappy. In other words, she can find very little support from her own family and her hometown. From the perspective of little social welfare and institutional network she can get, society seems callous to her.

Joyce's house cleaning job is not depicted or discussed much in the play. But it is low-end, no prospect, labor job. Moreover, this cleaning job is also closely connected with women's traditional domestic responsibility and private space. This job does not require much job training; furthermore, nor does it imply any mental or intellectual advancement. I do not mean to despise or discriminate against this profession but the current situation depicted in this highly gendered work site indicates that the work life of the underprivileged women has not evolved or made any progress. Based on her exploration of gender and work, McDowell asserts, "British economic and social relations, since 1979 in particular, have been based on a fundamental contradiction between material changes that have challenged but also reinforced women's traditional roles as carers and providers in the home, in the community and as waged labourers" ("Gender Division" 160). In such a time space, Joyce and other underclass women are not empowered by the liberal feminist and Thatcherist developments; rather, they are under double pressures, finding neither solace in the traditional household space nor support from their community or society.

5.2 Angie

For a middle-aged woman like Joyce, life is hard in this individualist, capitalist society. For a young girl of sixteen years old like Angie, her prospect seems equally gloomy. According to Joyce, Angie will have trouble surviving when she grows up because she has a hard time keeping up with the regular school work. If she cannot do well in school, she might not fit into the competitive world of grown-ups in the future. Joyce tells Angie's friend Kit,

> If your face fits at school it's going to fit other places too. It wouldn't make no difference to Angie. She's not going to get a job when jobs are hard to get. I'd be sorry for anyone in charge of her. She'd better get married. I don't know who'd have her, mind. She's one of those girls might never leave home. (43)

From her worldly experiences, Joyce predicts a miserable life for Angie even though she also mentions that Angie is "always kind to little children" (43). Because of her own frustrated job experiences and low estimation of the underclass's achievement, she also thinks Angie will not succeed in this free market and competitive world. Obviously, she does not place Angie's compassionate and tender aspect with younger

children as an asset in work.

Nor does Marlene think that Angie can survive in this society. When Angie runs away to London to visit her, Marlene directly tells her coworkers what she thinks about her "niece:" "She's a bit thick. She's a bit funny. [. . .] She's not going to make it" (66). Marlene may be right. Angie may not survive if everyone else, like Marlene and Joyce, thinks being compassionate but slow-witted and ineffective would not get you anywhere. Therefore, the space Angie is linked with is the "backyard" when she appears in Act Three, which symbolizes she is marginalized. She also appears as a visitor to Marlene's Top Girls Employment Agency but, as mentioned earlier, aggressive superiors like Marlene will not even give her a chance. Finding no space outside, Angie would have to be forced inside back to private space and remain underprivileged.

6. Conclusion

Examining the topic of silence in Feminist British drama in the last decades, scholar Margarete Rubik finds a prominent phenomenon—the silencing of women, "not only or not primarily by male coercion but because women have so internalized male standards and values that, despite their victimization, they lack the originality of thought which would enable them to develop and articulate alternatives" (177). Through the characterization of Marlene, Joyce, and other female characters, Churchill presents to us this kind of silencing of women accompanied by a subversive female self-realization in Britain during the 1980s. This is supposed to be a good time for women to liberate themselves from all sorts of bondage, and to follow Margaret Thatcher's steps; however, Maggie's daughter Marlene in *Top Girls* repeats Thatcher's individualist style and turns her newly derived empowerment into a new form of subjugation for women. The celebration in the imagined public space—a restaurant—reveals the subjugation of the top women by their respective patriarchal ideologies. In the real public space—office—occupied by Marlene, no new work ethics is produced but a replica of patriarchal competition.

Whereas women in the public realm still cannot receive a better way to meet their physical and spiritual needs, women in the private realm cannot find an improved new domestic role to play. Due to the lack of support from her home, her town, and her society, Joyce doesn't enjoy taking up the traditional private space and domestic female role to take care of her parents, to serve as a submissive wife, and to nurture her obstinate odd child. Even less adaptive, Angie might have to accept a bleak future in her marginalized private space. Women in both public and private spaces have not found a good way to their self-realization. It is then no wonder that

the end of the play is the young girl Angie uttering from her nightmares, “Frightening” (87).

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