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Teaching Resistance: A Butlerian Critique of Gender Performativity and the Limits of Individual Action in Caryl Churchill's Top Girls

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ABSTRACT

From different times, six women meet in Churchill's *Top Girls* (1982). Each finds her way around male control.The play quietly asks: can winning still be losing if the rules were never yours? This article examines how personal choices bend under deep rooted governing norms that delineate intelligible femininity and masculinity. Using Butler's theory of performativity and a subversive as a primary analytical framework, although it has frequently informed critical analysis of *Top Girls*, but the performative acts of rejection and subversion of female character has'nt got enough attention. Also, close reading to selected dialogues, dramatic structures, and the interactions of the *Top Girls*'character to investigate how gender is performed, regulated, and subverted within patriarchal system. To illustrates the defiance of the individual performative acts, lead to the instability of gender norms and remain hierarchically restricted. Churchill sets the prospects of collective change rather than individual resistance.

ثقافة المقاومة: قراءة بتلرية لأداء الجندر وحدود النضال الفردي في مسرحية بنات في القمة للكاتبة كاريل تشرشل

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المُستخلص

تستعرض مسرحية Top Girls (1982) للكاتبة البريطانية كاريل تشرشل ست شخصيات نسائية من عصور تاريخية مختلفة، يجتمعن في حفل عشاء خيالي. ورغم تنوع خلفياتهن، تواجه كل منهن تحدياً مشتركاً هو التفاوض مع أنظمة السلطة الذكورية. ومن خلال حواراتهن، تطرح المسرحية سؤالاً جوهرياً: هل يمكن للمرأة أن تحقق نجاحاً حقيقياً ضمن معايير وضعت لخدمة الرجل، أم أن هذا النجاح مجرد وهم؟ تنطلق الدراسة من فكرة أن الخيارات الفردية للشخصيات تتشكل تحت تأثير أعراف اجتماعية وثقافية راسخة. وتعتمد الدراسة على نظرية جوديث بتلر في أدائية الجندر(Gender Performativity) ، ومفهوم الأداء التقويضي (Subversive Performativity) إطاراً تحليلياً. ورغم أن نظرية بتلر حظيت باهتمام في الدراسات السابقة، إلا أن الأفعال الأدائية التقويضية لم تنل التحليل الكافي. ولذلك، توظف الدراسة منهج القراءة الدقيقة (Close Reading) لتحليل الحوارات والبنية الدرامية، للكشف عن كيفية مقاومة الشخصيات للمعايير الجندرية. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن الأفعال الأدائية القائمة على الرفض تنجح في كشف هشاشة المعايير الجندرية، لكن قدرتها على إحداث تغيير جذري تظل محدودة، لأن النظام الأبوي لا يزال قائماً. ومن هنا، توحي المسرحية بأن المقاومة الفردية لا تكفي وحدها، بل يحتاج التغيير الحقيقي إلى فعل جماعي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: كاريل تشرشل، فتيات القمّة، المسرح النسوي، النظام الأبوي

Introduction

> I’ve constantly said that I am both a socialist and a feminist. Constantly said it. If someone says ‘a socialist playwright’ or ‘a feminist playwright’ that can suggest to some people something rather narrow which doesn’t cover as many things as you might be thinking about. (Churchill, p. 89)

In this declaration, Churchill makes her dual political allegiance reflects her dramatic visions and rebels against its binary categorization by refusing to be labeled, she lays bare the complexity of her plays at the points where gender intersects with class and power **(Aston 3)**. Since the 1970s, works such as *Top Girls* (1982), *Cloud Nine* (1979) *Vinegar Tom* (1976), and) *Owners* (1972) have taken issue with gender roles and sexual mores while critiquing those systems that confine women’s political and social power within very limited parameters (Aston 5). Elaine Aston notes that Churchill’s feminist preoccupations developed in tandem with her formal innovations which were made more pronounced by her collaborations with the Joint Stock Company and Monstrous Regiment (Aston, p.5). It is through disruptions of conventional

narrative structure and dialogue as well as staging that Churchill embeds political critique within her dramaturgy feature long identified by critics as central to Churchill's theatrical project (Wandor 156).

Top Girls was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre in London in 1982. This play is one of the most important works of feminism by Churchill. The play has an all female cast and opens with a surreal dinner party to celebrate Marlene's promotion to managing director of the *Top Girls* agency. The six guests Pope Joan (ninth century), Lady Nijo (thirteenth century Japanese courtesan), Patient Griselda (fourteenth century literary figure), Dull Gret (sixteenth century Flemish painting), and Isabella Bird Victorians who traveled in the nineteenth century represent different times and places throughout history (Churchill, 1990; Randall, 2009). After this opening scene, it shifts into Marlene's present day life wherein one sees what she has sacrificed for success her forsaken child Angie, estrangement from her workingclass sister Joyce plus moral compromises required by her career. Through nonlinear structure overlapping dialogues historical periods juxtaposed against each other form a formal argument that patriarchal oppression continues unabated (Aston 39).

This article adopts a critical reading of Churchill's *Top Girls*, using Butler's gender performativity theory as primary critical tool. To contributes to existing scholarship on typologies of resistance, this study distinguishes the different ways in which resistance is performed by the play's main female characters. They place Marlene, Pope Joan, and Isabella Bird represents of women seeking empowerment through assimilation into male dominated roles; Griselda and Lady Nijo categorizes women conforming to traditional feminine ideals; and Dull Gret as a woman who can represent collective resistance (45). This article aims, firstly, to demonstrate how Churchill's ***Top Girls*** exposes the structural limitations of individual resistance within patriarchal systems. Secondly, to interrogates how the play's female characters perform, subvert, or reify gendered norms thirdly to examine why assimilation and conformity result in chronic unfulfillment; fourth to argue that collective resistance embodied by Dull Gret offers the only viable alternative to individual strategies. As well as investigating how do the female characters perform resistance through assimilation, conformity, or collective action; why do individual strategies fail to reach absloute freedom; and what does the play introduce about the necessity of collective change for feminist liberation movemen. Churchill's dramatic technique regularly unsettles sharp divisions, exposing the instability underlying appearntly essentialized categories. This dual focus sharpens analysis regarding Churchill's critique of individual agency within patriarchal systems while also signaling awareness of the provisional value associated with such typology.

Literature Review

Caryl Churchill enters academic discussion as a central figure in feminist theater, her growing political awareness often seen alongside shifts in structural form (Aston 2). From one angle, Christopher Innes positions the six dinner guests in Modern British Drama as emblems reflecting historical oppression of women each measuring Marlene's path against broader social costs. Grouped not by chance but by

function, three align with power through masculine mimicry Marlene, Pope Joan, Isabella Bird while Griselda and Lady Nijo stand apart, tied to endurance, submission, care (Innes, 466). Though widely adopted, this split stays incomplete; despite naming the patterns, Innes offers little on why triumph feels hollow regardless of method chosen. What Amelia Kritzer observes is an absence Innes interprets the drama as challenging Thatcher era ideals of self reliance, yet overlooks forces shaping why personal achievement remains flawed (Kritzer 114). Addressing this space becomes central here; scrutiny falls on systemic boundaries behind recurring instances of deprivation, shifting analysis past earlier frameworks built on classification alone.

Within Michelene Wandor's *Drama Today*, Churchill appears alongside key figures in British feminist theatre. From the 1970s onward, shifts in dramatic form emerge through attention to gender, class, and authority this trajectory noted clearly by Wandor (156). Focus settles on Marlene, much as it does in Innes's reading. Background formed by the remaining five characters allows deeper grasp of Marlene's position (Randall 82). Though differing in approach, each account returns to structural constraints shaping individual lives. Through Elaine Aston's analysis, Caryl Churchill's structural experimentation emerges as a mode of feminist expression. Rather than linear speech, layered voices disrupt continuity this shift redirects attention toward women's experiences (Aston 38). Although Aston traces form to political intent, connections to evolving concepts of gender identity appear absent. Where structure breaks apart, so too might conceptions of self; still, such parallels lack full exploration (Robillard 47).

From this connection, Janelle Reinelt examines Churchill's political theatre. Her analysis treats formal experimentation as inherently tied to politics, shaping a form of drama where audiences cannot remain detached observers (Reinelt 85). Instead of offering familiar structures, it disrupts ease through structure. Sarah Bay Cheng highlights how broken narratives and time shifts unsettle fixed ideas about selfhood and role (Bay Cheng 112). Rather than confirm norms, these techniques expose their instability. Newer interpretations contribute further angles. Perspectives shift again when viewed through recent scholarship. Starting differently each time, Rebecca Cameron's study links early feminist performances to Caryl Churchill's drama. Though past spectacles highlighted collective identity among women, Churchill reveals fractures behind idealized unity, so argues Cameron (220). Such an interpretation treats the play as skeptical toward shared sisterhood. Yet Sophie Poole observes that attention stays fixed on the dinner sequence; missing is clarification of what hinges on this breakdown when assessing female autonomy across the whole work (Poole 195).

From Amelia Kritzer's work on political theatre in Post Thatcher Britain comes clear insight into ideological tensions. Her claim unfolds slowly: the drama enacts a clash, one rooted not in personal choice but structural divide: socialist unity set against neoliberal self reliance, where female advancement under the latter reveals itself as empty gain **(Kritzer 112)**. Hollow triumph defines Marlene's outcome, a point accurately noted. Still, absence marks another direction; Sheila Rabillard observes that such analysis stops short, failing to grant the remaining five characters depth: they become backdrop, not beings shaped by circumstance **(Rabillard 49)**. Into this space steps Sophie Poole, whose essay *Feminist and*

Materialist Philosophies of History in Caryl Churchill's Top Girls proceeds through layered time, treating history not as fixed record but contested ground. Churchill brings together imagined characters alongside real ones, making the past feel alive through dual lenses: one rooted in feminism, another in socialism, according to Poole **(194)**.

Useful insights emerge when examining how the drama interacts with historical narratives, especially within Poole's framework. Yet attention shifts away from physical realities of female existence due to an emphasis on how history gets written. Notably, Rabillard points out that embodiment does not appear in her examination at all. Surprisingly so, since lived sensation underpins much of Churchill's argumentative force (Rabillard 51).

Beginning with Sheila Rabillard's study, the physical form emerges clearly as central to interpretation, where *Top Girls* treats bodily existence as ground for conflict, showing control rooted in sexed physiology (Rabillard 45). Though the focus on material presence holds weight, no reference appears to Judith Butler's ideas about repeated acts forming identity; rather, lived experience shapes the approach (Rabillard 52). Notably, two figuresMarlene and Pope Joanabsorb most scrutiny, while others fade into secondary status. From another angle, feminist thought has generated strong insights into Churchill's writing. To illustrate, Elin Diamond examines mimicry in performance, suggesting resistance occurs when imitation breaks down, unveiling gender as staged effect (Diamond 85). Feminist performance, as Jill Dolan explores, opens space for utopian gestures moments where theater sketches different ways of living together (Dolan 5). Rather than simply reflect reality, such acts propose it anew. From another angle, Sue Ellen Case examines early feminist theater through cast composition: women only, standing apart from standard formats (Case 115). So. the analysis move to Churchill's performing choices, which purposely shifted from male-centered theatrical traditions. By destabilizing classic dramatic forms, these strategies create an new dramatic structure that brings female experience to the light. The outcome is a mode of representation that accomplish sight without waivers and a theortical style formed by obvios political purpose. Recent studies has growing studied the emotional represenations of Churchill's dramatic work. In refrence to Ann Cvetkovich's window, depression outs not merely as a personal status but as a collective socio experience. According to this point of view, Marlene's lament, “Oh God, why are we all so miserable?” (125), represents less as an reflect of individual despair than as a critique of the social status that result collective pain (Cvetkovich 115).From another angle, Berlant's idea of “cruel optimism” clarifies how longed for goals like Marlene's career ascent may hinder wellbeing instead of enabling it (Berlant 24). Ahmed contributes by dissecting the assumed link between happiness and compliance; her study shows how joy functions normatively, while discontented women unsettle its authority (Ahmed 67). Expanding further, cross border viewpoints deepen existing interpretations. From an uncommon angle, Japanese academic Yuki Takigawa shifts focus toward Angie, a figure typically overlooked in Western analysis, proposing her role actively disrupts divisions within the narrative: the split between eras, outcomes, identities linking parent and child (Takigawa 320). In another context, work by transnational

feminists like Goddard identifies the drama's challenge to self centered ideals as meaningful beyond one culture, carrying relevance wherever collective values are weighed (Goddard 462).

Though much has been written about *Top Girls*, the specific acts of rejection and subversion enacted by its female characters have not been subjected to a systematic interpretive framework grounded in Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. References to Butler appear in existing scholarship, yet these engagements remain brief, tangential, or confined to specific scenes rather than constituting a comprehensive analytical lens. This work turns around two linked concerns: examining how consistently applying Butler's ideas exposes patterns tied to motherhood severed, power weakened, defiance attempted; also considering how such an angle reveals where blending in or falling in line fails those women. Central here is whether performativity explains better than other models why grief lingers and solitary rebellion falters throughout the piece. What often escapes notice is how Dull Gret functions alongside acts of defiance, particularly when viewed through Butler's concept of repeated disruption. Instead of merely outlining absence, the present discussion brings forward a distinct perspective by offering a rigorous, sustained application of that framework. Performativity becomes central here not as a label but as an interpretive path taken seriously across pages. With attention drawn to what has been overlooked, clarity emerges where prior analysis hesitated.

Theoretical Framework

This analysis is rooted in Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity as articulated in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and continued in *Bodies That Matter* (1993), *Undoing Gender* (2004), and *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015). Butler's theory provides the philosophical language that makes sense of why individuals, despite different strategies, often experience similar outcomes of loss and unfulfillment. **This framework is particularly suited to examining Caryl Churchill's** ***Top Girls*****, a play that foregrounds female identity as a site of performance, negotiation, and constraint.** It should be noted that Butler's work was generated from a critical engagement with second wave feminism and particularly its articulation of the distinction between sex (biological) and gender (socially constructed). This distinction was politically necessary for early feminist movements but, as Butler argued, it unwittingly reinscribed an idea of a discursive "sex" that exists prior to culture **(Butler 10)** . Rather, both are produced through discourse and performance, drawing on J. L. Austin's speech act theory, Michel Foucault's regulatory regimes, and Simone de Beauvoir's observation that "one is not born but rather becomes a woman" **(Butler 25)** . The result is a theory that conceptualizes gender not as something one has but rather something one doesa performance compelled by social norms yet also potentially subversive of them **(Butler 179)** .

Butler's theory posits that gender is not an inherent attribute but a "stylized repetition of acts" **(Butler 179)** . This performance comes from social norms about what counts as real or intelligible gender. Butler explains this by saying: "Gender is not a fact, but rather the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no such thing as gender at all" **(Butler 140)** . Therefore,

gender can be seen as an illusion that often conceals its origin, According to Butler gender identity is a result of repeated acts subjected by the "heterosexual matrix" (151), a normative structure that marks biological sex, gender identity, and heterosexual desire as normally equal. Gender emanates its illusory stability not from an innate essence but from an absloute sustained repetition of society regulated norms. However, repetition is never ideal, so each repeated action varies a bit, proving gender norms are never totally stable.

Such disruptions in the repetition of gender norms reveal their constructed nature beneath their apparent naturalness that expose the destabilization of gender norms and give chances for contradectedness instead of confirming stable identities, repeated performances prove gender ability to accept revision because repetition always involves variation. Butler argues such unstable links among repeated performances that gender can be reorganized. And she named this process as "subversive repetition" (145), so repeated performances, produced differently, make possibilities for defying and changing normative gender identities.**Within Churchill's dramaturgy, characters practise femininity not as matter of fact but as model, exposing its formed nature by practise it under stable conditions.** What seems normal reveals artifice when gestures back through subtle variations. Meaning derives less from intent than from difference through time. Each recurrence holds potential to unsettle norms presumed fixed. Through slight departures in familiar behavior, identity shows itself adjustable.

The body, for Butler, is not a passive surface where gender is inscribed but rather is itself constituted through performative acts. She states, “The body is not a 'being' but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality” **(Butler 177)** . This concept of the body as “politically regulated” is crucial for understanding how gender operates. The body repeatedly surfaces as vulnerable and betraying . When the body reveals a disguise, when it shows marks left by trauma, when it exposes what was meant to remain hidden, we see the kind of body Butler talks about: one that is a “variable boundary” whose permeability is regulated by dominant norms **(Butler 177)** . Additionally, Butler emphasizes that materiality of the body is not prediscursive but produced through discourse: “The materiality of the body is not a simple fact but an effect of dynamic processes of materialization governed by regulatory norms” **(Butler 2)** . This insight makes clear why individuals cannot simply “escape” their bodies via performance. The human body is not only a biological category of existence that predates gender; it is also structured by the same set of patriarchal regulation that defines gender. Therefore, no act of performing gender can fully avoid the reality of physical existence, since that physicality itself results from the same controlling system. **In** *Top Girls***, the female body emerges as a central site where these** normative structures **are enacted, contested, and betrayed.**

Central to Butler's theory is the argument that operating within the terms of the heterosexual matrixwhether by conforming to its roles or inverting themdoes not escape its regulatory power **(Butler 187)**. For Butler, genuine transformation requires not a different performance within existing norms but rather a “subversive repetition” that reveals those very norms as contingent and open to change **(Butler**

145). While *Gender Trouble* focuses primarily on individual subversion, Butler's subsequent writingsmost notably *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015)emphasize transformation as requiring collective action: the mobilization of communities in challenge against disciplinary framework. Here Butler states that "bodies in their plurality" have the power to "reconfigure the materiality of public space" by means of collective action **(Butler 75)** . **This understanding of collective performativity provides a crucial framework for examining how Churchill's play moves beyond individual acts of resistance toward a vision of collective transformation.**

Literary Analysis

One way to view this framework is as a tool highlighting how deeply entrenched patriarchal structures affect the six central women in the play. Beginning not with assertion but observation, it draws distinctions: Marlene, Pope Joan, and Isabella Bird navigate spaces shaped by men. In contrast, Griselda and Lady Nijo follow paths aligned with expected norms of womanhood. Standing apart, Dull Gret embodies resistance through collective action rather than isolated effort. When considered side by side, these figures expose varying degrees of strain tied to survival under systemic pressure. Throughout, the discussion leans on Butler's ideas about performed gender roles. Attention turns often to the female form, seen less as private flesh and more as exposed territory within cultural rulemaking. Through this structure, the present analysis builds upon existing scholarship by offering a sustained Butlerian reading of embodied agency within these typologies, presents a distinct interpretation of the theme of loss, and examines why both assimilation and conformity continually fail in Churchill's dramaturgical world**.** Finally, by showing that only collective change embodied by Dull Gret offers any real challenge to patriarchal systems, this article reframes the debate on feminist agency in *Top Girls*, basing its conclusion on rigorous comparative method grounded in theory.

Marlene grew up in a home where violence was common; she saw her father beat her mother. From childhood, the quiet tolerance of harm shaped a deep sense of powerlessness. What passed between Marlene and her sister Joyce exposed how firmly that pain had taken hold. Never questioned, the silence around abuse became its own kind of inheritance. A pattern formed not through words, but absence. Joyce's replies carried echoes of what was never challenged. In their conversation, old wounds surfaced without announcement. The weight of unspoken endurance settled into every pause. Some truths emerge only when mirrored in another's voice. No resistance shown then still shapes responses now. One generation's resignation feeds the next without warning. Unmet needs lingered beneath neutral tones. How emotion went unnamed defined its impact. Absence of protest taught more than any lesson could. Stillness in the face of hurt left lasting impressions. Marlene spoke not to fix, but to confirm what she long suspected: "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...." **(Churchill 229-230)**

Repeated use of never reveals resolves shaped more by dread than optimism. In response, Marlene enacts an alternate form of womanhood, distancing herself from her mother's quiet submission. As she states: "I

knew when I was thirteen, out of their house, out of them, never let that happen to me, never let him, make my own way, out" **(Churchill 231)**. Yet according to Butler, such behavior remains bound by identical social constraints. Performance, she argues, links gendered actions to theater like repetitions **(178)**. Rather than stepping outside gender norms, Marlene reenacts them this time as professional achiever instead of silent spouse. Each role emerges under pressure from the heterosexual framework. Though different on surface, both stem from enforced patterns.

Stated plainly, Marlene says, "I hate the working class...." **(Churchill 231)** ; this reflects a Thatcherist perspective that emphasizes the importance of achieving success through individual effort, with the community providing impediments rather than support, and the devaluation of individuals based on their achievements compared to their neighbors (Kritzer 112) . Butler's perspective, however, indicates that this position does not liberate people but rather creates new challenges. Conformity to a heteronormative system, as seen in Marlene's case, prevents individuals from achieving their goals since they have to perform as expected by society, as Marlene's mother did as a housewife while Marlene expects to be an ambitious businesswoman. Though free from direct patriarchal control, the body does not cease to be a limiting factor. Becoming pregnant at seventeen, an age when most of her peers are expected to enter into marriage and set up their own households, she exercises caution and cold calculation to avoid unwelcome motherhood.By transferring care of the infant to her sibling Joyce, autonomy remains intact, Marlene states: "You wanted it, you said you were glad, I remember the day, you said I'm glad you never got rid of it, I'll look after it, you said that down by the river..." **(Churchill 223-224)**

This moment reveals deep ambiguity. Not only does Joyce extend an offer, but there is also subtle blame woven within it. Marlene's decisions have left irreversible marks on her physical form. According to Butler, the body resists fixed definitions instead existing as shifting edges shaped by political forces **(177)** . What stands out most is how Marlene's inability to bear children reflects tangible consequences of striving to mold herself into a role she must constantly enact.

Misery awaits, so Mrs. Kidd insists labeling her a troublemaker without pause. Loneliness follows, according to those words spoken firmly. A judgment cast plainly, not gently shaped nor softened by doubt. "You're not natural" **(Churchill 190)**. Butler's theory sheds light on this moment: what Mrs. Kidd calls "natural" is really a socially constructed ideal of femininity that requires women to perform maternity and domesticity. Butler argues that "the regulatory norms of gender work to produce the appearance of a natural necessity"**(180)**. Marlene's refusal to perform this version makes her legible as deviant and unnatural; yet her performance of the "ballbreaker" is no less regulated. Marlene reveals her rage at the body's refusal to conform to her performance in response to pregnancy, "I've had two abortions, are you interested?..." **(Churchill 224)**

Her dismissal of "messy talk about blood"**(Churchill 224)** is an attempt to perform a version of femininity that denies the body's materiality, yet her rage reveals the body's resistance to this denial. Pope Joan is assimilation taken to its most extreme end. She lived during an epoch when learning was forbidden for women by the Church. **She ascends to the papacy through disguise**, declaring, "Leo died

and I was chosen. All right then. I would be Pope. I would know God. I would know everything....” **(Churchill 116)**

For Butler, Joan's story dramatizes the paradox of gender performativity. She performs masculinity so well that she gets to the top of the most powerful patriarchal institution. Butler says, “gender is an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” **(179)**. Joan's repetition is so effective that she becomes indistinguishable from the masculine authority she acts out. Yet this triumph reveals the constructed nature of power: truth emerges not from inner certainty, but from the role occupieda script enacted, not discovered **(187)**. One could argue that Joan’s success means that individual efforts can overcome a rigid system, thus proving that the supposedly fixed natural order of genders can be changed. Yet, even as Churchill presents Joan’s climb to power, he simultaneously undercuts it by emphasizing how frail her position is and how quickly she is brought down by her biological sex. Thus, while Joan reaches the peak, it is hard to accept that this was true power because there is not enough time for it to cement before being dismantled, and therefore, resistance is presented as a vain endeavor that will always be crushed by the much bigger system. In other words, while Joan does achieve prominence, the focus on the ease of which it is taken away overshadows and invalidates it, thus presenting the culture around Joan as one that only allows for tokens of women in power but is unable or unwilling to truly integrate them into the larger system. This dynamic, in turn, makes resistance seem fruitless, as any attempt at changing the status quo will always be met with repression. In the end, even Joan’s achievements are undermined by the necessity of reiterating her successes, thus presenting them as accomplishments not despite their tokenism but because of it.

Essentially, Joan’s life shows that while the system can allow for deviations from the status quo, they are confined to specific areas and come with implicit consent from the larger order that holds power. Such order may be flexible in its manifestations but is fixed in its ability to suppress any attempts at change that do not come from within the system, and so, Joan’s resistance is portrayed as futile. Not triumph, but tension defines what is permitted and what must remain hidden. So, growth unfolds not beyond rules, but carefully within their shifting edges. The eventual pregnancy with one of her chamberlains exposes the limits of performance, “In the end I did take a lover again. ... He was one of my chamberlains. ... I thought I was getting fatter, but then I was eating more and sitting about, the life of a Pope is quite luxurious. ...I shouldn't have been a woman. Women, children and lunatics can't be Pope. ... They took me by the feet and dragged me out of town and stoned me to death.” **(Churchill 118)**

According to Butler, this instant shows that “the body is not a 'being' but a variable boundary” **(177)** . No matter how well Joan acts out masculinity, her body still has the power to give away her act. Not knowing about her pregnancy is not a personal failure but rather a systemic one resulting from many years of keeping women away from learning about their own bodies **(Rich 56)** . The double standard where male popes father children with no consequences and female popes die for giving life shows that the body is “politically regulated” by gender **(65)**. Isabella Bird was a Victorian traveler confined by the *Cult of True Womanhood* 1820-1860 which stated that women belonged at home as obedient daughters and

wives **(Brannon 170; Welter 152)** . After her father dies, she takes up an activity culturally reserved for mentraveling. But guilt consumes her, "Whenever I came back to England, I felt I had so much to atone for. ... I did no good in my life. I spent years in self gratification. So, I plunged myself into committees, I nursed the people of Tobermory during the influenza epidemic, and lectured to the Young Women's Christian Association on Thrift. I talked and talked, explaining how the East was corrupt and vicious. My travels must do good to someone besides myself. I wore myself out with good causes." **(Churchill 125)**

Butler's concept of performativity is used here to discuss Isabella's guilt as a result of the internalization of the Victorian ideal of femininity as a performance that needed constant reiteration. Her travels break this performance hence she needs expiation through charity workanother reiteration of femininity. Butler states that "the possibility of gender transformation" exists in "the breaking or subversive repetition of that style" **(145)**. An attempt at subversive repetition is being made by Isabella through travel but it gets reasserted by the regulatory regime of guilt. For Ahmed, guilt is indicative of the working of the "promise of happiness" the notion that happiness is contingent upon conformity to social norms **(67)**. Travel may offer a promise of freedom for Isabella but post travel guilt indicates how such freedom has been configured as antithetical to feminine virtue.

At the other extreme from assimilation are those women who seek to negotiate patriarchy by adhering to its prescribed ideals. Griselda epitomizes patriarchal femininity taken to its furthest limits: patience, obedience, and self sacrifice. She is a figure in literature from the thirteenth century; *Top Girls* introduces her with Marlene saying: "Griselda's in Boccaccio and Petrarch and Chaucer because of her extraordinary marriage ... Griselda's life is like a fairy story except it starts with marrying the prince." **(Churchill 127)** Three major male writers were obsessed with an utterly passive Griselda not because she had any power or intelligence but because she could withstand tests imposed upon her by an extremely probing husband. The Marquis proposes; their conversation shows just how very limited are her options, "the Marquis said it wasn't an order, I could say no, but if I said yes I must always obey him in everything. Isabella, I swore to obey dear John, of course, but it didn't seem to arise. Naturally I wouldn't have wanted to go abroad while I was married..." **(Churchill 129)**

In Butler's view, Griselda's performance of wifely obedience is precisely an effect of gender as performative, an effect of repetition. Butler states, "the repetition of gender is a repetition of a set of norms that are always already in place"**(182)**. Obedience finds its roots not in choice but in longstanding patterns passed through generations. When Griselda replies to Marlene "But of course, a wife must obey her husband" the act reveals how deeply these expectations have been internalized. Habit, reinforced across time, creates this sense of inevitability. The phrase "of course" suggests acquiescence to forces far greater than one's own will. What seems self evident is actually the result of a habitual action so deeply ingrained that it appears to be instinctive (185)

Within Griselda's patriarchal mindset, obedience is the ultimate declaration of love "Walter found it hard to believe I loved him. He couldn't believe I would always obey him. He had to prove it." **(Churchill 130)** Trained by the expectations of her society, she accepts that a good woman shows loyalty and love

through complete obedience. This attitude is evident when she allows Walter to take their six weeks old child: “was Walter's child to do what he liked with ... I had promised ... He wanted to see if I loved him enough” **(Churchill 131-132)**. The most brutal aspect of her story is the removal of Griselda's children. Her answer “It was Walter's child” reveals the ideological operation Butler describes: children are positioned as the father's property because the regulatory norms of gender assign paternity as the source of legitimacy **(190)**. Griselda has no legal or moral claim to her own children because in this heterosexual matrix ownership goes to the father. The last test that the Marquis imposes is even more vicious; he sends her back home in her shift to take some great lady to wife and commands her to be attired for the wedding. Such patient submission is finally rewarded with what appears as a happy ending, “Marlene: And he said, 'This is your daughter and your son.' Griselda: Yes. Joan: What? Griselda: Well I fainted. Then I cried and kissed the children” **(Churchill 22)**

Butler's theory sheds light on this moment. Griselda's dissociation “half asleep with shock” is the psychological price of total obedience to the point of handing over one's own children. Yet according to Butler, identity emerges through repeated acts rather than existing as fixed essence **(189)** . Though Griselda occupies the role labeled “patient wife,” such status required surrendering voice, offspring, and inner balance. During Japan's Kamakura era lived Lady Nijo, a woman of court companionship **(Brazell xv)** . Similarly to Griselda, control over Lady Nijo passed into hands of an imperial figure. Her entry into servitude begins with permission granted by her father, revealing how male dominance enables such suppression. At age fourteen she enters the imperial court as a courtesana role shaped less by choice than by accepted social structures that enforce women's compliance **(Churchill 12)** . When Marlene asks about her first sexual encounter, it reveals how much Nijo has internalized her subordination, “Well I was only fourteen and I knew he meant something but I didn't know what....? .... very heavily embroidered trousers, I already felt different about him. It made me uneasy. No, of course not,....Oh, my father was a very religious man. Just before he died, he said to me, 'Serve His Majesty, be respectful, if you lose his favour enter holy orders.'“ **(Churchill 100)**

Drawing upon Butler's framework, the fact that Nijo cannot label her experience as a violation indicates how performativity creates subjects who see themselves in the norms that control them. Butler says, “the process of becoming a subject is a process of becoming subordinated” **(192)** . Nijo has been made into a subject courtesan, a woman by means of subordination. The words “I belonged to him” do not convey resignation but declare her identity; she has been created as a subject who knows herself to be property **(195)** . But while Griselda utterly surrenders herself to male power, Lady Nijo at last finds some small measure of agency within her circumstances. After the Emperor's affections have strayed, she takes two loversan act that insists on personal choice in defiance of social expectation, “NIJO. ... My first child was His Majesty's, which unfortunately died, but my second was Akebono's. ... Now His Majesty hadn't been near me for two months, so he thought I was four months pregnant when I was really six, so when I reached the ninth month, I announced I was seriously ill .... It was only a girl, but I was sorry to lose her.

Then I told the emperor that the baby had miscarried because of my malady, and there you are. The danger is past." **(Churchill 100)**

Nijo's trickery undermines the accepted ways of being male and female. She takes advantage of the male belief that women cannot be trusted to tell the truth about their own bodies to hide her wrongdoing. Butler says that change can happen through repeating things in a new way: "the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts, within the possibility of a different sort of repeating" **(145)** . Nijo tries this new kind of repeating but must pay with the forever loss of her children. She suffers so much that by the time her fourth child is born, she has become emotionally dead: "It was a boy again ... But strangely enough I felt nothing for him" **(Churchill 124)** . Her questioning of Griselda shows her desire, "Nijo: But did you feel anything for them?" **(135)**

One might see, in Butler's view, how emotional detachment emerges where repeated acts challenge norms yet remain policed by them. Not submission but rather conformance to expectations leads to consequences. Consider Griselda, whose endurance draws approval, while Nijo, moving against the grain, faces censure. What appears personal reflects structure: compliance acknowledged, defiance curtailed. It has long been established in thought before our days (Ruegg 532).

Begun in bodies seated in the meal, play finds its grounding in corporeality, focusing on those elements retained through time. Though conversations flow freely between the characters, it is their gestures, specifically the tight tying of the cloak, which suggest interior unrest. Lady Nijo announces her grief, dressed in it as she speaks; Griselda acts out her feeling of loss, folding her hands as if releasing something tangible. Marlene stands rigid throughout much of the office scenesnot relaxed, never slouchedas though stillness itself could offer protection. What appears intentional often masks constraint, especially when autonomy must be performed rather than lived. Even silence carries meaning when shaped by years of adaptation under systems not built for one's survival. Sequences like Pope Joan's staged collapse, Nijo's ritual washing, Angie resting her head on Marlene's lap"Angie has fallen asleep" **(Churchill 199)** and Gret's mimed call to arms **(82)** collectively reveal how bodily motifs are used by Churchill not merely as indicators of trauma but rather as important proof in the case regarding how social regulation shapes both agency and vulnerability. By staging bodily suffering explicitly both privately and publicly she proves with Butler that the body is always caught up in the struggle between personal desire and social constraintthe very core argument of this play: how trauma can be resisted collectively yet is always structured against female agency.

Dull Gret is unique in the play because she comes from Bruegel's *Dulle Griet* and her way of fighting back is different from the others. Marlene, Pope Joan, Isabella Bird, Griselda, and Lady Nijo use either fitting in or obeying ways and tell their stories in detail. Gret is short on words; she mostly listens instead of talking. Her silence and distance set her apart; her main act is not telling a story but a big change from just putting up with things to joining in active group resistance. Unlike the others who care about personal success or their own pain, Gret takes in tales of hurt and oppression before turning her experience into shared action at the end of Act I.

It reframes the intimate tragedy as a collective issue and mobilizes her neighbors against it. Gret's account of rallying her neighbors demonstrates both the motive and method of intervention are sourced within this setting: “and I had a sword and my neighbors come out with choppers and spits.” **(140)** Unlike the other women who recount their subjection to male authority, Gret's involvement instigates direct action from the community itself: “I come out of my front door that morning and shout till my neighbors come out, and I said, 'Come on, we're going where the evil comes from and pay the bastards back.' And they come out just as they were ...” **(140)**

However, Churchill's depiction of Gret is deliberately ambiguous; it poses no straightforward solution to what happens when people collectively resist. Since she has little utterance and even less psychological depth, there is no access to her interiority; thus, it remains impossible to determine whether her collective action is an actual agency that makes a difference or merely a symbolic one. The play leaves the audience wondering if her insurrection ends as a complete or partial success, or if it transforms into something else entirely, thus leaving these questions hanging as the plot resolves. In doing so, it highlights the potential and the limitations simultaneously, forcing the viewers to ponder if patriarchal power structures can be meaningfully shifted through such actions or if they will only result in new conflicts erupting. By witnessing Gret through the lens of Butler’s collective performance theory, one might conclude that solidarity within the group is fragile and can be easily shattered. Stability is not achieved, although actions are performed, with risk being inherent to the process. The means by which one attempts to dismantle patriarchy, if unsuccessful, lead to the same structures being reaffirmed, with uncertainty lingering at the core of relational dynamics.

While Marlene’s self imposed exile in pursuit of her own mission is reminiscent of Pope Joan, Isabella Bird, Griselda, and Lady Nijo, Gret makes her appearance alongside these women, not as a solitary figure but as a companion who prefers collaboration to isolation. In contrast to the isolation of the mentioned women, Gret’s contribution to resolving existing problems in her favor is not evident at first glance. The mutual help that brings her to the fore is ambiguous in intent and success since the narrative offers little in the way of information about what these women say to each other or how they feel about the outcomes. Consequently, rather than offering solutions or unrealistic ideals, the narrator leaves the reader with lingering doubts that lead to alternative thoughts and considerations. These hesitations, in turn, help spark discussion not only among story listeners but also among a wider audience in general and, more specifically, the audience of women. While the author considers the obstacles these women face, she does not seek to formulate concrete and simple answers to the complex and persistent challenges. This uncertainty is key to Gret’s role, which is not to impose or dictate but to draw attention to the potential for resistance. This potential, which was previously available to the mentioned women, is connected precisely to the ambiguity of outcomes, which allows reflection on resistance. Thus, the change that is not closed and tied knots becomes noticeable also to an observer, drawing him into the discussion of the possibilities open to both performers on stage and beyond, inside and outside the theater.

What if success does not free anyone? *Top Girls* shows how women, whether copying men, staying conventionally feminine, or joining together, still face invisible barriers. Each path demands loss of self, connection, peace. Why do they remain unhappy? That question echoes, unanswered. Performance shapes identity more than choice ever could and "divests women of agency" **(Mahmoud 799)** . Transformation must happen between people, not within them alone. Small adjustments change little when systems stay fixed. Fulfillment slips away despite effort because power rarely shifts without shared reimagining and "treat women as a spectacle" **(Mahmoud 813)** . One line repeats like a warning: misery persists even after winning. Individual strategy cannot undo deep patterns. Only common reinvention might loosen old constraints. Still, no one escapes unharmed.

It follows from what has been discussed above that *Top Girls* brings to the forefront the unending costs of women's attempts either to resist or simply to adapt within patriarchal systems. The play continually ties successes with personal sacrifice and emotional torment as an extension of its theme that individual achievement under such constraints can only be momentarily satisfying. Following Butler's theory of gender performativity, this analysis reaffirms the fact that ideological constraints produce individual strategies which do not lead to emancipation in any substantive sense. Therefore, *Top Girls* identifies collective transformation as a necessary precondition for genuine liberation rather than placing hope in isolated triumphs.

This study contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations on *Top Girls* by offering two distinct interventions. First, it applies Butler's gender performativity framework rigorously to reveal how Churchill's characters are chronically unfulfilled due to structural gender regulation through repetitive social performances. Second, it presents a Butlerian analysis that differentiates collective resistance mainly analyzed through Gret from both assimilation into male dominated roles and conformity to patriarchal femininity, contending that authentic transformation eludes solitary endeavor. Previously published research has focused on strategies that have failed; this article concentrates on collective action as the only tactic in the play that short circuits repressive systems. By focusing on gendered embodiment, the analysis prioritizes the body as a site of agency and vulnerability, seeking to destabilize the status quo. Furthermore, by distinguishing between approaches that advance gender equality and those that take it for granted, this article furthers theatre scholarship by arguing that collective dramaturgical strategies (such as the use of ensembles) enable a more nuanced articulation of feminist agency and patriarchal power structures than strategies that rely on individualized action. In essence, the analysis highlights how collective transformation is positioned as the most comprehensive solution to oppression in the play, providing theatre practitioners and scholars with a theoretical framework and practical foundation for advancing their work in the future.

By presenting collective resistance as an avenue for significant change, albeit one that remains unrealized in *Top Girls*, the play opens up a rethinking of agency, empowerment, and liberation through feminist criticism and drama. One way to see Churchill's unresolved conclusion is as pointing toward institutional shifts: liberation emerges when people act as one, dismantling hierarchical control. Because of this, the

work questions excessive focus on personal success, while suggesting new ways to view feminist influence and societal shift. Looking ahead, inquiry might explore how group efforts unfold onstage in current feminist plays, examining performance techniques that shape shared purpose. Another path involves comparing responses to collective defiance in *Top Girls*, observing adaptations in varied cultural and political settings. These efforts add dimension to academic insight, clarifying what unified approaches reveal about freedom, both in Churchill's body of work and wider realms of feminist theater.

Clearly shown through the women in *Top Girls* is how efforts to resist or adapt remain limited when facing patriarchal systems, no matter the method or recognition involved. Though triumphs appear evident, they arrive hand in hand with private sorrow or inner damageproof that autonomy under such conditions demands isolation and cost. “Oh God, why are we all so miserable?”(Churchill 125), exclaims Marlene drawing attention to a different aspect of the performance. She demonstrates that, despite all achievements and successes, one's inner emptiness may be painful and unbearable. What is more, she exposes the misery enforced by the culture on individuals.

This paper makes its contribution by analyzing Dull Gret's narrative as the primary means through which Churchill articulates collective resistance in *Top Girls* **in a systematic, theory driven manner to** depart from earlier scholarship privileging individualist models of agency by foregrounding collective action through Dull Gret to illustrate how Churchill shifts the play's focus from individual achievement toward necessity for collective transformation. The article advances an original argument highlighting this dimension, previously underexamined, that through Butler's framework of gender performativity, Churchill most significantly innovates by depicting collective resistance as necessary for feminist emancipation and thus reframing the conditions for agency in the play.

This provides a concentrated analysis of the play as a contribution to scholarship on Churchill’s *Top girl*. Showing, through thorough application of Butler's theory of gender performativity. The *play* **connects repeated loss with the structural limitations of individualized resistance and places collective transformation as necessary for real emancipation**(Butler 179)**.** By positioning the play as an engagement with models of feminist agency based solely on individual achievement(Aston 5), this analysis claims that Churchill demands a turn toward collective action and structural change. Here, the ambiguous ending serves as an intentional call for further engagement with strategies of collectivity (Churchill 195). Further research should be conducted on how collectivity is staged in feminist theatre and how Churchill's model of agency is translatable across cultural contexts to more fully delineate its importance in both theory and practice.

Conclusion

Chirchill’s *Top Girls* suggests that any endeavour, to face patriarchy through individual strategies, no matter what methods and resources women use, lead only to partial victories and self realization through suffering. The characters in *Top Girls*, no matter how hard they try, cannot escape misery. As Marlene says, “Oh God, why are we all so miserable?” (Churchill 199). Her own success does not free her from

patriarchy. She may have achieved some victories and personal success fulfilled, but she remains under the oppression of a system that does not allow her full self realization. The main problem is that patriarchal power relations are imposed on everyone from above, while individual achievements remain only personal victories.

Through Butler's theory of gender performativity, the present analysis seeks to demonstrate that the frustration of the female characters in Churchill's *Top Girls* originates not from their inner selves but from regulatory gender norms that predetermine and circumscribe their behavior. Whether performing masculine roles, follow traditional patriarchal femininity, or resist these roles, all the female characters remain constrained by the same framework of regulation, which circumscribes and predetermines their actions, thus limiting their individual agency. Regardless of the adopted strategy, the female characters remain bound by the same system of constraints, thereby remaining dependent on the patriarchal status quo. In this regard, the individual agency of the female characters in Churchill's play remains contingent upon the larger patriarchal power structure (Butler 179–90).

The present study makes two significant contributions to the discussion of the play. First, by analyzing *Top Girls* through a Butlerian lens, it demonstrates how repeated gender performances lead to persistent feelings of emotional deprivation and reveals the limitations of individual agency. Second, the study reveals how collective resistance, as demonstrated by Dull Gret, differs from both assimilation into patriarchal power structures and the adoption of traditional feminine roles, thus proving to be genuinely transformative. While scholars have previously focused on the failures of individual agency in *Top Girls*, this research argues that Churchill highlights collective action as the only strategy that capable of challenging patriarchal structures effectivelly. Moreover, by insisting on the body as the site of regulation, the article shows how patriarchal domination is achieved and, subsequently, how it can be overcome.

Ultimately, *Top Girls* suggests that individual approaches to resistance, no matter whether succesfull or not , are limited when it comes to resisting patriarchy. Thus, the strength of Churchill's writing lies not in the portrayal of female empowerment through the lives of remarkable women but in the demonstration that isolated efforts, no matter how significant, achieve little in the fight against patriarchy. Her writing does not leave the audience with a feeling of accomplishment but rather with the realization of what could be achieved if more people stood together rather than remaining silent witnesses to patriarchy. Future research could investigate how other feminist plays represent collective resistance to patriarchal oppression. Further research may investigate how collective performance strategies shape representations of feminist agency and challenge hierarchical power structures in feminist theatre. Comparative studies across different cultural contexts would further illuminate how Churchill's vision of collective transformation is interpreted, adapted, and reimagined within diverse theatrical traditions. Such research would contribute to a broader understanding of collective resistance in feminist theatre and its potential to challenge patriarchal structures both on and beyond the stage.

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