

## A Socialist Feminist Reading of Thatcherite Women in British Feminist Plays\*

Prof. Berna Ayça Ülker Erkan   
İzmir Democracy University, Faculty of Science and Letters  
Department of English Language and Literature  
[aycaulker@yahoo.com](mailto:aycaulker@yahoo.com)

### Abstract

This study focuses on the representation of women in British feminist drama that challenges gender roles and gets stuck in having obsessive power as an outcome of the policy of the first British woman Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. The study discusses excessively ambitious women who question patriarchal order and subvert gender roles to get power and finally left alone on the top like Thatcher. Marlene in Caryl Churchill's play *Top Girls*, Marion in Churchill's play *Owners*, Mary Traverse in Timberlake Wertenbaker's play *The Grace of Mary Traverse* are discussed throughly. Marlene, Marion, and Mary are the representatives of the destructive effects of the ambition for power that characterize Thatcher's Britain. Socialist/materialist feminism is applied to the plays both to criticize selfish Thatcherite powerful women figures and to express the lack of collaboration among women to improve their position.

**Keywords:** Margaret Thatcher, Socialist/Materialist Feminism, British feminist Drama, Caryl Churchill, Timberlake Wertenbaker.

## İngiliz Feminist Oyunlarındaki Thatcher'cı Kadınların Sosyal Feminist Açısından Okunması

### Öz

Bu çalışma, cinsiyet rollerine meydan okuyan İngiliz Feminist tiyatrosundaki kadınların temsili ve bu kadınlar İngiliz ilk kadın Başbakanı olan Margaret Thatcher politikasının sonucu olarak takıntılı bir şekilde güce sahip olurken nasıl sıkıştıkları üzerine odaklanır. Çalışma, ataerkil düzeni sorgulayan, güce ulaşmak için cinsiyet rollerini ters yüz eden ve sonunda Thatcher gibi tepede yalnız bırakılan aşırı hırslı kadınları tartışır. Caryl Churchill'in *Top Girls* oyunundaki Marlene, Churchill'in *Owners* adlı oyunundaki Marion ve Timberlake Wertenbaker'ın *The Grace of Mary Traverse* oyunundaki Mary karakterleri tartışılır. Marlene, Marion ve Mary, Thatcher İngiltere'sini karakterize eden ve güç elde etmek için hırslı yıkıcı etkilerinin temsilcileridir. Sosyalist/materyalist feminist eleştiri kuramı, hem bencil Thatcher'cı güçlü kadın tiplmelerini eleştirmek hem de kadınların pozisyonlarını ilerletecek bir kadın dayanışmanın noksanlığını ifade etmek için oyunlara uygulanır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Margaret Thatcher, Sosyalist/Materyalist Feminizm, İngiliz Feminist Drama, Caryl Churchill, Timberlake Wertenbaker.

\* This is a revised form of my presentation at international IDEA Conference which was held on 24-26 April 2019 at Gaziantep University, Turkey.

## INTRODUCTION

The British feminist plays of the 1980s tend to take the subject matter of women in majority of the plays. Significantly, Margaret Thatcher and her policy has influenced British Theatre and drama in the eighties framing this period as Thatcher's Theatre. Since Margaret Thatcher is an effective figure of British history, her presence and attitude towards women reflect the dramatization of the era. The political stance of Thatcher is the subject-matter of most women's drama especially criticising the lack of solidarity and sisterhood among women. The purpose of this essay is to explore representations of Thatcherite women who are "in power" in Carly Churchill's plays *Top Girls* and *Owners* and Timberlake Wertenbaker's play *The Grace of Mary Traverse* through socialist/materialist feminist criticism. Both playwrights contributed much to the feminist theater; Churchill received critical attention in the mid-1970s and Wertenbaker in the 1980s. Churchill adopted a Marxist/socialist feminist outlook and she has reflected historical transformations of the eighties and nineties in her plays. First, Margaret Thatcher and her famous political doctrine Thatcherism will be discussed before analysing the plays in terms of socialist feminism.

Margaret Thatcher (1925-2013) with her nickname "The Iron Lady" is Britain's first woman Prime Minister (in office between 1975-1990) who lends her name to political doctrine -Thatcherism. In fact, "Thatcherism" as an expression is mostly the creation of Margaret Thatcher's opponents. From 1975, she was a member of Conservative party, her enemies who adopted liberal democracy emphasize a rhetoric of compassion based on social justice. Thatcher's opponents emphasized the idea of social injustice, social democratic postures and the idea that poor people would become disruptive if nothing was done for their welfare. Thatcher based concern for economics and her policy was based on "monetarism", which depended on money matters. She pointed out the moral lesson that you could not spend more than you earned. Therefore, the government cut all spending that caused inflation. According to Thatcherite politics, capitalist concerns became important which ignored society. Thatcher defended private enterprise culture. As Gould and Anderson (1987) state "Thatcherism cannot be an ideology" (p. 41) because it mostly concerns the economic facts. "Thatcher phenomenon" is associated with the slogans:

*conviction politics, wealth creation before its distribution; popular capitalism; enterprise culture, cutting public expenditure; keeping more of what you earn; maintaining the medium-term financial strategy (MTFS); reducing public borrowing; giving the unions back to their members; reversing the 'ratchet effect', publishing back the 'nanny state' [...]*  
(Gould & Anderson, 1987, p. 41-42)

Thatcherite policy privileged the upper-class capitalist private enterprises, which cause inequality among different classes of British society. The Thatcher government has reduced public spending budget like art subsidy. In other words, Thatcher cut all expenses and support of Art and theatre, which was criticized in most of the British theatre of the era. As Peacock (1999) states "The theatre was, therefore, only experiencing the same financial pressures as other areas of the public sector – particularly health, education and local government—and was treated to the same introduction of business practices intended to ensure greater fiscal responsibility." (p. 60-61).

If one analyzes Thatcherite policy from a feminist lens, it is evident that it brings nothing in the position of women let alone improvement. Conversely, some women prefer to stay at home and go back to their domestic life, which is expressed by backlash

phenomenon. Thatcher's policy has a great impact in the position of women since the post-feminist conception of the "superwoman" figure is prominent in displaying a powerful and at the same time egoist women types. There is a gap between the upper-class women and the lower class of women which is supported by Thatcherite policy. The attitude of Thatcher towards women made the women dramatists of the 1980s criticize the "powerful" women figures like herself. Destructive and ambitious women figures, that cause an intra-sexual oppression on women through the character of Marlene, are displayed criticizing Thatcher's policy in Caryl Churchill's play *Top Girls*. The upper-class women in power have many privileges at the same time they exploit working-class women, which is highly criticized in Caryl Churchill's plays *Top Girls* and *Owners*.

### 1. WOMAN IN POWER IN CARLY CHURCHILL'S PLAY *TOP GIRLS*

Churchill criticizes the existence of Thatcher-like figure, through Marxist feminist perspective when she introduces her protagonist Marlene in *Top Girls*. Marlene, the boss of the "Top Girls" employment agency, oppresses both her sister and biological daughter to climb the stairs to become a "top girl" in the capitalistic world. She is successful, but alone on the top. Peacock (1999) emphasizes atonement of women and intra-sexual oppression: "The effect of intra-sexual oppression on women in the lower strata of society who do not or cannot attain the station of top-girls is also illustrated in the portrayal of Joyce, Marlene's sister, and Angie, her daughter, whom Joyce has raised" (Peacock, 1999, p. 151). Marlene stands for all feminists; an egoist upper-class woman who does nothing for the other classes of women. Marlene adopts patriarchal capitalist power to get ahead while adopting a male-identified woman character. The play criticizes women's adaptation of male stereotypical ways of getting ahead by denying the traditional domestic woman image. Feminine identity disappears to serve for the patriarchal power. One can hardly see any feminine characteristic traits in Marlene even though she is a woman. Since power is associated to be a male attribute, she denies her womanhood and responsibilities as a woman. She acts like an "iron lady" controlling everything around her. Marlene has difficulty in balancing between the professional and the private life because something is missing in one or the other area. The career woman Marlene both neglects and rejects her biological daughter Angie, thus she never reveals her identity as her mother. Marlene leaves Angie alone on her own fate without having any mother's affection. Depriving of her child from her mother's affection, Marlene exploits Angie and rejects her identity both as a woman and a mother.

Marlene does not only exceed her traditional feminine role as a mother and woman but also exploits the other members of her family. She leaves the responsibility of her daughter to the shoulders of her sister Joyce and walks away to lead a life of her own. She is too busy with getting a perfect career to reach the top of her job by defeating her male rival Mr. Howard in Act I. Thus, she becomes a "top girl" in her career. The critique of feminist ambitions is a central theme in the play, and this also depicts the predicament of modern women. Churchill adopts a Marxist/socialist feminist view to emphasize the condition of collectives not individuals in the play. Individual success of only one woman does not help the rest of all classes of women. For instance, Marlene's success in Act I is attained by the domestic help of her sister Joyce as expressed in a long debate that takes place throughout Act III. The last act investigates how Marlene reached to the top position in her career when she exploited her sister and rejected her own daughter. This brought nothing to the welfare of the other classes of women. There is no feminism unless it includes collectives. This

expresses the futility of individual solutions. Women should act collectively to be liberated from the patriarchal oppression. The play adopts a socialist feminist criticism and harshly criticizes women like Marlene who represents Margaret Thatcher and her policy bringing no development to the condition of women. Since the individual success of only one woman is presented and at the same time ironically criticized in the plays under discussion, it also points out that it brings nothing to the welfare of all classes of women.

There exists the political figure Margaret Thatcher, which is labeled as “Maggie” in Carly Churchill’s play *Top Girls* in Act Three. Tycer states that Churchill writes the play “as a response to the election of Margaret Thatcher” (Tycer, 2008, p. 1). Although Thatcher’s rise to political power is good for women’s progression in the political arena, her politics only defends some privileged minority of wealthy Britons not all classes of women. Thatcherite policy did not improve the position of women. Moreover, such policy sent women back to home and the domestic sphere, which was known as backlash phenomenon. For example, Marlene in *Top Girls* imitates/represents Margaret Thatcher who does not improve the rights and conditions of the lower-class women. In Act Two Scene Three the office women, Win and Nell, discuss about the possibility of upward position for themselves, however they see that there is no room left for ordinary working-class women:

NELL: There’s not a lot of room upward.

WIN. Marlene’s filled it up. (Churchill, 1996, p. 46)

Win points out that there is a class distinction among women and upper-class women are always privileged if compared to the working-class women: “It’s the top executive doesn’t come in as early as the poor working girl” (Churchill, 1996, p. 49). Marlene embraces “the enterprise culture” and monetarism encouraged by Thatcher. Thatcherite policy does not care about the social consequences and unequal treatment among the classes in the society. Joyce and Angie represent section of the most disadvantaged class in need of social support. Marlene does not care about her working-class sister, on the contrary she leaves the burden of her own daughter on the shoulders of Joyce. Churchill reveals that Marlene’s economic success is not only caused by her ambition but is certainly dependent on her sister’s domestic labour in Act Three. Marlene exploits her sister’s labour, whereas Joyce is unable to have her own life and baby because of Marlene’s burden. Joyce states this situation as follows: “Listen when Angie was six months I did get pregnant and I lost it because I was so tired looking after your fucking baby/ because she cried so much...” (Churchill, 1996, p. 81). This quotation explains the reason Churchill’s play embodies socialist feminist ideals and criticisms, which draws attention to the lack of collaboration and sisterhood concepts.

Churchill emphasizes the rise of a new type of women to power like Thatcher: “She may be a woman but she isn’t a sister, she may be a sister but she isn’t a comrade. And, in fact, things have got much worse for women under Thatcher” (Betsko & Koenig, 1987, p. 87). Marlene is a representative of Thatcher-like women; she has a great sympathy for Thatcher when she states: “She’s a tough lady, Maggie. I’d give her a job” (Churchill, 1996, p. 84). The playwright criticizes both Thatcher’s policy and Marlene who preaches Thatcher. Since Thatcher’s policy promotes only upper-class women like Marlene, it brought no improvement on conditions of women as collectives. The historical figure of Margaret Thatcher appears in the text highlighting her normalization of female success and transgression of class and gender boundaries. As in Marlene’s case, Thatcher’s success of becoming the first British women prime minister is shadowed by her fall from the political

grace. The play points out that the patriarchal system does not offer clever women such as Margaret Thatcher and Marlene a reliable way up the top position. Thatcher and Marlene are exceptional women who climb on the top by adopting patriarchal norms. Finally, both are alone on the top and their privileged position do not serve for the improvement of the other classes of women collectively. Marlene embraces the “enterprise culture” encouraged by Thatcher and Thatcher’s government. It supports monetarist policy regardless of the social consequences. Thatcher and her policy explicitly appear in the text when Marlene states “Monetarism is not stupid” (Churchill, 1996, p. 84) and “First woman prime minister. Terrifico. Aces. Right on. / You must admit. Certainly gets my vote” (Churchill, 1996, p. 84). That policy divides women into camps as Joyce states: “What good’s first woman if it’s her? I suppose you’d have liked Hitler if he was a woman. Ms. Hitler. Got a lot done, Hitlerina...” (Churchill, 1996, p. 84). Thatcher has often been criticized for being an anti-feminist model, because only a few privileged women profited her policy and the majority were send back to home and the domestic sphere.

Thatcher’s policy brought “backlash” phenomenon into question. “Backlash” promotes bachelor women at work. The presence of such modern-working women is a protest to “backlash”, which imposes women to adopt a domestic life. For instance, Nell, a modern woman who works for Marlene, in Act Two rejects the traditional role of women by stating her colleague Win that “I could go on working and not marry him” (Churchill, 1996, p. 48). Nell and Win like Marlene express themselves as “high flyers” (Churchill, 1996, p. 47), “though birds” (Churchill, 1996, p. 48), and they are “plenty” (Churchill, 1996, p. 48). Nailsmith (2005) states that it is almost impossible to get a top job with family responsibility: “access to the top jobs is easier for those women who have few or no family responsibilities” (Nailsmith, 2005, p. xxxiv). Marlene promotes this idea of having no family or child responsibility: “I’ve been on the pill so long/ I’m probably sterile” (Churchill, 1996, p. 81). Marlene may now be infertile after years of taking oral contraceptives. Mary Brewer points out “her susceptibility to backlash propaganda more than to soften her character. In addition to appearing as the castrating career woman, ... a member of the “sisterhood of the infertile” (Brewer, 1999, p. 79). The successful managing woman on the top should not have any family connection and she should be a single woman. This also creates problem for women with careers ending up alone and miserable; moreover being “not natural” (Churchill, 1996, p. 59) as Mrs. Kidd states in Act 2, Scene 3.

The play also depicts the condition of modern women at work who must face frustration in their private lives. Christine Bimberg (1997) states that while twentieth-century women define themselves by profession; it also brings frustration in their private lives. Still women must pay. According to Bimberg (1997) “Female identity in *Top Girls* is achieved at a high risk, with great efforts only” (p. 404) and women are “entrapped in a different way than the women from the past were because of mastering ‘the men-made system’ and ‘adopting a male power behavior’” (Bimberg, 1997, p. 404). There is no clear answer to the dilemma of women who want to balance family and professional life. Bimberg emphasizes that Churchillian women “sacrifice that potential of female identity” (Bimberg, 1997, p. 404). Likewise, Verna Foster (1998) points out that women’s adaptation of “stereotypically male ways of getting ahead” (Foster, 1998, p. 3) brings no resolution since individual as well as communal solution would be more effective. Motherhood and domestic duties hinder women from “getting ahead”. The play also points out that women’s adaptation of

“stereotypical male ways” as observed in the play does not work unless patriarchal ideals change.

Marlene, who rejects domesticity, is an example of a modern woman figure of the 1980s that has powerful positions with personal initiative; nevertheless, Churchill emphasizes the selfishness and loneliness of those figures. Marlene’s need to celebrate her success entitled as “promotion” with imaginary women from different cultures and different ages demonstrates that she has no close friends to invite over her dinner party. The playwright emphasizes Marlene’s isolation and having no opportunity to share her happiness. However, the guests are not as lucky as Marlene since all of them must put up with the oppressive patriarchal system of their own age. From the very beginning of the play, Churchill emphasizes class distinction among women those who have and have not: the presence of the oppressed women on one hand and “top girl” like Marlene on the other hand. Tyser (2008) points out that Thatcherite politics gave “no guarantee of equal opportunity” (p. 21) for all women, only the upper-class powerful women benefitted from Thatcherism. There emerges a new type of woman: “The ‘new woman’ or ‘working woman’ was meant to aspire towards the career ladder, pursuing an ethic of individualism” (Tyser, 2008, p. 21). There is an exposition of history of sexual oppression and universal female resentment of women through different ages, which explains the oppression of modern women. In both cases, women must pay the prices throughout history: historical characters are oppressed, and career women are left alone, which brings no resolution for women’s condition.

Churchill adopts a socialist or materialist feminism, which attributes women’s relation to the material conditions of gender, class and race, in her both plays *Top Girls* and *Owners*. As Peacock (1999) states “change could only be achieved through social/political revolution” (p. 151). This is the secret message in Churchill’s both plays explaining that one woman’s success is nothing since it does not serve to the rest of women. Then, a collective attitude should be adopted for the welfare of all classes of women. The change is not possible through individual efforts, but it would be realized through a collective social action by women of all social classes. Churchill points out that without socialism there is no effective development in feminism because there arises enmity and selfishness among women without any collaboration (Ülker Erkan, 2010, p. 194-95). Even if both plays are open-ending, still there is a hope for change at least such ending “is designed to promote social action” (Tyser, 2008, p. 69), which seems as the perlocutionary act of the theater: taking up an action. As Keyssar points out Churchill’s drama “revises the history of the past and the present she makes a new kind of history – of the theatre and of society – appear not just possible but necessary” (Keyssar, 1984, p. 100-1). Thus, sisterhood is an initiation for a social change as it is portrayed by the friendship of the next generation representative by Kit and Angie. Churchill’s play emphasizes the importance of sisterhood and collective action on the welfare of all classes of women, which is the target of socialist feminism.

## 2. POSSESSIVE WOMAN IN CARLY CHURCHILL’S PLAY OWNERS

The play *Owners* (1972) is Churchill’s first full-length play for the London stage, which can be considered as “schematic and conventional” (Solomon, 1981, p. 50), which leans on Churchill’s “socialist and feminist concern” (Solomon, 1981, p. 50). Churchill acknowledges both social (the idea of ownership controlled by female power) and philosophical (the contrast between Western aggressiveness and eastern passivity) issues. The play is written in

two acts; the first has six scenes, the second has eight, taking place in a developing part of North London. The play starts with the depiction of the protagonist Marion, a successful property developer. She buys the house in which Lisa, Alec, Alec's mother and their two children live on the third-floor apartment. Marion wants to sell the house that they live in rent and assigns her employee Worsley to vacate the house immediately. Worsley threatens and bribes, but Lisa and Alec are resistant to moving. Marion has had a past affair with Alec and the situation gets complex when Lisa finds Marion and Alec in the bed as she goes to give birth to her third child. In anger, Lisa offers the baby to Marion, who is sterile. She accepts it and makes Lisa sign adoption documents, which she later regrets. Marion's husband Clegg hates his wife and wants to murder Marion because he is suspicious of her relationship with Alec. Worsley whose own suicide attempts go in vain agrees to help Clegg. Clegg lets Lisa see the baby under the condition that he sexually exploits her. Marion sends Worsley to set fire to the house. In the final scene, Worsley in bandage returns the forgotten baby to Lisa. Then he starts the fire and shouts a warning upstairs to save Lisa and the baby. The entire family escapes the fire, but Alec re-enters the burning house to save the child downstairs. Unfortunately, he and that child die. Marion is not sorry for Alec and becomes aware of her destructive power on people. Worsley again attempts to commit suicide and places a gun against his temple, fires, and misses.

Marion, the protagonist, is presented as a vamp figure without having emotions whose sole purpose is to possess power. She is obsessed with power and owning anything. She has great desire to own everything around her: estates, power, money, Lisa's baby and even an abstract thing like love. Marion wants to control Alec's feelings under the name of love in a most imperative way. She declares her desire for Alec in terms of ownership and power:

*[...] I'm yours whether you want me or not. Have all the money and stay here too if that's what you want. Empires have been lost for love. Worlds well lost. We men of destiny get what we're after even if we're destroyed by it [...] Onward. Love me. (Churchill, 1985, p. 31)*

She uses an oppressive masculine discourse having no emotional depth. She does not care about emotions since success is the most important factor in her way of being brought up:

*MARION: Everything I was taught— be clean, be quick, be top, be best, you may not succeed, Marion, but what matters is to try your hardest. To push on. Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to the war [...] Marion tries hard. I work like a dog. Most women are fleas but I'm the dog. (Churchill, 1985, p. 30)*

Marion metaphorically explains that she is "the dog" representing power and independence, not "a flea" that is associated to being dependent on the existence of others. She is not a traditional powerless and submissive woman like other women. She is a representative of Thatcherite politics by refusing stereotypical gender roles. As discussed in the previous play, Thatcherite policy gives privilege to only upper-class women who are alone "on the top" position. Marion, like Marlene even their names sound similar, is the outcome of such politics; an antipathetic and egoist figure. Churchill argues that female sexual power represented by Marion seems problematic in patriarchal social system when she is presented as having mental problems in the past.

Thatcherite politics gives much credit for private enterprises and social advantage to women like Marion. She has economic power and unnaturally adopts masculine characteristic traits. Marion represents almost the same characteristic traits in *Top Girls's* Marlene: she is the embodiment of upward mobility, has a privileged position for only upper-class women in Western capitalistic world, alone, unnatural, unhappy, sterile, and adopts a masculine attitude for power by denying her womanhood and motherhood. Inevitably, there is a reversal of gender roles in the play. Marion does not liberate herself from dominant patriarchal values causing her "to acquire dehumanize[d]" (Merrill, 1988, p. 74) values. Churchill criticizes the existence of Thatcher-like figure, through socialist/Marxist feminist perspective when she creates an unconventional woman like Marion. The play depicts "the bourgeois interpretation of feminism which had become prevalent under Thatcher" (Reinelt, 1996, p. 179). Then, why does Marion adopt masculine characteristic traits? Power and ownership could only be achieved by confirming capitalist and patriarchal order, which seems as a consequence of social and political issues. Worsley states that power depends on "owners" who has capitalistic power to manipulate the others:

WORSLEY: [...] *the law's not for morals so much as property. The legal system was made by owners. A man can do what he likes with his own.* (Churchill, 1985, p. 36)

Being an owner and having power are associated with male attributes. This also explains why Marion has adopted masculine traits. Conversely, Marion's husband Clegg is feminized and powerless. He is not successful in his business and is always dependent on Marion. Marion's subversion of her gender roles in the society is also an outcome of having no capacity for motherhood and inability to produce a child of her own. Clegg thinks that she is sterile. Clegg's wish for an heir goes in vain when Marion produces no child. This shadows her power as a woman. Marion's power is also shadowed by her mental destabilization, which depicts the woman in power is not still accepted in a patriarchal dominant society. Marion, Worsley, and Clegg in Scene Three go to a striptease night club to celebrate Marion's success in purchase. Clegg watches a female stripper with an arise of his sexual desire, which is made fun of not only by Marion but also by the audience. Instead of emphasizing the male gaze on the strip-teasers, it is Clegg who has been the target on the act of gazing. Marion takes advantage of this situation by stating: "If you want a girl, Clegg, I'll buy you one" (Churchill, 1985, p. 20). This quotation emphasizes that gender roles are subverted; furthermore, Marion is the boss having an absolute economic power.

The reversal of gender roles and creating powerful masculine women like Marion was an outcome of Margaret Thatcher's policy which made women adopt male roles to get power and "success" in business life. The emergence of successful career women tended to deny associations with feminism, which not only left them alone on the top but also gave little room for sisterhood and solidarity among women. The play successfully raises consciousness concerning the idea that women should act in collaboration, otherwise the future would be "frightening" (Churchill, 1996, p. 141) as Angie exclaims at the end of *Top Girls* or continue to produce devilish characters like Marion who celebrates her devilish design as: "... I never knew I could do a thing like that. I might be capable of anything. I'm just beginning to find out what's possible" (Churchill, 1985, p. 67). Churchill emphasizes the need for socialist feminism when she depicts powerful but anti-pathetic Thatcherite women in the plays.



Capitalism and monetarism, which is defended by Thatcherite politics, create monster-like women image who is neither interested in family affairs nor producing a child. Everyone seems to be preoccupied with his/her own life bringing egoism into question. Gender roles reverse: Marion acts like a masculine that has great economic power both on property and her husband; conversely Clegg performs feminine qualities that are dependent on his wife's property. Marion leads an independent life despite her marriage, as opposed to Lisa being a family-centred type. Marion's victory depends on her materialist individualism and the misery of the others. The playwright does not criticize Marion's rejecting her feminine roles but draws attention to the consequence of excessive wish for power, ownership, and the effects of women types like Marion as a consequence of Margaret Thatcher's policy.

Churchill criticizes the existence of Thatcher-like figures through Socialist/Marxist feminist perspective. The play also criticizes women's adaptation of stereotypical male ways of getting ahead by denying the traditional domestic woman image. There is a lack of socialist feminism, which emphasizes the idea that individual success, like Marion and Marlene have, does not improve the position of women in collectives. There is no feminism unless it includes collectives. Churchill adopts a Marxist/socialist feminist lens because the basis of socialist feminism expresses the futility of individual solutions and women should act collectively to be liberated from the patriarchal oppression. Marion's bourgeois feminist attitude is criticized by socialist feminism. Feminism clashing with capitalism seems problematic for women who lack solidarity and sisterhood. Peacock (1999) states that "post-feminism, extreme individualism and the emergence of successful career women who were keen on to deny any association with feminism, left little room for the claims of sisterhood and solidarity" (Peacock, 1999, p. 168). Churchill points out that successful women characters like Marlene and Marion lack solidarity and sisterhood. Marion, like Marlene, exploits another woman Lisa who is coming from the working class. Churchill's character Marion is not different from Marlene; an egoist upper-class woman who does nothing for the other classes of women. The play also criticizes women's adaptation of stereotypical male ways of getting ahead by denying the traditional domestic woman image like it did in the previous play. Those unconventional women images like Marlene and Marion are the products of Margaret Thatcher's policy. The name of the characters sounds similar, likewise their function. Under the light of this perspective, feminism clashing with capitalism also seems problematic for women since they lack solidarity and sisterhood.

### **3. POWER CRISIS IN TIMBERLAKE WERTENBAKER'S PLAY *THE GRACE OF MARY TRAVERSE***

Timberlake Wertenbaker in the next play *The Grace of Mary Traverse* states in the note part that she sets the play in the eighteenth century although it is not a historic play because she "found the eighteenth century a valid metaphor" "to free the people of the play from contemporary preconceptions" (Wertenbaker, 1996, p.66). The daughter of a rich 18<sup>th</sup> century pottery-owner begins "to gain knowledge of a world from which she has been isolated" (Peacock, 1999, p. 194). Wertenbaker emphasizes in her interview that she "wanted a woman on a quest, a woman who was active" (Stephenson & Langridge, 1997, p. 139), which explains why Mary has an inquiring mind and escapes from her upper-class doll-like life to have real experience and knowledge about the real world in London. She goes beyond her limitations of class, family, and gender to have personal experience and reality of the streets

of London. Mrs Temptwell acts like Mephistopheles—who wants to take revenge from Mary’s father— to awaken curiosity telling Mary beyond her house are “interesting and lively” (Wertenbaker, 1996, p. 74) and she feels sorry for Mary’s mother who died before she discovered “one little pleasure” (Wertenbaker, 1996, p. 74). Issues of female identity, self-discovery, prostitution, gambling, language power to raise a riot, power, subversion of class and gender roles are among the discussed themes in the play. Mary seeks power in the male-dominated arenas by winning games while she gambles with men, raises lower-class to stand up for their rights resulting in chaos and catastrophe, engages in multiplicity of sexual experiences with hiring a gigolo, masturbating her father (incest) when she is in disguise, having lesbian relation to Sophie, escaping Lord Gordon’s rape in Act one Scene Three, and prostituting. The play ends with Mary, her female servants, her baby daughter, and her father gathered in a garden in the Potteries. With Mary’s attempt to defeat cultural forces that shapes her and all females around her, she is hopeful with the next generation represented by her own daughter that “one day we’ll know how to love this world” (Wertenbaker, 1996, p. 160). The play ends with its open ending when “Mary moves into a state of grace that allows her to glimpse happiness in the future” (Dahl, 1993, p. 150).

Mary voices the critique of the class distinction and raises community riots to protest economic privilege. Ironically, Mary exploits ever loyal young working-class woman Sophie who substitutes herself as the victim of rape and saves Mary. She endures not only the rape of Lord Gordon but also the death of her child and hanging of her lover Jack. Mary exploits Sophie and forces her into prostitution by objectifying her. There is an intra-sexual oppression in the play because Mary continues to treat both Mrs. Temptwell and Sophie as servants. After she escapes her own rape, Mary experiences heterosexual desire with Mr. Hardlong and homosexual desire by exploiting Sophie in the gambling scene. Mary challenges patriarchal power through intertwined issues of identity, gender, and power. Still, she encounters with limitations since she is a woman. Mary’s being too ambitious like Faust and asking for power by adopting masculine qualities and exploiting women to get ahead like Marlene and Marion did in Churchill’s plays is the subject for socialist feminist criticism. Those female protagonists are like Margaret Thatcher, who struggled for power and success in the patriarchal dominant realm. Mrs. Temptwell states that Mary “only wants power, Jack” (Wertenbaker, 1996, p. 131). Mary as well as the other powerful women characters in the plays represents Thatcher striving for power in the political arena by manipulating the working-class people by her speech. Like Thatcher, Mary is unaware of the fact that she is adopting patriarchal values that belittle the presence of women in many respects. Even though she is a woman, Mary serves for patriarchy and Mr. Manners, an important politician who is very close to the King, manipulates her when she wants to go the Parliament. As Mr. Manners states: “Real power prefers to remain invisible” (Wertenbaker, 1996, p. 122). Mary from the beginning of the play has been manipulated by patriarchy. Mr. Manners plays with Mary when he invites her to the House and the guard at the gate knows that this “invisible” power will manipulate those who ask for power and equality:

*GUARD: I’ve seen people go in there and come out very different.* (Wertenbaker, 1996, p. 135)

Mary’s supposed power goes in vain. She thinks that she is powerful: “I’m drunk with what I have done: glory! ... And it’s by my command. I’ve done it all” (Wertenbaker, 1996, p. 146). However, the men who really hold the power shoot millions of people in the riot resulting a destructive outcome of Mary’s speech power in public. Mary cannot control or

stop shooting of people which makes her comprehend that she is powerless in the patriarchal order. Having seen that she has been the only cause of the destruction and destructive consequence of women having power, she exclaims:

*MARY: No! No! It cannot have happened. / I didn't want it to be like this. Please believe me. I wanted something good. I had dreams. (Wertenbaker, 1996, p. 149)*

Wertenbaker points out that the consequences of Mary's choices "when she enters into a Faustian pact for knowledge and power" (Stephenson and Langridge 140) is extremely dangerous for women. Power is always on the side of men since the society is patriarchal. Women having power is seen as a treat to the hegemonic ideals of the dominant power:

*[...] But the idea that you just get power and then it's all going to be different is naïve in the extreme and rather dangerous. It used to irritate me intensely. Power is power... As they gain power, and I hope they have the courage to continue to gain power, they have to know what the failings are. And that's what I wanted to show with Mary, that it would be very easy at that point to get discouraged, which is what happens to her. (Stephenson & Langridge, 1997, p. 140-41).*

Wertenbaker emphasizes the impossibility of women's getting absolute power in the dominant eighteenth-century British patriarchal society. Prostitution seems the only way out to make a living and survival for women in the patriarchal society. Patriarchy leaves no way out but forces women to work as prostitutes for earning their lives in the play. Mary has economic freedom by the help of prostitution, however, each women character in the play are interested in their own survival. Mary despises and exploits Mrs. Temptwell and Sophie who come from the lower working-class. Ironically, she treats them as her servants even she is in the same position with those women. Physically escaping from the upper-class background does not guarantee her privileged position; however, she unconsciously feels belonging to her own class even if she rejects it to lead a life of her own. She is unable to stop patriarchal oppression in her escape to an ordinary life, still she encounters with both gender and class oppression. Socialist feminist concerns come into question because Wertenbaker raises the question of intra-sexual oppression and lack of sisterhood among women. Wertenbaker emphasizes socialist feminist concerns, as Case emphasizes, patriarchy is not the only reason of women's socialist feminist concerns oppression since they are double oppressed by intra-sexual oppression (Case, 1988, p. 83).

Mary enslaves and exploits both Sophie and Mrs. Temptwell, which can be taken as an intra-sexual oppression. Mrs. Temptwell tries to make Sophie understand how Mary oppresses both. First, she summarizes Sophie's enslavement by stating: "She had you raped, she made you a whore, she caused the misery that killed your child and now you'll slave to bring up her reject?" (Wertenbaker, 1996, p. 136). Then, Mrs. Temptwell depicts her own oppression by Mary: "But us? I'm her servant. Nothing my own, no small piece of ground, no hour, no sleep she can't break with a bell. Do you understand, girl?" (Wertenbaker, 1996, p. 136). Mrs. Temptwell tries to awaken Sophie by depicting the exploitation of the upper-class woman. She expresses how she hates the upper-class by stating "I curse the whole family" (Wertenbaker, 1996, p. 137) and she is ready to take revenge from that class by making Mary a lower-class: "She'll be as low as us when I'm finished" (Wertenbaker, 1996, p. 137). Even if Mrs. Temptwell hates the treatment and the oppression of the upper-class, she exploits and oppresses Sophie who is also coming from the same class. Ironically, Mrs. Temptwell orders Sophie to satisfy the men in the gambling den in Act Two Scene Four,

when she states: “Sophie does what she’s told” (Wertebaker, 1996, p. 105). Intra- sexual oppression plays an important role in the play. Sophie is the most oppressed woman in the play. Sophie’s passivity and her silence make her an objectified body in male consumption and a servant for other women. Wertebaker raises the socialist feminist criticism since there is no sisterhood among women, although they suffer from the same oppression. Patriarchy is the primary cause of their oppression and without any collaboration among women there can be no improvement in women’s case. Gömceli (2010) takes the play as an outcome of socialist and feminist concerns of Thatcherite years reflected to contemporary times:

*Wertebaker also draws parallels to contemporary times and discusses the social ills of the Thatcher years. [...] she highlights the exploitation of the working class as a result of the rise of the capitalist ideology and individualism, the increasing gap between those who have and those who have-not, and the destructive effect of the ambition for power that characterised Thatcher’s Britain. (Gömceli, 2010, p. 154)*

Consequently, Wertebaker expresses Thatcher-like women who are in quest of power will bring no collectively improvement in women’s case since success of a woman does not serve for the rest of the classes. The open-ending plot reveals the frustration of Mary and her attempts to seek shelter in her own class with a glimmer of hope for the welfare of women.

## CONCLUSION

Both Churchill and Wertebaker turn their subject matter to women and history to depict the plight of modern women since universal experience of women does not change. Women's struggle to exist in the patriarchal society is always on the agenda when we pay attention to the history of women. The open ending in the three discussed plays dramatizes women's position and their plight, which should be reconsidered. It is left to the audience to think about the condition of women coming from the past has not changed in modern times. Adopting an excessive power and reversing gender roles are presented as problematic weakening women in the upper-class. A few "powerful" and successful women will not be enough to end the collective oppression of women unless a total change will be realized in patriarchal ideology. Destructive and ambitious women figures, that cause an intra-sexual oppression of women, are displayed by criticizing Thatcher's policy in the three plays under discussion. The upper-class women in power have many privileges at the same time they exploit working-class women, which is highly criticized in Caryl Churchill's plays *Top Girls* and *Owners* and Wertebaker's play *The Grace of Mary Traverse*. Since Thatcher's policy promotes only upper-class women like Marlene, Marion, and Mary, it brings no improvement in conditions of women as collectives. This is the secret message in Churchill's both plays and Wertebaker's play explaining that one women's success is nothing since it does not serve to the rest of women. Then, a collective attitude should be adopted for the welfare of all classes of women.

The playwrights under discussion highlight the inevitability of collective action for the welfare of all classes of women. They point out the lack of sisterhood and collaboration among women through a socialist feminist outlook to criticize the plays. The emergence of successful career women tends to deny associations with feminism, which not only leaves them alone on the top but also leaves little room for sisterhood and solidarity among women. The playwrights point out the need for a social/political revolution through Socialist feminist criticism. The plays successfully raise consciousness concerning the idea that women should act in collaboration, otherwise the future will be vague and continue to be unresolved on the side of women.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Betsko, K., & Koenig, R. (1987). *Interviews with contemporary women playwrights*. New York, NY: Beech Tree Books.
- Bimberg, C. (1997/98). Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* and Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* as contributions to a definition of culture. *Connotations*, 7(3), 399-416.
- Brewer, M. (1999). *Race, sex, and gender in contemporary women's theater: the construction of woman*. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press.
- Case, S.E. (1988). *Feminism and theatre*. New York: Routledge.
- Churchill, C. (1985). *Plays:1*. London: Bloomsbury Methuen.
- Churchill, C. (1996). *Plays: 2 Softcops, Top Girls, Fen, Serious Money*. London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama.
- Dahl, M. K. (1993). Constructing the subject: Timberlake Wertenbaker's *The Grace of Mary Traverse*. *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*. Spring, 149-159.
- Foster, V. (1998/99). The uses of history in contemporary feminist drama: a response to Christiane Bimberg. *Connotations*. 8(2), 249-57.
- Gömceli, N. (2010). *Timberlake Wertenbaker and contemporary British feminist drama*. Palo Alto, CA: Academia Press.
- Gould, J., & Anderson, D. (1987). Thatcherism and British society. In K. Minogue & M. Biddiss (Eds.), *Thatcherism: Personality and politics*. (pp. 38-54). New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Keyssar, H. (1984). *Feminist theatre: An introduction to plays of contemporary British and American women*. London: Macmillan.
- Merrill, L. (1988). Monsters and heroines: Caryl Churchill's women. In P. R. Randall (Ed.), *Caryl Churchill: A casebook*. (pp. 71-89). New York: Garland Publishing.
- Nailsmith, B. (2005). *Carly Churchill: Top Girls*. London: Methuen Drama.
- Peacock, D. K. (1999). *Thatcher's theatre: British theatre and drama in the eighties*. London: Greenwood Press.
- Reinelt, J. (1996). Caryl Churchill and the politics of style. In W. Demastes. (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to modern British women playwrights*. (406-415). London: Greenwood.
- Solomon, A. (1981). Witches, ranters and the middle class: The plays of Caryl Churchill. *Theatre*. 12(2), 49-55.
- Stephenson, H. & Langridge, N. (1997). Timberlake Wertenbaker. In *Rage and reason: Women playwrights on playwrighting*. (136-145). London: Methuen.
- Tycer, A. (2008). *Caryl Churchill's Top Girls*. New York: Continuum.
- Ülker Erkan, A. B. (2010). *Caryl Churchill'in oyunlarında feminist yansımalar*. İzmir: Meta Basımevi.
- Wertenbaker, T. (1996). *Timberlake Wertenbaker: Plays 1*. London: Faber & Faber.