

**“Have-it-all” in Wendy Wasserstein’s  
Plays: *The Heidi Chronicles* and *An  
American Daughter***

مفهوم «الحصول على كل شيء» في مسرحيات ويندي ووترستاين: خلا

هيدي كرونكلز و*أمريكان داوتير*.

إعداد

منار طه إبراهيم أحمد

مدرسة لغة سابعة بكلية الآداب بجامعة سوهاج

محاضر الآداب الإنجليزية بكلية العلوم والآداب بجامعة الجوف

## Abstract

This study examines the concept of "Have-it all" in Wendy Wasserstein's plays *The Heidi Chronicles* and *An American Daughter*. The plays came when Second-wave feminists were on the defensive depicting that women could not multitask to fill gaps existing in their marriage, career, and motherhood. The protagonists of the selected plays gave voice to the gender diaspora that was culminated by oppressive patriarchal structures. The two heroines represent the Liberal and Radical feminists who portray the Woman diaspora and work to challenge a healthy work-life balance while maintaining their own families. Most women want to "have it all" despite the strictness of sociopolitical and gender biases. "Have-it-all" is examined in the selected plays as the core of the feminist diaspora. Wasserstein's plays celebrate woman's survival amidst modernized social, political, and gender biases. The study explores the heroines' journey of feminist survival to challenge such biases to "Have-it-all" and also celebrate the strength of their feminist empowerment.

**Keywords:** Wendy Wasserstein, Have-it-all, *The Heidi Chronicles*, *An American Daughter*, Feminism.

## المستخلص

تبحث الدراسة مفهوم " الحصول على كل شيء" في مسرحيات ويندى واسرستين : *نا/ هيدى كرونكلز و امريكان دوتر*. جاءت المسرحيات لتعبر عن فترة مواجهة نسويات الجيل الثانى للاتهامات بعدم قدرة المرأة على القيام بمهام متعددة لسد جميع الفجوات التى قد تحدث بالزواج و الحياة المهنية و الامومة. فقد عبر بطلات المسرحيات المختارة عن صوت الازمة ما بين الجنسين و التى تصاعدت بفضل الانظمة الذكورية المجحفة المترسخة بالمجتمع. من خلال اطار الازمة النسوية، يجسد البطلتان دور النسويات الليبرال و الراديكال لخلق توازن بين بيئة العمل صحية و الاستقرار العائلى. تسعى العديد من النساء لتحدى صرامة التحيزات الاجتماعية السياسية و الجنسية. يجسد مفهوم "الحصول على كل شيء" الصمام الرئيسى للأزمة النسوية. تتوج مسرحيات ويندى واسرستين قصة كفاح المرأة ضد عوائق العصر الحديث الاجتماعية و السياسية و الجنسية. و لذلك تهدف الدراسة الى استكشاف رحلة الكفاح النسوي للبطلات فى مواجهة التحيزات الاجتماعية و السياسية و الجنسية سعيا "للحصول على كل شيء" وتمجيذا لأهمية التمكين النسوي.

**الكلمات الرئيسية:** ويندى واسرستين، "الحصول على كل شيء"، *نا/ هيدى كرونكلز، امريكان دوتر، النسوية.*

*The Heidi Chronicles* and *An American Daughter* by Wasserstein profoundly depict the woman diaspora in a modern society striving to "Have- -it -all". The play offers a multifaceted representation of women and their feminist structure which has cemented their position in the history of American theatre and demonstrated their continued relevance. Heidi and Lyssa, the two protagonists are white, middle-class feminists, and entirely accomplished in their respective fields. Wasserstein's plays portray how social, political, and gender biases entrap such successful women to "Have-it-all".

The fight for women's rights during the Second Wave movement reached its peak with the rise of consciousness-raising groups, which took place inside radical/liberal activist groups. *The Heidi Chronicles* implies the development of the heroine from 1965 to 1989, showing typical events of the feminist movement during that period. It is divided into two acts; each preceded by a prologue that takes place in New York in 1989 while Heidi is lecturing at the hall of Columbia University. In these two prologues, Heidi delivers two monologues as a critique of the position of women artists and the historical disregard. In the prologue to Act One, Heidi lectures:

HEIDI: Sofonisba Anguissola painted this portrait of her sister, Minerva, in 1559. Not only was Sofonisba a painter with an international reputation, but so were her six sisters. ...Although Sofosniba was praised in the seventeenth century as being a portraitist equal to Titian, and at least thirty of her paintings remain known to us, there is no trace of her or any other woman artist before the twentieth century in your current Art History Survey textbook. Of course, in my day, this same standard text mentioned no women, "from the Dawn of History to the Present." Are you with me? Okay. Clara Peeters ...whose undated self-portrait we see here, as I believe the greatest woman artist of the seventeenth century. And now I'd like you to name ten others. (*The Heidi Chronicles* 3)

Heidi asserts that the absence of the history of women is a declaration that their efforts either were not worthy of record or were not expected to perform in the same way as men.

Heidi's remarks clearly echo her radical feminist approach. She strongly believes that men and women are equal. She also appreciates the strength of women whose biological condition affects them more than men. In scene Two, Heidi is located two years later in a dance hall where she meets Scoop Rosenbaum. He tries to provoke her mentality and sexuality as well:

SCOOP. You mean if after all the politics you girls decide to go "hog wild," demanding equal pay, equal rights, equal orgasms?

HEIDI. All people deserve to fulfill their potential.

SCOOP. Absolutely.

HEIDI. I mean, why should some well-educated woman waste her life making you and your children tuna fish sandwiches?

SCOOP. She shouldn't. And for that matter, neither should a badly educated woman. Heidella, I'm on your side

HEIDI: Don't call me "Heidella." It's diminutive.

...

SCOOP: No. I'm subtly asking you to go to bed with me... before I go meet Paul Newman.

HEIDI: I can take care of myself, thanks.

SCOOP: You've already got the lingo down, kiddo. Pretty soon you'll be burning bras. (19-20)

This dialogue examines many important aspects connected to the Women's Movement. Scoop makes a clear reference to the political situation of the time in which women demanded changes during the demonstration events of their rights. However, the mentioning of "equal pay, equal rights" and "burning bras" shows another important aspect of the Second Feminist Wave which is the mocking tone used by many men in those times whenever they listened to women's demand for rights. Scoop's diminution of her name and the tone used by calling her "Heidella" instead of "Heidi" clearly reveals that he is not taking her seriously. Heidi becomes so irritated and replies ironically, "I was wondering what mothers teach their sons that they never bother to tell their daughters." (17) Heidi satirizes the patriarchy Scoop represents as a prototypical, determined, and strong-minded male. She condemns the culture of feminine upbringing which teach women to be available for patriarchal victimization.

As the title of the two plays implies, *The Heidi Chronicles* and *An American Daughter*, are symbolic of the two plots. *The Heidi Chronicles* tackles the chronological steps of Heidi's life with specific dates starting from 1965 to 1989, projecting second-wave feminism of the women's liberation movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Comparably, Wasserstein succeeded in selecting the title of *An American Daughter* for her plot. Lyssa, the protagonist, is descending from an Upper-class Presidential family. She is a fifth-generation granddaughter of the 18th president, the daughter of a Republican Senator, and nominated for the position of the Surgeon General of the United States.

Successful women are expected to perform many gender roles perfectly as daughters, wives, and mothers. Furthermore, since contemporary women in Wasserstein's plays are highly educated, they are expected to be successful, competent, and professional careerist women. The male-dominated society expects a woman to be a "superwoman" who can simultaneously accomplish several socio-sexual duties at high levels of excellence. Lyssa in *An American Daughter*, is a woman who is also expected to be morally and heavily burdened and dutiful to

her numerous social responsibilities. Consequently, petty mistakes are not tolerated by the harsh society and the mass media. Morrow comments sarcastically on Lyssa's forgetting accident once to answer a jury call, "...Dr. Lyssa Dent Hughes, surgeon general nominee, a woman of impeccable commitment, at the forefront of women's health issues, pro-choice, pro-gay has never served on a jury."(*An American Daughter* 37)

Lyssa is grateful to her traditional gender roles as a daughter, mother, and wife as well as her professional career. Alan Hughes, Lyssa's father, explains what kind of person Lyssa has been as a daughter since she was a young girl: Lyssa picks up her kids from soccer training and makes her own scones for her children. Quince Quincy observes in her compliment, "I love that Dr. Lyssa Hughes does her own cleaning on the day of her nomination. I love that!" (*An American Daughter* 8), Lyssa is really a perfect example of a woman who seems to have-it-all.

Lyssa, in *An American Daughter*, comments on the television show how a successful career woman is always entrapped by her gender. She doesn't want to demolish the distinction between her personal life and her political career. She allows all minorities of society to share their ideas in her diaspora, but there is a patriarchal victimization for the faults in her private life or behavior to support the idea that women couldn't have-it - all:

LYSSA: ...And anyway it would be all right if she were a man and cold. That man would be tough. No one would give a damn what he felt about his mother! But a woman! A woman from a good school and a food family. That kind of woman should be perfect! And if she manages to be perfect, then there is something distorted and condescending about her. That kind of hard-working woman deserves to be hung out to dry...(An American Daughter 66)

She was first called an American daughter being admired for seeming to have-it-all, "This is gold, Timber, Pure gold. Call your

segment on Lyssa, “An American Daughter.” It’s another Emmy in the bag for you.” (31) as Morrow says. Morrow McCarthy, though a gay friend of Lyssa and Walter, plays the role of the patriarchal society. He accuses Lyssa of not fulfilling her jury duty, “Your daughter and my best friend, Dr. Lyssa Dent Hughes, Surgeon General nominee, a woman of impeccable commitment, at the forefront of women’s health issues, pro-choice, pro-gay, has never served on a jury.” (*An American Daughter* 37) Responding to this accusation, a reporter, Timber Tucker, calls Lyssa “An American Snob” (*An American Daughter* 41) and “seizes on this information to embarrass the President’s second nominee” (*An American Daughter* 48)

Out of the same patriarchal perspective, Reporter Timber provokes this petty information in the second interview with Lyssa. He is a symbol of the inciting role of the patriarchal media. He defines Lyssa’s small mistake as “a crime”, “your daughter committed a crime”, even though Alan says that it is just an “oversight” (*An American Daughter* 86) Many television vans gather over Lyssa’s house, and mass media reporters distort what she says about her mother during the chat after brunch with her friends. Because of the mass media’s chaos, Lyssa suddenly becomes the target of hostile public opinion:

WALTER: USA Today says the housewives of Indiana are picketing the radio stations. The ‘icebox cakes and cheese pimento canapé’ moms are apparently furious with you for ‘minimizing their lives.’ The boys even found a fuckin’ ‘Ladies Chat Room’ about you on the NET.

LYSSA: Jesus, another van.

WALTER: Of course, In a fucking week you’ve gone from being a compromise candidate to the fucking soccer mom’s ant-Christ. (*An American Daughter* 45)

Lyssa recognizes that Timber and Morrow’s mass media-based attack is based on patriarchal basics. They practice gender and

sociopolitical victimization on a competent professional careerist woman like her. The plays portray these practices as invisible forms of social and patriarchal oppression. According to the misconceptive feminine/patriarchal point of view, women are expected to be slim, beautiful, and attractive, taking great care of their dietary and exercise regimens. When they marry, they also should create extraordinary home environments and raise good children. At the same time, women are expected to pursue their professional careers effortlessly and gracefully in order to achieve a successful working career and deal with life problems with zeal. So, Lyssa's husband investigates her feminist diaspora:

WALTER: No, you don't. this has nothing to do with the god-damned slip of paper. It doesn't even have anything to do with your politics. It's the women of America who are furious with you, Lizard....you're pretty, you have two great kids, you're successful, you're admired, you're thin, and you have a great soul...(*An American Daughter* 47)

Lyssa rejects the wrath of housewives who thinks that her words diminish their roles and her mother's. She feels that her self-image is threatened due to her gender duties as a mother and a wife. The dialogue mentioned- above evokes the slogans of radical feminism of 1960 to 1970s in the United States: "Sisterhood is powerful," "consciousness raising," "The personal is political," and "the politics of housework," (Krolokke 9), Lyssa's radical concepts collide powerfully with the patriarchal prejudice of Morrow and Timber and the gender hostility of the American housewives.

In Act Two, when reporter Billy tries to support Lyssa in her diaspora, he also manipulates it through the patriarchal perspective. He prefers to perform an interview with her in the kitchen rather than the living room where Timber did his interview, "we should do it in the kitchen, it's a little more homey." (*An American Daughter* 49) Lyssa here is victimized by gender biases which judge her political professional career

according to her marital and maternal position. He also asks Lyssa to look more feminine by wearing a band to draw the sympathy of the angry women of America, "I'd suggest you wear a feminine attire tomorrow. Maybe a bow or headband in your hair. Talk about your mother. How much you miss her..." (*An American Daughter* 51)

Quincy criticizes the non-feminist approach Lyssa will adopt if she wears the band, "She's boring. She should wear Armani. She has no sex appeal..." (*An American Daughter* 53) Lyssa is driven by the resentment of the feminist diaspora she is entrapped in which threatens her positive image as a careerist politician. She is confronted again with the prejudice of her sociopolitical feminist diaspora. She is angered by the position of wearing a feminine band in the kitchen to make an interview that could survive her career.

Quincy rejects powerfully the feminist diaspora Lyssa is entrapped in. She agrees with Lyssa that her problem is gender one not political, "Listen. I can think a lot of reasons why you wouldn't like me. But it's not good for anyone of us to watch an established icon being hung out to dry." (*An American Daughter* 59) Radical Lyssa and third-wave feminist Quincy Quince propose different perspectives of feminism, but both agree with the accredited general Feminist and Feminist consciousness Raising Groups' slogan "Sisterhood is powerful" which is relevant in using the pronoun "us" in the mentioned quotation. The fall of Lyssa's figure is such a gender diaspora that could shake the foundations of CRR which unites, in turn, the different perspectives of all Feminist waves.

Ironically, Lyssa is victimized by other women of America who felt abused by the slip reference to her mother for being proud of doing just ice cake boxes, "...Many American women feel that your private life disqualifies you from such an important humanitarian position." (*An American Daughter* 65) as Timber tells Lyssa. Actually, Lyssa doesn't intend to diminish her mother's role, specifically, or woman's role generally, but rather

to imply that her mother couldn't be able to pursue a career and "have-it-all". When she is attacked fiercely and jealously by those unemployed mothers, Radical Lyssa prefers to defend herself courageously instead of trying to draw on their sympathy:

The women of America should concern themselves with the possibility of their reproductive rights being taken away from them. The women of America should concern themselves with the fact that breast cancer, ovarian cancer, and uterine cancer research are grossly underfunded compared to prostate cancer...(*An American Daughter* 65)

Most women want to "have it all" despite the strictness of such racial, gender, and religious biases. "Have-it-all" is examined in the selected plays as the core of the feminist diaspora. The texts dramatize the prospect of having it all through the successful balance of career and family known as the "feminist mystique." The woman is daily victimized by the gender culture which advocates that fulfillment for women is found at home, as a wife and mother. Friedan argues that women should develop themselves and their intellectual abilities and fulfill their potential rather than making a "choice" to be just a housewife. She wrote, "The only way for a woman, as for a man, to find herself, to know herself as a person, is by creative work of her own" (98).

The Feminist protagonists in the two plays survive to have-it -all, and indeed they are expected, but at the same time, they are wickedly not allowed to. Owing to these inflated desires and unrealistic social expectations, they struggle much more. The patriarchal society expects women to be more dutiful to their traditional gender roles as good daughters, good wives, and good mothers, than to their professional career aspirations. Gender, cultural, and sociopolitical biases still hinder women to "have-it-all".

Despite the different feminist paedology of the protagonists, the two plays settle the feminist conscious concept that women's lives are more important than "making you and your children

tuna-fish sandwiches” (*The Heidi Chronicles* 19) and women like all people, “deserve to fulfill their potential” (*The Heidi Chronicles* 20) in their lives, as Heidi points out. Accordingly, women cannot be satisfied with a life that is merely free of physical abuse or male-imposed violence. In addition, women’s lives need to be free from invisible socio-sexual oppressions in life.

Heidi’s final journey to her full feminist identity is assisted by the development of her transcultural experiences with the sisterhood members and the male friend’s circle. Heidi befriends Susan, the “radical shepherdess/counselor” (38), who doesn’t mind working under the control of male power in one institution, “...I was seriously considering beginning a law journal devoted solely to women’s legal issues. But after some pretty heavy deliberation, I decided to work within the male establishment power base to change the system.” (*The Heidi Chronicles* 23), Fran, the Lesbian gifted physician, and Becky, the submissive wife, “I mean I try to be nicer to him. I make all his meals and I never disagree with him...” (*The Heidi Chronicles* 27) At the end, They all gather at singing together “Sock it to me” in a wonderful scene after they have exposed and accepted their diversity in an amiable scene reflecting their transcultural feminism. Wasserstein wrote:

ALL (singing) Friends, friends, friends

We will always be,

(They all begin to sway)

SUSAN: I love you, Jill

JILL (singing): Whether in hail or in dark stormy weather,

ALL (singing): Whether in hail or in dark stormy weather,

JILL (Singing): Camp Tuckahoe will keep us together!

ALL (singing): Camp Tuckahoe will ...!

...

ALL (Singing along and dancing with each other):

R-E-S-P-E-C-T,

Find out what it means to me.

Sock it to me,

Sock it to me...( *The Heidi Chronicles* 32-33)

Heidi also doesn't mind befriending Scoop, her frequent sexual lover and the arrogant seeming-Jew lawyer, as well as, "the liberal homosexual pediatrician" (38) Peter. She encourages Peter to join the feminist march against masculine art exposition advocating liberal feminism:

(PETER picks up a picket sign and begins to march with them.)

PETER: Women in Art.

DEBBIE: I find your ironic tone both paternal and caustic. I'm sorry. I can't permit you to join us. This is a women's march.

HEIDI: I thought our point was that this is *our* cultural institution. "Our" meaning everybody's. Men and Women. Him included. (*The Heidi Chronicles* 39-40)

Heidi, driven by her individual talents, is ready now to defy the norms and sex roles. She keeps on her sexual affair with Scoop without marriage, enjoying a platonic love with Peter, having a baby without marriage, and engaging in a woman's CRR organization. She could satisfy all her maternal and feminist needs without blinking an eye at society's perspective. She dreams that her daughter will be a heroine of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and achieve all she couldn't have completed. Heidi lifts her baby up saying, "A heroine for the twenty-first." (*The Heidi Chronicles* 118)

In the end, Heidi challenges society's traditional expectation for a woman to marry and have a family. She fosters this feminine instinct without the gender obligations of marriage. She reflects on her liberal feminist perspective in pursuing professional and maternal careers amid cultural, social, and sexist biases striving to "have- it- all". After establishing her career, Heidi has a baby girl by artificial insemination. She denounces the patriarchy which scores her success in life according to her marital & maternal position. In her dialogue with Scoop at the end of the play, Wasserstein wrote:

SCOOP: Well, I have a notion, Oh, yes, and one other thing. Susan told me you adopted a baby last week.

HEIDI: she did.

SCOOP: Yes. And I thought, "Fuck her. If she has the courage to make a move and go on for her ten, then what I am waiting for?"

HEIDI: Wait a minute! Why is my baby my ten, and your work is your ten?

...

SCOOP: And are you happy?

HEIDI: I've never been what I'd call a happy girl. Too prissy. Too caustic.

SCOOP: But now. Right now. Are you happy?

HEIDI: ...And yes, that makes me happy. (*The Heidi Chronicles* 115-116)

Reaching positive identity development for Heidi would be difficult, if not impossible if there was no identification of the gender and social inequities that hinder women to have it all. Heidi advocates providing opportunities for women to form new ideas, and secure a commitment to action that could create a nonsexist environment. Questioning the feminist concept "of

Have-it-all” releases women’s distinct talents and provides both personal satisfaction and the gratification of effecting social change.

On the other hand, Lyssa also seems to be a woman who “has it all”; a successful, professional career, a nice family with a supportive husband and children, and a beautiful slim body to boast about. Park says, "Lyssa has attained what Wasserstein’s former heroines, Heidi, could only wish for in their lives." (99) In Lyssa’s case, it was the catalyst for survival, despite the socio-political and gender biases. Lyssa isn’t afraid to declare her view of the angry American women, withdraw from the nominee to keep her positive image, take care of her family, and maintain her strength against the gender/sexist society. Lyssa says, “our task is to rise and continue” (74).

Lyssa strives to have it all, despite the surrounding cultural, gender, and sociopolitical biases. She is one step further from achieving the concept of “have-it-all” but was not allowed. Lyssa’s downfall is portrayed for a thematic purpose. She is depicted as the tragic hero whose survival celebrates the feminist diaspora. It is tragic and oppressive for a professional careerist woman like her to be entrapped in the contemporary American landscape.

Heidi and Lyssa's feminist plight to “Have-it-all” offers significant feminist insight with respect to the challenges that women face in their quest for career advancement in male-dominated fields and how their private lives can be exploited against them. They illustrate the obstacles women confront on the path to "having it all," but they also celebrate the strength of their feminist empowerment. In doing so, Wasserstein's plays celebrate woman’s survival amidst modernized social, political, and gender biases.

## References

- Baehr, Amy R., "Liberal Feminism", edited by Edward N. Zalta. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2018, [www.plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/feminism-liberal/](http://www.plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/feminism-liberal/).
- Bartky, Sandra Lee. Toward a phenomenology of feminist consciousness. In M. Vetterling-Braggin, edited by F. A. Elliston, & J. English. *Feminism and Philosophy*. Totowa, NJ: Littlefield, Adams & Co, 1977.
- Brooks, Ann. "Reconceptualizing representation and identity: Issues of transculturalism and transnationalism in the intersection of feminism and cultural sociology". *Cultural Theory: Classical and Contemporary Positions*. SAGE Publications Ltd, 2012, doi:10.4135/9781446216682.n11.
- Downing, Nancy E., and Kristin L. Roush. "From Passive Acceptance to Active Commitment: A Model of Feminist Identity Development for Women." *The Counseling Psychologist*, vol. 13, no. 4, Oct. 1985, pp. 695–709, doi:10.1177/0011000085134013.
- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Norton, 1963.
- Ford, J., Atkinson, C., Harding, N., & Collinson, D. (2021). 'You Just Had to Get on with It': Exploring the Persistence of Gender Inequality through Women's Career Histories. *Work, Employment and Society*, 35(1), 78–96. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017020910354>.
- Krolokke, C., & Scott Sørensen, A. "Three waves of feminism: from suffragettes to grrls." *Gender communication theories & analyses: From silence to performance*. SAGE Publications, Inc., 2006, pp. 1-24, doi.org/10.4135/9781452233086. Accessed 28 May 2019.

Ortiz, Fernando. *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar*, translated by Harris de Oneis. New York: A.A Knopf, 1947.

Papastergiadis, N. "Hybridity and ambivalence: places and flows in contemporary art and culture, Theory". *Culture and Society*, vol. 22, no. 4, 2005. pp. 39-64. Paperback, 344.

Ramos, Sánchez. *The Heidi Chronicles as Illustration of the Second Feminist Wave in the United States*. 2015. University De La Lgune, Spain, PhD dissertation.

Sarachild, K . "Consciousness-raising: A radical weapon". *Redstockings of the Women' s Liberation Movement* (Eds.) *Feminist Revolution*. New York: Random House, 1968, pp.144-151.

Wasserstein, Wendy. *An American Daughter*. Mariner Book, 1998.---. *The Heidi Chronicles*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1988.

---