

Child Abuse and its Lifelong Impact in Caryl Churchill's - *A Number*

Alaa Radhi Makki Mirmas¹, Ikhlas Muhammed Nati Al. Abedi²

¹Republic of Iraq, Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, University of Wasit, College of Education for Human Sciences
Department of English Language and Literature

²Professor, Republic of Iraq, Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, University of Wasit, College of Education for Human Sciences, Department of English Language and Literature

Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to explore the theme of child abuse in A Number, one of the plays of the British contemporary dramatist Caryl Churchill. The problem of child abuse is regarded as one of the global current issues that has a negative impact not only on the children or their families, but rather on the society in general, that it may result in creating a damaged generation. Caryl Churchill exposes this problem in many of her plays and A Number (2002) is one of these plays.*

Keywords: Caryl Churchill, *A Number* child abuse, violence, neglect, damage

1. Child Abuse and its Lifelong Impact in *A Number*

Child abuse and neglect can be regarded as serious social problems that humans face in our current world, and its aftermath has an impact on child's development. Indeed child abuse either physical or emotional constitutes a threat for the child's personal security, it reflects the insecure environment that this child inhabited, and it also shows that parents (in such abusive environ) are unqualified to provide sufficient care to their children (Rios, 2006). Child abuse may have a great impact on the child that it may cause a psychological problems that can never be healed.

Caryl Churchill (1938 -) exhibits this serious issue in her works. Luckhurst (2015) stated that her worlds are the stuff of primitive, post - Freudian horror nightmares, where children have no sense of safety. That parents and step - parents continually fail to provide security and good nurturing to their offspring. They are presented as torturing, abandoning, abusing and (in some occasions) even threatening to murder them. And this is clearly shown in *A Number* where a psychopathic father uncovers his delusional clemency to his son when he chooses not to kill him. Churchill frequently depicts children in her plays as having no voice, as they are ghosts who are inhabiting a bizarre no man's land (Luckhurst, 2015).

Caryl Churchill was born in 1938. She was an emerging English playwright in the period of the late 1950s and 1960s (Luckhurst, 2016). She is a British dramatist who has continued to write plays for about seven decades. She is regarded as one of the most influential female writers in the second part of the twentieth century, and her works are considerably seminal (Bennett, 2015). Her play *A Number* was produced in 2002, and human cloning was the backdrop of this play (Luckhurst, 2015). Yet, Churchill herself does not have the sense that this play is associated with cloning, however, this subject makes her able to shed light on many subjects that she finds them important (Churchill, 2008). Nonetheless, the essential purpose of human cloning in *A*

Number is to exhibit the possible outcomes of cloning (Roberts, 2008). It also demonstrates the sequence of child abuse, as Gobert (2014) stated that in this play, a father (after his wife's suicide) had neglected and abandoned his biological son, then he made a copy of that son.

Hence, in *A Number*, Churchill demonstrates how a child may be situated as a victim to his parents by presenting the character of B1 (Bernard) who appears to be a victim to his father's neglect and abuse. (Luckhurst, 2015). *A Number* is about a father, Salter, and his three sons. They are B1, who is forty years; B2, who is thirty - five; and Michael (Roberts, 2008). This one act play contains five scenes, and in each scene there is a confrontation between the old father Salter, who is depicted as deceitful and a manipulative character, and one of his sons. The initial meeting is between Salter and B2 (Bernard) who tells his father that he discovers the truth of his origin that he is just a number of clones who are made by taking cells from B1 (Bernard), Salter's first child. Salter lies on B2, assuring him that B1 was killed in an accident. In the second scene, Salter meets B1 who is psychologically disturbed, and in this meeting B1 confronts his father with the serious neglect that he had experienced when he was a youngster (Higgins, 2008). B1 sees his father as "a dark dark power" (Churchill, 2002, 1.2. p.24). Actually, when he was two years old, his mother died (Higgins, 2008), and B1 started to face neglect and abuse from his father who, after his bad treatment to his child, sent him to foster care, and this happened when B1 was at the age of four (Roberts, 2008).

Luckhurst (2015) mentioned that B1 is "tortured by a persecution complex, consumed with rage at his usurper B2" (p.162) and does not have the ability to do anything other than objectifying people as well as animals, and his conception of other living entities can be depicted as fatal threat (Luckhurst, 2015, p.162), as he stated: "There's a lot of wicked people. So that's why. And you see them all around you" (Churchill, 2002, 1.2. p.30).

When he meets Salter he asks him about B2 and he knows that B2 has a stable life since he lives happily just like other humans whom he knows about their happiness just through reading, because he does not have any relationships with other people: “as happily as most people? . . . because most people are happy I read in the paper” (Churchill, 2002, 1.2. p.27). This shows the extent of damage that Salter had caused in B1’s life. He spent all his life in isolation, having no relationships with people, rather he chooses to make dogs his companions, and he treats those dogs violently in a manner that mirrors his father’s bad treatment (Luckhurst, 2015):

B1: I’ve not been lucky with dogs. I had this black and tan bitch wouldn’t do what it’s told, useless. Before that I had a lurcher . . .rottweiler pit bull I had to throw a chair, you could hit it with a belt it kept coming back. I’d keep it shut up in the other room and it barks so you have hit it, (Churchill, 2002, 1.2. p.29)

Moreover, Salter himself declares that he had treated B1 violently, and this disclosure comes in unwonted chilling monologue. He mentions that when B1 was a child, he did not respond to his continual crying rather he showed him his neglect. He also gave him food under his bed in a full rotteness. Salter also declares that he confined his son in the cupboard and this led B1 to stop eating and speaking, and in some occasions even hid himself (Luckhurst, 2015):

SALTER: . . .You’d nearly stopped speaking do you remember that? Not speaking not eating I tried to make you. I’d put you in the cupboard do you remember? or I’d look for you everywhere and I’d think you’d got away and I’d find you under the bed. You like it there I’d put your dinner under for you (Churchill, 2002, 1.4, p.52)

Additionally, Salter really congratulates himself because he did not kill B1, thinking that it is a good thing that he had done for his son. In outburst of uncontrollable sadism (Luckhurst, 2015), he mentions:

SALTER: . . ., I could have killed you and I didn’t. I may have done terrible things but I didn’t kill you. I could have killed you and had another son, made one the same like I did or start again have a different one get married again and I didn’t, I spared you (Churchill, 2002, 1.4. p.51)

On the other hand, B2 lives happily with Salter and he has experienced love with him, unlike B1 who is deprived from parental affection (Kritzer, 2008). So, as a result, he is unable to evaluate himself because he did not experience love with his father, and he experienced alienation even before his father has sent him away. Furthermore, B1 does not have self - estimation, and as a sequence he does not have the ability to love and evaluate not only himself but

other people as well. Despite the fact that Salter assures him that he really loves him, but B1 does not have any memory of affection with his father. So, as a sequence, there is no starting point that make him feel of love towards other people. (Kritzer, 2008). Hence, after living miserable childhood which is full of violence and neglect, B1 is now following B2 wherever he goes and giving him nightmarish (Higgins, 2008). On the other hand, B2 does not have the courage to face anyone of the clones, and he is also frightened of his sibling B1. So he has fled in fear of his life (Luckhurst, 2015). Moreover, when B1 realizes that his father has the ability to love and actually has offered love to that clone who has taken his position, his frustration brings destructiveness to him and his brother as well (Kritzer, 2008).

Hence, B1 meets his father again in scene four and he tells him that he kills B2. Then in scene five, Salter meets another clone, Michael, and in this meeting we know that B1 has committed suicide (Luckhurst, 2015, p.163). B1 murders his brother just to take his revenge and this conduct comes as a reaction against his father (Kritzer, 2008). Indeed, the damage that is occurred in this family is brought by Salter who destroys his sons, the original (whom he neglected) and the clone (whom he loved) as well (Luckhurst, 2015). Probably, Salter was a source of misery even to his wife, and he might have pushed her to commit suicide (Luckhurst, 2015). Consequently, child abuse has an impact not only on B1 but it extends to his brother B2. It is clear that B1 cannot overcome the problem of child abuse, despite the fact that he had experienced it many years ago, but he continues to live miserable life that after many years he seeks revenge, and he also chooses to put end to his despair by committing suicide.

2. Conclusion

The problem of child abuse is well embodied in this play. Churchill presents this serious problem and how its outcomes may be extended to many decades. It causes psychological problems that one may difficultly overcome this problem or it may lead to a big destruction. Those children who have suffered from child abuse and neglect may hurt themselves as well as others, as a sequence to the harm that they had faced. In *A Number*, Salter passes his violence to his son B1 who started to avoid people, thinking that they will hurt him just like his father. On the other hand, all his actions become a reflection to his father’s abuse. And when he discovers his father’s love to B2 and that he lives happily, he decide to put end to his suffering, but before that he starts to bring nightmares to his sibling then he kills him and himself to accomplish revenge against his abusive father.

References

- [1] Bennett, M. Y. (2015). *The Cambridge introduction to theatre and literature of the absurd*. Cambridge University Press.
- [2] Churchill, C. (2002). *A Number*. Theatre Communication Group.
- [3] Churchill, C. (2008). *Caryl Churchill: Plays: 4*. Nick Hern Books.

- [4] Gobert, D. (2014). *The theatre of Caryl Churchill*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- [5] Higgins, D. (2008). Theatre and science. In N. Holdsworth, & M. Luckhurst (Eds.), *A concise companion to contemporary British and Irish drama* (pp.225 - 244). Blackwell Publishing.
- [6] Kritzer, H. A. (2008). *Political theatre in post - Thatcher Britain: New Writing 1995 - 2005*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [7] Luckhurst, M. (2015). *Caryl Churchill: Routledge modern contemporary dramatists*. Routledge.
- [8] Luckhurst, M. (2016). The new genetics, genocide and Caryl Churchill. In S. Adiseshiah & L. Le Page (Eds.), *Twenty - First century drama* (pp.239 - 256). Palgrave Macmillan.
- [9] Rios, A. N. (2006). *Child abuse in contemporary children's literature: A critical multicultural analysis*. University of Massachusetts Amherst.
- [10] Roberts, P. (2008). *About Churchill: The playwright and work*. Feber & Feber.