

# Enacting Trauma in Caryl Churchill's *Blue Heart*

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the representation of trauma in Caryl Churchill's *Blue Heart* (1997), focusing on trauma as both dramatic structure and linguistic collapse. After World War II, the concept of trauma has taken an essential part in English drama. Postmodern playwrights utilize different forms of trauma (historical, psychological, structural, and collective) to represent the inexpressibility of trauma. They utilize theatrical techniques such as non-linear temporality, and fragmented narrative to achieve this goal. Drawing on Sigmund Freud's concept of repetition compulsion and the trauma theories of Cathy Caruth, and Dominik LaCapra, the study explores how Churchill transforms trauma from a thematic concern into theatrical form. Through the repetitive structure of *Heart's Desire* and the progressive breakdown of language in *Blue Kettle*, Churchill enacts psychological trauma rather than merely describing it. The analysis demonstrates that fragmentation, repetition, and linguistic disruption function as dramatic strategies that embody the traumatic experience and challenge conventional narrative coherence.

**Keywords:** Caryl Churchill; Trauma Theory; Repetition Compulsion; language collapse; Postmodern Drama; *Blue Heart*

## 1. Introduction

This study employs a qualitative method to investigate the play, using trauma theory as a main approach to analyze it. Postmodern drama is characterized by the absence of coherent narrative, it challenges the old norms of traditional drama (linearity and representational strategies). Otherwise postmodern dramatic texts present fragmented narrative which provides an appropriate way for depicting traumatic experience. Originally, trauma has its roots in psychology and it has been expanded to incorporate both literary and cultural studies by theorists such as Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra. According to Caruth (1996), trauma is "the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena" (p.91). On the other hand, individuals who have faced events that lead to trauma are usually "haunted or possessed by the past and performatively caught up in the compulsive recognition of traumatic scenes, scenes in which the past returns and the future is blocked or fatalistically caught up in a melonic feedback loop" (LaCapra, 2001, p.21).

Trauma is a term used in psychoanalysis to describe a situation that has happened to a person. "It is an event in the subject's life defined by its intensity, by the subject's incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organization" (Wald, 2007, p.93). However, trauma drama explores a concept that has become so pervasive in various contemporary Western discourses, including psychoanalytical, psychiatric, journalistic, artistic, legal and cultural hypothetical discourses. Though, the scholars depict the contemporary North American society as having 'wound culture' and British culture is also described by them as a 'traumatic culture' (Wald,2007).

Indeed, by the end of the nineteenth century, the term of 'trauma' was firstly utilized to reflect an overall form of wound and it had come to be connected with a mental wounding, when it was appointed to describe the sudden collapse of the nerve system which was caused by surgical

shock. In contemporary culture, the emergence of trauma in artistic and popular discourses has coincided with its emergence as a medical notion. Consequently, trauma, particularly childhood trauma, has a fundamental role in the work of a number of recognizable contemporary artists either British or American. A traumatized individual may reveal his condition of trauma in many forms, such as belatedness, flashbacks, or repetition compulsion (Wald,2007). Key features in traumatic texts incorporate repetition compulsion, fragmentation of memory, inexpressibility in language, and temporal dislocation. All these features are associated closely with postmodern dramatic aesthetics.

Churchill (1938- ) is regarded as the most successful and well-known socialist-feminist playwright of the second wave feminism. Her plays are performed in many countries in the world from Britain to America to Korea and Japan. Churchill produced *Blue Heart* in the closing years of the twentieth century. It consists of two plays, *Heart's Desire* and *Blue Kettle* (Godiwala,2003). In this play, trauma is enacted in its two parts. In the first part, narrative coherence collapses and the same scenario is repeated from the beginning to the end. In the second part, the language breaks down where characters start to replace words then they just use letters to communicate. Instead of presenting trauma as a past situation, Churchill chooses to show its ongoing and developing experience that destabilize narrative and communication within the dramatic world.

## 2. Traumatic repetition compulsion

Repetition compulsion reflects trauma in a way which makes the individual repeat parts of trauma in two different but intersecting strategies which are known as 'acting out and working through'. Freud thinks that the acting out of trauma gives the traumatized individual the ability to develop belatedly the influence that was not stimulated by the trauma that he had experienced, and this is just because that the trauma is excessively overwhelming in a manner that it does not permit emotional and intellectual processing at the point of its occurrence. Hence, repeated compulsion inherent in traumatization. This means that the individual does not

experience the trauma as a repetition, but rather he/she experiences it for the first time. Paradoxically, the event really happened to the individual and he/she unconsciously repeats it (Wald,2007).

Freud's repetition compulsion sets that a person may unconsciously be in a state of terrible agony that he iterates a constant pattern of destructive demeanor to re-locate the stifled material and experience it in the present. The impulse to reiterate originates from a need to accomplish dominance over horrible circumstance from an earlier time to change an occasion that one suffered from and survived, yet the state that repetition compulsion is bound to a cycle of endless failures. Furthermore, many psychoanalytic scholars demonstrate that reiteration impulse and reenactment are basic events in the lives of people who had experienced maltreatment or abuse as youngster. The coercion is recreated not as memory but rather as an act, and those people reiterate it without being conscious about it. Churchill acquires this idea of psychoanalytic and conveys it in both content and structure (Luckhurst,2015).

### 3. Traumatic Repetition Compulsion in *Heart's Desire*

In *Heart's Desire*, a family which consists of four members, Brian and his wife Alice, aunt Maisie, and son Lewis are presenting in the situation of waiting the homecoming of Susy, their daughter, from Australia. The play's scenario starts with Brian, Alice, and Maisie as they preparing for Susy's arrival. This homecoming is delayed by both real and surreal events, and also by the sudden appearance of strange figures: a dead body, gunmen, a group of children, an ostrich, an official, and a young Australian woman. The play ends with the same scene of waiting the arrival of Susy who does not come.

This family is presented as engaged in a time loop and not in some sorts of impossible chronology. It is set in the kitchen where the family members are waiting for their daughter to get back home. This daughter ultimately never comes. However, she appears for short times, but does not really come home. The one who most desire this coming is the father, as he frequently claims: "She's taking her time" (Churchill,2017,1.11). This is the opening line of the play, and this means that in taking her time, she never returns (Aston,2003). Those characters appear as making lunch, speaking, and rebuking their intoxicated son who interrupts their conversations. They eagerly anticipate the arrival of Susy. The excitement of her return reveals both familiar habits as well as profound aspiration and worries. The ordinary surroundings and genuine circumstances become bizarre as the action pauses, then resumes at previous points, lurching forward (Kritzer, 2008).

The play does not have linear progression and it just consists of fragmented situations which can be regarded as rejected fragments since the play resets after each fragment. In each reset there are some information to expand the audience's knowledge about the characters. The audience can learn that Maisie likes Australian animals, she is afraid of death, she has physical fragility, she also has some skeletons in her closet. Furthermore, Lewis alludes that she may have a

drinking problem. And when the officer comes, she seems to be worried and shows her fear of being captured as though she has done horrible crimes in the past (Grochla, 2017). Through these fragments we can also know that Alice was once unfaithful to Brian and she herself uncovers that she had a love affair fifteen years ago. Each fragment appears just in one reset and it is never repeated again in spite of the numerous repetition.

*Heart's Desire* is set in the kitchen which seems to be real but dream like makes its atmosphere. After few resets, the play moves from real to surreal style and the action of waiting start to be delayed by surreal situations. Alice quarrels with her husband and gets out of the house, gunmen appear on the stage and shoot all the characters, a crowd of children runs across the kitchen and disappears, an ostrich walks on the stage, an officer comes and requests their papers, and Susy's female lover comes from Australia. Moreover, in one of the resets, Brian fantastically portrays how to eat himself by listing the parts of his body, he is reduced to a mouth eating his mouth. Brian's portrayal of eating himself and his admission for the wish to self-cannibalise symbolize the autophagic structure of the play. The play's scenario and structure gobble themselves up over and again (Luckhurst, 2015). Thus, Churchill presents unstable household that is frequently attacked by unrelated figures which may resemble the sudden invasion of traumatic flashbacks that haunt the individual's mind and disturb his life, and this reflects her capability to enact trauma rather than narrating it. The audience can feel of the instability as much as the characters themselves.

The play's circular structure is marked by the numerous repetition of the same scenario of waiting for Susy's homecoming which is frequently delayed. Many versions for one scene are repeated with no end and the audience could not know which scene is really happened. Although Susy arrives in three versions, but her arrival does not make any meaning and it does not mark the resolution or the end of the play (Cousin, 2007). This means that her coming is not real since the play restarts again and the loop continues. The play ends exactly as it begins with Brian's line: "She is taking her time" (Churchill, 2017, 1. p.40).

*Heart's Desire* fails to reach its end. It contains only one scene which is repeatedly sent to its starting point, and it is repeated for twenty-six times. (Grochala,2017). In the first reset there is a changing in Brian's clothes. Firstly, he appears as wearing a red sweater, which is substituted by a tweed jacket then the father appears as wearing an old cardigan (Roberts,2008). Hence, the internal coercion of the structure reflects the family's repetition compulsion. This suggests a question: why the individuals in this family are portrayed in a state of arrested hysteria over their daughter's homecoming? It seems that the father Brian is the most implicated one. The play starts with his most repeated line and he is the most worried about her coming and why her arrival might be delayed. More frequently, throughout the play, Brian and Alice are shown in a state of conflict about who loves Susy more. On the other hand, Lewis desperately tries to articulate the trauma but unfortunately, he is frequently exiled by his parents, so he takes refuge in alcohol to get relief (Luckhurst,2015). In addition to the

numerous repetitions, language breakdown is also another feature of the text. The characters in *Heart Desire*, either speak rapidly or they just utter parts of the lines. In one of the scenes exactly after the first appearance of Lewis, drunk, the play resets again as the stage direction reveals that the characters “do the repeat at double speed, all movements accurate though fast.” (Churchill, 2017,1. p.17). In other reset, the characters just mention the first phrase of their speech:

“BRIAN: She’s taking  
ALICE: Not  
BRIAN: We should  
ALICE: We should not  
BRIAN: She’ll be” (Churchill, 2017, 1. pp.22-23)

Whether in other reset, they just mention the last phrase of their speech as it is shown in the following lines:

“time.  
ALICE: really.  
BRIAN: the plane.  
ALICE: not.  
BRIAN: exhausted.  
ALICE: thirty five.” (Churchill,2017, 1.p.29)

The choice of repetition compulsion in itself infers child abuse or maltreatment and the way that Susy shows up, in two separate occasions toward the end when the dad claims that (Luckhurst,2015) “You are my heart’s desire” (Churchill, 2017, 1.36), and “You are my heart-” (Churchill,2017,1.40), emphatically reflects the terrible secret of this family (Luckhurst, 2015). Actually, a threat of abuse is presented in Lewis’s speech which also reveals his hostility towards his father (Gobert, 2014, p.186): “Where’s my sister? I want to give her a kiss...Dad knows where she is, don’t you Dad? Daddy always knows where Susy is.” (Churchill,2017,1.16-17). Through their conversation we can infer that Susy has fled to Australia just to be in away from her dad. Monforte (2000) mentions that Brian treats his daughter in a way that leads her to depart to Australia, the remotest area of the world, and this what has made him resentful and angry. Actually, Alice really knows about her husband’s threads to his daughter, and through this Churchill shows the probable presence of corruption even within this small institution, the family. From Lewis’s utterances we can know that Alice always attempted to protect her daughter from Brian’s motivation. Additionally, his appearance as drunk in each time reflects the unhealthy climate of this house and its impact in determining the lives of its occupants.

Similarly, in an occasion, Alice informs Brian to be nice to his daughter. On the other hand Brian shows his desire to go to Australia where Alice replays: “Though mind you she wouldn’t stay in Australia in that case would she? She’d have to move on to New Zealand. Or Hawaii, I think she’d move to Tonga probably.” (Churchill,2017,1.27). Thus, all these situations reveal that this family has experienced traumatic events and this is revealed by the repeated structure of the play. Moreover, this structure reflects the family’s reiteration compulsion and shows that Susy’s return cannot be confronted and this is due to a pre-existing trauma (Luckhurst,2015). Actually, Susy’s coming is not actual, rather it is surreal. For three times, she shows up in the play

and in each occasion she just appears for a while and the play restarts again where the family return to the situation of despair and torment which is caused by the endless waiting (Roberts,2008). It is obvious that she never really comes through the circular plot, and it is also clear through the characters’ reaction to this arrival (Monforte,2000). In her first appearance, the family members seem to be happy and the scene is as follows:

“Doorbells rings  
MAISIE goes off ALICE and BRIAN embrace cries of welcome off  
enter SUSY with MAISIE behind her.  
SUSY: Mummy. Daddy. How wonderful to be home.” (Churchill,2017,1.31)

As we can see, this homecoming seems to be an idealized one. Throughout the action of the play, the parents (Alice and Brian) contradict each other since they consistently bicker, so it is unreasonable that they embrace each other at her arrival. This arrival where Susy seems to be overjoyed to get back to her family. Similarly, in her second appearance, Alice welcomes her while Brian does not make any motion and this action is interrupted when the play restarts again showing that this coming is unreal. Finally, in her last appearance, the scene is also interrupted since the playwright interrupts the action and the play resets again. In addition, Brian’s line is also interrupted when he is about to reveal his emotion (Monforte, 2000, p.270). Hence, Churchill criticizes the family structure and reflects the fragility of familial relationships. The numerous repetition of the play can be categorized as a reflection of unspeakable trauma and this traumatic condition is shown in the situation of repetition compulsion where characters are trapped in the same action without moving on, and this resembles the notion of ‘acting out’. It also reveals their inability to confront their daughter and even their son, whom they always dismiss. This family has faced horrible events which drive them to repeat their actions just to regain control over this traumatic situation which is the cause of their suffering or to escape from the strain of this event.

#### 4. The Collapse of Language in *Blue Kettle*

Churchill focuses on the devaluation of language in both parts and she presents it at two levels. In *Heart’s Desire*, she addresses the general design of the play where the characters are constantly trapped in repeating the same scene. whereas in *Blue Kettle*, language collapses through autophagy and it is noticed in the structure of the sentences and words (Angel-Perez,2013). In *Blue Kettle*, the playwright presents another story and different characters, where the representation of trauma shifts from repetition compulsion to linguistic collapse.

In this play, Derek, a man in his forties, attempts to con four old women to believe that he is the long lost son that they had given for adoption many years ago. Those women, Mrs Plant, Mrs Oliver, Mrs Vane, and Miss Clarence, respond differently to his claims, but all of them accept his deception. Enid, his girlfriend, threatens to reveal his trick and she actually tells Mrs Vane about the trick. However, Derek can overcome this situation since no one wants to

believe the truth. By the end of the play, Derek discloses his trick and tells Mrs Plant about the real truth. He tells her that while he was in Indonesia, he met her real son who was searching about his mother. After his death, Derek took his documents and decided to search about the women and convince her of his trick. But he does not tell her the whole truth and he still lies on her by claiming that his real mother is dead. Both of them agree to make a false relationship.

Derek's world is as fragile as the world of the old women that he can easily enter their life. As he is looking for a mother, those women find a chance to return to their past and recall their memories. They react differently to his false confession and each one of them informs Derek about their personal lives concerning their past and present relationships in details. Mrs Plants wants to know if Derek hates her, Mrs Vane tells him not to inform her husband about his real identity, Mrs Oliver brings her family photos and introduces them to Derek, and Miss Clarence narrates her past story in details (Roberts, 2008). Similarly, Derek narrates different stories to each one. He tells Mrs Oliver that when he was sixteen, he knew about his adoption; unlikely, he tells Mrs Vane that his parents told him the truth when he was a child. In the last scene, he meets his real mother, who has Alzheimer, in the geriatric ward and discloses his trick to her because he is sure that she cannot comprehend what he is doing. This scene can interpret his real intention behind his trick that he wants to compensate what he has lost (Luckhurst, 2015).

Instead of using temporal repetition, the playwright uses language breakdown as a strategy to portray trauma. Derek's encounters with the women who think he is their long lost son lead them to engage in compulsive storytelling where each woman recounts her history and revisiting unresolved emotional events. The tendency of trauma warp memory and reconstitute identity is reflected in these narratives. As the play goes on, language starts to degenerate where words are gradually replaced by 'blue' and 'kettle' until they finally collapse into solitary sounds. This linguistic breakdown is an example of how language is unable to adequately convey painful experiences.

Unlike *Heart's Desire*, *Blue Kettle* appears to have a story, but language collapse undermines its conclusion. As the play goes on, the words 'blue' and 'kettle' begin to take the place of other words in the play, so the narrative flow begins to falter. Actually, there are two facts that trouble the play's resolution. First, Derek's relationship with Mrs Plant is based on lies since he tells her that his real mother is dead. In fact, his mother is alive but she is unqualified to play the maternal role that he wants. Second, the spectators are left in the dark side as Churchill reduces the text into phonemes (Gobert, 2009). The play starts with the first confrontation between Derek and Mrs Plant and she depicts the state of his conception. This scene gives an impression that it is a classical realistic play. However, when he continues to play the same trick of long-lost son with other women, the play's tone shifts from reality to dark comedy (Kritzer, 2008).

Language collapse can be noticed from the very first line of the play as Mrs Plant tells Derek that she cannot speak, this sentence comes as a response to Derek's claims. As the play

progresses, this failure infects the whole play (Cousin, 2007, p.102). Gradually, the words 'blue' and 'kettle' start to replace other words leading language to become meaningless, and characters utter those words as everyday language with its naturalistic tone (Diamond, 2008, p.290). The first appearance of the language breakdown is in this line: "You don't have to blue anything up" (Churchill, 2017, 1.2.p.46). The audience may not pay any attention to this first replacement and it may be considered as a tongue slip (Lane, 2010, p.44). But gradually, the expected words start to disappear and be replaced. However, it is still easy for the audience to understand and correct since they are common situations that are staged in front of the audience (Angel-Perez, 2013, pp.91-92):

"MOTHER: Blue you was a little blue you liked buses.

DEREK: Did I blue to blue a bus?

MOTHER: You kettle buses and you kettle golden syrup." (Churchill, 2017, 1.8. p.62)

Later on especially by the eighth and ninth scene, words replacements begin to appear more frequently to the extent that meaning is compromised. The audience are left in ambiguity since the characters' communications become so unclear as it is shown in this line: "I know it's not the kettle but why is it not the kettle, blue is the kettle, is the kettle to make money out of blue kettle" (Churchill, 2017, 1.9. p. 63). Then, these two words start to eat all other words: "Blue blue blue blue blue today in the street, I begged." (Churchill, 2017, 1.9. p.64). Then by the end of the play these words have been subjected to the same process as they are reduced to their first syllables "bl, kt" and then to their first letters "B. K." These replacements are similar to a computer virus where every regular word is replaced, but maintaining the sense of what the characters say. Language breakdown may not represent the absence of coherence, instead it reflects the fractured words of its inhabitants and their pain and suffering (Roberts, 2008).

"MRS PLANT: How bl bl bl this was bl

Son?...ket be tle die of?

MRS PLANT: T b k k k k l?

DEREK: B. K.

End" (Churchill, 2017, 1.11. p.70)

Mrs Plants expressions resemble a mother's open prattling to her infant, so it is easier for the audience to understand his real mother's rambling in the geriatric ward. It seems that the destruction of language promotes the result of this relationship. Derek tells Mrs Plant that while he was travelling, he meets John, photographer, who was searching about his mother. When John passed away, Derek made his decision to find the woman. Mrs Plant was John's real mother whom he was searching about and the first one that he meets. Derek does not stop there, instead his search leads him to create his cuckoo plan. Although he confesses to Mrs Plant about his real identity, they both decide to continue in this false relationship. He takes her real son's position, and she also takes the place of his real mother; this is strongly similar to the words 'blue' and 'kettle' where they replace any other words in the play (Gobert, 2009).

It can be said that the circularity of the scenario appears in Derek's action since he repeats the same trick with other

women. So, Derek is unconsciously trapped in the same action and he also repeats his trick with four old women. Derek's fabrications implies profound emotional emptiness besides fractured identity. Derek's obsessive hunt for finding a replacement mother discloses his psychological trauma due to emotional deprivation. Both Derek and the old women fail to express their feelings so they take refuge in verbal nonsense. Rather than facing their emotional deprivation, they choose to create new fabricated relations. They remain in the same loop of emotional illusion and fragmented communication. In this sense, trauma damages identity, feelings, and communication.

## 5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Churchill transforms trauma from a thematic subject into a dramatic structure in *Blue Heart*. Through the repetitive circular form of *Heart's Desire* and the progressive linguistic disintegration of *Blue Kettle*, trauma is enacted rather than narrated. Repetition, fragmentation, and language collapse embody the psychological effects of unresolved trauma and reveal the limitations of conventional narrative and communication. By denying closure and resolution, Churchill presents characters who are trapped within cycles of emotional and psychological disturbance, thereby illustrating trauma as ongoing experiential condition rather than recoverable past event. In *Heart's Desire*, the characters are presented as suffering from traumatic situations that make them repeat their lines and gestures. Hence, the failure of the play to develop mirrors this trauma where the characters are involved in circular or endless action of reiterating the same scenario. In *Blue Kettle*, Churchill represents trauma through language breakdown and repetition where Derek is presented as trapped in the same action where he repeats his trick with four women. On the other hand, the old women seem to have psychological experience since they are trapped in the past and accept Derek's lies. This may reflect the character's psychological trauma due to emotional need, and language deconstruction reflects their inability to face their reality. Churchill creates a theatrical atmosphere that can embody trauma rather than narrating it. Characters in both parts are trapped in a loop without reaching a resolution, Churchill avoids healing ends in both parts, demonstrating that they are still trapped in the concept of 'acting out' without having the ability to face the source of their trauma and overcome it.

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