



“They’ve damaged your uniqueness”: Technology as a Source of Dystopia in Caryl Churchill’s *A Number*

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Abstract

This study focuses on the impact of technology on creating a dystopian world as presented by the English playwright Caryl Churchill in her play *A Number* (2002). This dramatic work came as a reaction to the most crucial and valuable turning point in the scientific achievements of human engineering, namely, the cloning of the sheep called Dolly. Therefore, *A Number* is a play that presents an analytical stage for imagining the biotechnological and scientific future. This dramatic vignette captures the playwright’s fears towards the abnormal progress of technology and science and how far such technological progress affects human relationships and identity. It also portrays how technological progress results in the feeling of a lack of ‘uniqueness’ and potential psychological problems. It shows that biotechnological attempts at human cloning are the heights of science irresponsibility. Human beings desire to have children, but there are limits to this desire. It should not include whatever kind of technology is available to meet such desires. The playwright, through her dramatic characters Salter, B1, B2 and Michael Black, draws a ‘near’ futuristic world in which the misuse of technology raises ethical, scientific, medical and legal controversies.

Keywords: biotechnology; dehumanization; domination; dystopia; individuality

الملخص بالعربي

هذه الدراسة هي محاولة لتوضيح تأثير التكنولوجيا العلمية في خلق عالم بئس (دستوبي) من خلال تحليل مسرحية الكاتبة المسرحية الانكليزية كاريل تشرشل "مجرد رقم" (٢٠٠٢). وقد جاء هذا العمل الدرامي المسرحي كرد فعل على نقطة التحول الأكثر أهمية وقيمة في الإنجازات العلمية للهندسة البشرية، الا وهي استنساخ النعجة المسمى دولي. فهذه المسرحية ترسم صوراً تخيلية مستقبلية متشائمة عن التأثير السيء للتكنولوجيا الحيوية والعلوم. وتركز الدراسة الحالية على التجسيد الدرامي الذي يبرز ذلك التأثير السيء في التقدم غير الطبيعي في التكنولوجيا والعلوم، ومدى تأثير هذا التقدم التكنولوجي في العلاقات الإنسانية والهوية. كما أنها تصور كيف أن التقدم التكنولوجي يؤدي إلى الشعور بعدم وجود "الفردية" وخلق الكثير من المشاكل النفسية المحتملة. كما انها تعرض مشكلة المحاولات اللا مسؤولة لتكنولوجيا البيولوجية في مجال الاستنساخ البشري. فمن الطبيعي ان يرغب البشر في إنجاب الأطفال، لكن هناك حدود لتلبية هذه الرغبات. في هذه المسرحية تناقش الكاتبة المسرحية، من خلال شخصياتها الدرامية سالتر، ب ١، ب ٢ ومايكل بلاك، عالماً "شبه مستقبلي" يثير فيه سوء استخدام التكنولوجيا خلافاً أخلاقية وعلمية وطبية وقانونية.

1-Introduction

Technology in all its advancements is integrated intensively into people's lives more than ever before. Technology has proven to be a double-edged sword that can modify life for better or worse. In other words, technology as a source of power can potentially enable its users either to build or destroy their societies. Mark William Roche explains this matter in his book *Why Literature Matters in the 21st Century* by saying,

Technology's ability to alter the world becomes a problem only when technology becomes autonomous and is no longer guided by valid ends. Today many of our actions do serve trivial ends at odds with the environment and our normative concept of humanity.[...] Technology may provide us with some assistance, but technology alone cannot provide the brake.(Roche, 2004, p.124)

The vital role of technology and its problematic consequences in relation to society have been discussed extensively by many writers, critics and philosophers in different fields, whether sciences, literature, politics, sociology, economy or psychology. Amongst those philosophers are Karl Marx, Martin Heidegger, Herbert Marcuse and Neil Postman. Karl Marx (1818–1883), one of the first modern thinkers, considered technology to be a source of power, dominating workers and making them slaves to the bourgeois and their machines (Mahadi, 2015). Therefore, powerful technology is interwoven with humans within the capitalistic world, in which humans are seen 'less valuable than their machines because their energetic powers are paltry by comparison' (Wendling, 2009, p.11). Moreover, Marx noted that 'alienation' was amongst many problems caused by technology. For example, labourers in the 19th century

stood against the engine and smashed it, considering it their foe that left them unemployed. In a capitalist society, workers must compete with others to secure a job, thereby alienating themselves and exposing their distrusted nature. Marx explained that technology reveals a new process of production, as well as ‘the social relations that always persist among humans are made visible and undeniable’ (Wendling, 2009, p.172).

The prominent philosopher Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979), who studied Hegel, Marx and the classics of the Western philosophical tradition, highlighted the effect and role of technology on individuals. He believed that ‘technological rationality colonizes everyday life, robbing individuals of freedom and individuality by imposing technological imperatives, rules, and structures upon their thought and behaviour’ (Kellner, 1964, p. xi). In his book *One Dimensional Man*, Marcuse explained how people have started to lose their degree of privacy of freedom. An individual’s identity, needs and thoughts are dominated by technology; his freedom and individuality decline as he becomes the dominated not the dominator. Sir Martin Rees, a professor of cosmology, shared other philosophers’ fears of destructive effects of technologies, which threaten the human race. Rees implored with humanity to rethink about their future under such uncontrollable destructive technologies. He questioned science whether it will ‘continue to surge forward, bringing new insights, and perhaps further threats as well? Or will the science of the coming century be anticlimax after the triumphs already achieved’ (Rees, 2003, p.141). Bill Joy, who is an American software developer, is obsessed with a similar fear. Joy stressed the danger of technology and its ability to control humans and destroy their identities. According to him, ‘progress will be somewhat bittersweet’ where the ‘most powerful 21st century technologies-robots, genetic engineering, and nanotech-are threatening to make humans an endangered species’ (Joy, 2000).

Moreover, technology has a direct effect on literature. The writers of the Renaissance era were divided into two groups. One group saw technology as a means to create a utopian world and lead to the progress of humanity; therefore, they wrote literary works to extol and praise the role of technology in life (see Francis Bacon's novel *New Atlantis* (1629), Bulwer Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1817) and William Morris's *A Dream of John Bull*). The other group of writers anticipated the negative effect of technology on a human's soul and his relationship with others (see Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* (1818) and H. G. and Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896)). Praise for technology greatly waned in the 20th and 21st centuries because of the different events that occurred as a direct result of technology, such as World Wars I and II, atomic bomb, global pollution, bio and chemical weapons, artificial intelligence, biotechnology, nanotechnology, internet, robotics and cloning. Consequently, many literary writers established a new vision based on what they saw and experienced, leading to many dystopian and technophobic literary works (Mahadi, 2015). Many modern and contemporary writers have warned in their literary works about societies declining into dystopian life that may result from the misuse of technology. Among these writers are the dramatists Karel Čapek (*Rur*, 1920), Elmer Rice (*The Adding Machine*, 1923), O'Neill (*The Hairy Ape*, 1929) and Alan Ayckbourn (*Henceforward*, 1987) and the novelists Aldous Huxley (*New World*, 1931), George Orwell (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 1984), Margaret Atwood (*The Handmaid's Tale*, 1985) and Kazuo Ishiguro (*Never Let Me Go*, 2005).

One of the dramatists who dealt with the feelings of unease and fear and described the dystopian influence that technology may have on individuals of industrial societies is the prolific British dramatist Caryl Churchill (b.1938). Caryl Churchill is known for her extraordinary style of writing and different modern themes that

relate directly to the contemporary events experienced in the world of today. She has received critical attention for her ground-breaking treatment and concentration on political, social, gender issues and feminism.

This study focuses on her play *A Number*, which had a successful run at the Royal Court theatre in London in 2002 and ‘was one of the most frequently produced plays in American professional theatres during the 2005–2006 season’ (Brandon, 2006, p. 502). Such success might be attributed to the play’s ‘minimal technical requirements, a cast of two’ and its concentration on ‘the important contemporary issue of cloning’ (Brandon, 2006, p.502).

Similar to her other plays *Far Away* and *Not Enough Oxygen*, in *A Number*, Churchill discloses an ontological issue where human existence and identity are questioned in a world ‘defined no longer by the human element, but conversely, by the lack of it’ (Vangölü, 2017, p.202). In her dramas, Churchill unfolds various topics that deal with environmental pollution, scientific ramifications and spiritual and emotional vacuum that ‘challenges audiences to join their imaginations with hers in seeking answers to the difficult questions posed by her plays’ (Kritzer, 1989). Therefore, Churchill’s *A Number* is regarded as an attempt to empower the audience to question humanity to rethink of different ethical, social and scientific matters and not simply accept any previous or established patterns for granted.

Technological domination as a gate to dystopia

Dystopia, which means a ‘bad place’, is a common theme in the 20th and 21st centuries, although it appeared beforehand. Originally, the term dystopia is one of utopia’s derivations; *dys* comes from Greek word *dus*, which means bad or abnormal. However, dystopia might be defined as

a futuristic, imagined universe in which oppressive societal control and the illusion of a perfect society are maintained through corporate, bureaucratic, technological, moral, or totalitarian control. Dystopias, through an exaggerated worst-case scenario, make a criticism about a current trend, societal norm, or political system (Cited in Demerjian, 2016, p.7).

One of the most controversial issues in the modern technological world that raises fear of causing dystopian feelings is genetic technology, particularly 'cloning'. Scientifically, the cloning process is defined as a 'production of genetically identical cells or complete organisms as a result of a descent from a single individual' (Barber, 2002, p. 137). Creating the first real clone, a sheep named Dolly, in 1993 was the turning point in scientific research, which was followed by a plethora of research in this field. Such progress in genetic technology research led scientists to think of the possibility of cloning human beings, namely, creating individuals who are identical to one of their parents or one of their relatives. To date, no real successful attempts have been achieved in human cloning. However, the scientific world oscillates between continuing research in this path, claiming its scientific and medical benefits, and rejecting human cloning. Undoubtedly, cloning is regarded as a profoundly technological risk where cloned individuals might be devoid of their own individuality, identity and personality. The banding campaign against human cloning and its possible danger to the futuristic world is serious. Barrack Obama, former president of the United States, stated that 'we will ensure that our government never opens the door to the use of cloning for human reproduction' (Gilgoff, 2009, p.2).

Generally speaking, in literature, the topic of cloning has greatly inspired writers and injected their imagination to visualize the kind of future that is awaiting human beings and the features of cloned human beings. However, this topic is burgeoning their interest and their fear of science. Churchill's *A Number* demonstrates a near future world that is imprinted by a

dystopian vision because of the possible cloning process that might be posed to the society. The play was displayed around the time of the Dolly sheep cloning experiment where Britain was one of the first countries that legalized 'the cloning of human embryos for therapeutic purposes in 2001' (Liliane Campos, 2012, p.27). Therefore, the play involved the philosophical, ethical, moral and legal complications of applying this biotechnological achievement in society. Cloning, or the concept of 'human engineering', can be defined as scientific progress that may cause great danger of eliminating what distinguishes a human's uniqueness and what identifies the qualities of a human's personal individuality.

In their book titled *The Drama of DND: Narrative Genomics* (2014), Karen H. Rothenberg and Lynn Wein Bush highlighted the significance of analysing scientific literary works focusing on science drama as being a neglected genera in comparison with fiction, and they described the dearth in dramas that depict the topic of future generations created by genomic research and medicine. Lynn and Bush argued that the fictionalized characters and dramatic narratives of theatrical works with scientific themes on genomics introduce scientific issues and their complexities to the public. The writers, through analysing dramatic texts, pointed out the 'potential benefits and dilemmas facing individuals, families, and professionals with comprehensive genome technology and the information it generates' (Rothenberg and Wein, 2014, p.2). Being a part of interdisciplinary collaboration, these theatrical works are examined from a pedagogical approach and as a 'resource to enhance teaching' (Rothenberg and Wein, 2014, p.x). Lynn and Bush analysed Caryl Churchill's *A Number* among other dramatic texts and shed light on the moral dilemma that the play introduces and what the lack of uniqueness beyond our genetic formula means.

Technology and Dystopian Vision in Caryl Churchill's *A Number*

The society in dystopian literature is characterized by an authoritarian form of oppressive power, whether government or technology or both. In dystopian society that is covered by fear and 'throes of collective nightmare', 'the individual has become a victim, experiencing loss of control over his or her destiny in the face of a monstrous, superhuman force that can no longer be overcome or....even comprehended by reason' (Gottlieb, 2001, p.11). In *A Number*, Salter's sons are nameless; they are called 'B1' and 'B2'. Throughout their conversation, neither calls the other by their names. This technique of erasing names and substituting them with a letter and number reflects a terrifying dystopian future where individuals have no definite names, no autonomy and no worth. This type of future also reinforces the sense of loss and lack of identity of being in such a drastically different world.

B2, the son of Salter, finds himself in a nightmare after a regular visit to a hospital where he discovers that he is a clone among a number of genetically identical copies; he is merely B2. B2 vividly describes his shock at seeing the other clones: 'What suddenly see myself coming round the corner...Like seeing yourself on the camera in a shop or you hear yourself on the answering machine and you think god is that what I' (p.137).

Such a shocking discovery creates a deep and long conversation between the father and son(s) where the story of the family, and how science plays a role in it, is described. Several questions about the essence of human individuality, nature versus nurture, what makes one a unique individual and the limits of science and bioethics are unfolded in this short but deep and complicated play. The father Slater, who lies to his son B2 when the latter asks him about his mother and his brother, declares that science and technology misuse the whole matter by making more than one copy. Under pressure from B2, Salter finally informs B2 the truth:

B2: So please if you're not my father that's fine. If you couldn't have children or my mother, and you did in vitro or I don't know what you did I really think you should tell me.

Salter: Yes, that's what it was (p.138).

Slater blames the hospital and doctors for this mess and tries to show himself as an innocent person. He says, 'Copies of you which some mad scientist have illegally... they've taken your cells' (p.135).

A Number tackles the ethical labyrinth of human genetic engineering and the timeless debate over nature versus nurture. The critic Michael Billington observes that 'what she [Churchill] does, in a series of fraught, emotional encounters, is use the scientific possibility to address basic human questions: above all, what the source is of that mysterious thing we call 'personality' (Cited in Lyall, 2014). Therefore, the questions that might be asked are as follows: Does science and technology help us identify who we are? Does it obliterate the very essence of our individuality?

Throughout the play, which has five minimal scenes with only two characters, Churchill does not suggest any definite answer. Instead, she leaves it to the audience to ponder and imagine the causalities of using technology for controlling people physically and psychologically. Churchill shears her audience her worries about the kind of future that is awaiting human race when man's genetic materials are sold; thereon, man is decreased into a replicated blueprint. In this way, the being of human is apt to dehumanization and degraded to be only a 'thing'. In this play, Churchill endeavours 'to remind us that we are human and that we have souls' (Lyall, 2004). In the conversation between Salter and B2 in the first scene, Salter asks, 'How many of these things are there?' B1 disagrees with using a 'thing' to refer to the clones and says, 'You called them things. I think we'll find they're people' (p.134).

In such a mechanical and dehumanized world, a clone, who is supposed to be a human just like any other one, has no absolute value. He is treated as the 'other'. Technology, as presented in the play, creates a dystopian lifestyle where even the feeling of fatherhood becomes peculiar and false. Technology can be used to devalue and destroy the beauty of life and sacred relationships. The father, Salter, wants to exploit the case of how doctors stole the original cells in the process of replicating many Bs, and he wonders if he can sue them. This reflects the concern of many scientists, such as Majorie Miller (2000), who warns against manipulating the cloning of human beings for illegal commercial practices, which take priority over the ethical issues in the modern technological society. Here, an important case that has ethical constraints is raised, which is the use of some parts of human organs as objects that can be produced and reproduced and throwing other parts of human organs. Such work is inhuman and reflects the mechanical and senseless souls of what is expected of a futuristic society that deals with humans as accommodation.

Indifferent to his son's feelings, he obviously manifests cupidity to monetization: 'A million is the least you should take, I think it's more like a half a million each person because what they've done they've damaged your uniqueness, weakened your identity, so we're looking at five million for a start' (p.136). Later, that son speaks out, 'I'm just a copy. I'm not the real one' (p.141). Salter uncovers the story of making another copy from B1. When the mother commits suicide, he says, 'She did it under a train under a tube train, she was one of those people when they say there has been a person under a train' (p.153). Therefore, B1 faces psychological problems. He becomes aggressive and a threat to the father, who decides to abandon him at the age of four. Before sending him away, with the help of genetic engineering, he creates from the cell of B1 another version and calls him B2. B2 is moulded the way Salter wishes his son to be. He is physically identical to his 'brother'. Yet, this discovery does not raise him with happiness; rather, B2 finds himself without any special uniqueness, without any entity. He is

merely a replica of another person whom he does not know anything about, and he feels alienated and resentment.

By contrast, Slater tries to determine the value of the son's uniqueness by minimising him to market value, thereby repeating the ugly rationale behind the beginnings of the cloning process of his son. Ironically, Salter states that 'the clones belong to you . . . they've been stolen from you and you should get your rights' (p.134) because his beloved son 'belongs' to his neglected predecessor. When Salter advances his predecessor in the same language of theft and property, he inadvertently confirms the exchange of sons. In the third scene, he talks with his son B1 and tells him, '[T]hey stole your genetic material... 'you and I have got common cause against the others don't forget, I'm still hoping we'll make our fortunes there. I'm going to talk to a solicitor' (p.158).

Salter explains to B2 how technological science is responsible for this bizarre situation. He says, 'Because the thing is you see that isn't what happened. I am your father, it was by an artificial [*sic*] the forefront of science but I am genetically' (p.139). However, Salter laments himself of what has happened to his family because of unstudied and unpredictable steps he has taken on behalf of his 'sons' when he says, 'Nobody regrets more than me the completely unforeseen unforeseeable which isn't my fault and does make it more upsetting but what I did seem at the time the only and also it's a tribute' (p.146). As the attitudes of Salter and his son B1 are severely polarized, B2 decides to leave his father and stay away from B1 who shows a violent and aggressive reaction upon realising that he is dehumanised and rejected by his father since he was a little child. B1's aggressive nature has dominated his nurture. He makes his mind to follow his replica, B2, and kill him.

Throughout his conversations with his two sons, Salter exposes mechanical feelings of fatherhood towards his sons as if his fatherly emotions are not genuine; rather, they are replicas. He does not reflect

emotional attachment towards the clones that were made out of his son B1. After the murder of B2 by B1, Salter encounters his son B1 and expresses his incapability of engaging or meeting all of his offspring. He says, 'What about the others? Or is he the only one you hated because I loved him, I don't love the others, you and I have got common cause against the others don't forget, I'm still hoping we'll make our fortunes there' (p.158). Nevertheless, Salter only moves once when he loses his two sons, namely, when B1 commits suicide after murdering B2.

To substitute his fathering vacancy, he searches for a third clone who appears to be Michael Black. Michael is raised separately in a loving home. He is a math teacher and a married man with two kids, and he is content with his life. However, Salter tries to find common ground with his third son, so he informs Michael about his late 'brothers'. He says, 'I didn't feel I'd lost him when I sent him away because I had the second chance. And when the second one my son the second son was murdered it wasn't so bad as you'd think because it seemed fair' (p.164).

Intrinsically, Michael's reaction towards this scientific involvement in his being as a replica of known copies is completely different from his brothers. He shows a personality that is different from his two 'brothers', accepting the idea of being a clone with a scientific attitude of curiosity. This response of satisfaction shows that human beings, even if they are 99% identical, react differently to such essential matters, and their responses are unpredictable. Through Michael's reaction, Caryl Churchill demonstrates that people in this technological world are dehumanised because the natural human responses and behaviours are destroyed. Moreover, she warns us that technology may create robot-like men who accept their state without questions. She states that technological achievements are not only symbols of human capability, but they also reflect a human's evil side as his weakness.

Conclusion

In a futuristic and fictional discourse, Churchill's *A Number* (2002) discusses human cloning and genetic science as the spectrum of reasons for a dystopian shift. The play attracts attention to serious ethical and moral dilemmas in the modern world and how we think about the perspectives of basic concepts, such as uniqueness, individuality, objectification and personality. *A Number* exposes the fact that technological and scientific achievements show human capability, yet they become symbols of weakness and danger that threaten the essence of human race. Churchill depicts how technology and science devalue human beings and reduce his individuality to be a 'thing' or nothing. In five no-linear scenes of conversations between Salter and his three identical sons, the play shows deeply how the abnormal progress of technology and science challenges the possibility of creating a utopian paradise in modern society where dehumanization, disillusionment, the sense of alienation and fear pervade it. In such a society, the natural human being's feelings and emotions do not seem genuine, which is evident in the relationship between Slater and his sons and in Michael's response of accepting being merely a clone.

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