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The Right to Kill vs. the Will to Be: Abortion, Infanticide and the Unwanted Body in Caryl Churchill's *Abortive and a Mouthful of Birds*

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Ever since the beginning of civilization concepts like abortion and infanticide have been highly controversial. While the controversy is partly because of the ethical and legal concerns associated with the willful ending of human lives amounting to murder, it has also been due to the religious pro-life doctrines regarding pregnancies as expressions of the 'divine' order. Moreover, abortion and infanticide have historically been viewed as empowering strategies for women who have seldom meant anything more than mere procreating machines to patriarchy. In the present paper, I will try to re-read two plays by the Caryl Churchill namely *Abortive* and *A Mouthful of Birds* with a view to highlighting how abortion and infanticide provide the mother figures with a final means to resist and subvert the constrictive and often dehumanizing impositions of patriarchy. If in *Abortive*, Roz's decision to terminate her pregnancy indicates a revolt against both her husband Colin and her lover seducer Billy, then in *A Mouthful of Birds* Lena's killing of her newborn daughter symbolizes a ritualistic suicide. Attempts, therefore, will also be made to highlight the ethical dimensions of thanatotic strategies like abortion and infanticide, and the ramifications thereof.

Abortive was first aired on BBC Radio 3 on February 4, 1971, under the direction of John Tydeman. The play offers a brief description of the life of a young couple Roz and Colin just three weeks after Roz has had an abortion. While both of them try to show love and concern for each other, what makes their situation precarious is the fact of the pregnancy being the result of a rape. However, this traumatic awareness affects Roz and Colin in two altogether different ways. If Colin wants to erase the incident from their shared memory by re-establishing sexual contact in his capacity of a husband with his wife, then Roz is too traumatized to consider any present or future prospects for intimacy. *Abortive* opens with a bed scene wherein Colin is visibly annoyed to see a frigid Roz. Though he tries his best to keep his equilibrium, his uneasiness with an unresponsive body is evident from his reactions, 'Just not on at all? Mm?' (*Abortive* 23).

Interestingly, the strategy that Colin takes to erase the twin memories of the rape and the rape-pregnancy from Roz's mind, instead of helping her, reinforces the specter of forced intrusion of her bodily territories. Colin, however, misses the point and goes on harping on Roz's being 'not on' (aroused). In fact, Colin is not so much concerned about what happened to Roz as about the response which that 'happening' has created in her. Roz's quick response in asking for

'forgiveness' 'I'm sorry, Colin' as opposed to Colin's constant pleading for marital intimacy is expressive of a social, cultural, religious and legal guilt generated by her 'inability' to fulfil the husband's expectations (Abortive 23).

In fact, from the very beginning of patriarchal history, marriage has been viewed as the wife's absolute and irrevocable consent to the husband's authority on her body and being. This resulted in the fact that any/all inability or reluctance on the part of the wife to comply with the commands of the husband has been considered as an act of deviance inviting social categorization and punishment. And if the husband's command is a sexual one, it becomes all the more imperative on the wife; for it is only through coercing the reluctant and unprepared body of the wife into a compulsory sexuality that the husband's absolute authority over her body promised by and gained through marriage can be asserted most profitably and most pleasurably. Therefore, in denying Colin his due, Roz actually resists the patriarchal attempt to commodify her body. This resistance becomes all the more pronounced when we remember the recent loss/theft/dismantling of Colin's exclusive authority and ownership of Roz's body as indicated by the rape and the three week pregnancy.

Colin, however, tries to play the uninhibited modern husband who is not moved by realities of the wife's rape and aborted pregnancy. He attempts to shower Roz with understanding, sympathy, and affection, 'Not a bit, No, no. Odd if it wasn't like this', 'My darling Roz, I'm not a monster', 'Are you warm enough without the blankets' and 'I know it's only three weeks, my pet' (S. 23). However, behind and beneath such a show of marital care is the need to establish the male righteousness and vigour as indicated by expressions such as 'odd', 'monster' and 'only' as opposed to the female folly and weakness. Roz's near neurotic deliberation on abortion, at this stage, at once highlights her inability to grapple with the connotations of Colin's words and her continued preoccupation with her lost pregnancy, 'In fact abortion is overrated. Men make it such a melodramatic topic. The backstreet aspect. It was bliss physically. The anesthetic alone was worth the price. I quite understand why Billy took drugs' (Abortive 23).

For Roz, the termination of her pregnancy seems 'blissful'; for not only does it liberate her from the shackles of an unwanted pregnancy but also enables her to forget the painful memories of her rape. It is for this reason that the 'anesthesia' given to her prior to the medical process of extracting the foetus from her body seemed to her so 'worthy' of the 'price' both monetary and psychosomatic. Moreover, the anesthesia, being medically administered, holds out a promise of a healing presence to her tortured psyche. The reference to anesthesia reminds Roz of Billy's dependence on narcotics. Needless to say, this reference to the person who raped her is intolerable to Colin and his abrupt comment 'Nevertheless it is a shock to the system' cuts Roz short and brings her back to the reality and the demands thereof, 'It won't have made me permanently frigid' (Abortive 23). Colin's reply 'unless of course you've stopped loving me'

resonates with his lack of confidence as the lawful owner of Roz's body and mind especially in view of the continued sexual resistance that Roz is showing to him after her intimacy with Billy, albeit against her will (Abortive 23).

While Roz tries to resolve what is perceived as Colin's problematized apprehension about her love, Colin is engrossed in far more complicated issues:

ROZ: Are you starting that? I wondered how long it would take?

COLIN: Well it wasn't rape. (Abortive 23)

In fact, what seems to be Colin's absentminded answer to Roz's assurance of love and fidelity is actually an expression of his worst suspicions, as indicated by the conclusive 'well'. The mere suspicion that the pregnancy might not have been caused by a rape but by extra-marital consensuality is unbearable to Colin. This on the one hand explains his obsessive brooding on the need for sexual re-union with Roz, while on the other hand, it underscores a possible reason of Roz's problematic sexual rejection of Colin. It is at this point that Roz's comment 'It started as a rape. I might as well have lied to you about it. There was no need to tell you how it ended' instead of fortifying her marital fidelity, bolsters Colin's fears regarding the supposedly consensual aspect of her intimacy with Billy (Abortive 23). In fact, it is this awareness that transforms Colin's absentminded echoing of Roz's 'No need' into a satiric mimicry of Roz's claims about the alleged rape which very soon gets crystallized into Colin's final accusation 'But at the end you didn't struggle' which once again brings up the question of marital infidelity (Abortive 30).

According to John Tydeman, in *Abortive*, Roz's lover/seducer Billy operates as 'a third party who sort of lurks in a catalytic kind of way' (Tydeman quoted in Fitzsimmons: 1989, 16). Tydeman further comments, 'Billy was and still continues to be a strange necessity in their lives' (Tydeman quoted in Fitzsimmons: 1989, 16). In fact, since the very beginning of the play Billy's presence is felt through the constant references to him made by the couple either consciously or unconsciously. What is interesting is that neither Roz nor Colin exhibits any sort of ill-will for Billy. While Roz is definitely sympathetic towards her rapist on counts of his disturbed childhood and addiction to drug, Colin is at once dismayed to see his friend's actions and disillusioned to sense his wife's reaction.

The play proceeds with a short heated conversation between Colin and Roz wherein the couple's problematic friendship with Billy is revealed. During this conversation Roz impulsively starts talking about her abortion which expresses her deep-seated frustration at having lost the child, 'I might as well have the baby. (...) I do miss something. (...) Shall I tell you the best moment? (...) you lie there on your narrow table with a pleasant floating sensation from the first injection you had downstairs and you know that in a minute you'll be gone' (Abortive 33-34). According to Vincent M. Rue, though abortion, in itself, is not 'a serious threat to a woman's life

or physical integrity', its 'consequence' on the unborn child i.e. the foetus is 'undeniable' (Rue in Rue et al: 2014, 31). It is this sense of undeniable harm done to the child, and that too, willingly, which often weighs heavily on the conscience of the mothers-murderesses. Rue points out how this post-abortion trauma expresses itself on a number of levels:

- 1) avoidance of affect/feelings (numbing);
 - 2) avoidance of knowledge of the event (amnesia);
 - 3) behavioral [sic] avoidance (phobic responses); and
 - 4) avoidance of communication about the event (interpersonal distancing).
- (Rue in Rue et al: 2014, 48)

In fact, these are the four psychological defensive mechanisms through which the traumatized woman attempts to strike a balance between what she actually endures and what she allows herself to feel. In Churchill's play, Roz strives to achieve this balance by denying to be influenced by the loss of her foetus. Her obsessive compulsive talking about the experience of anesthesia, the description of the operation theatre, and the details of the surgical procedures are indicative of her subconscious strategies to forget her pregnancy and forgive herself for irrevocably terminating it. As Rue aptly asserts this psychogenic denial of the abortion enables the sufferer to sum up her entire gamut of 'abortion experiences', from the 'awareness' of conception, the 'responsibility' for it, the situations leading to the 'decision' to the 'reality' of abortion, the medical 'procedures' of abortion, and finally the 'memory' of both the foetus and of the abortion (Rue in Rue et al: 2014, 83).

Similarly, Roz's inability to sleep is another form of post abortion disorder whereby she unconsciously tries to ward off the corporeal and discursive memories of a lost womb through constant vigilance, 'I sleep badly now, (...) I have bad dreams. (...) I dream of something violent every night' (Abortive 36). In a similar manner, the 'nightmare' that Roz finds herself in every night embodies the anxieties and insecurities of the life that she is having to endure while the stark absence of 'content' in those horrifying dreams exemplifies the void that has been created in the mother's life by the loss of her womb, 'I do find I'm afraid to go to sleep. Just as I'm going off I get that feeling like in a nightmare but with no content' (Abortive 36). Roz's concluding lines 'Something's about to happen' is an apprehensive expression of a violent future wherein she finds herself surrounded by memories of loss, symbolized by her 'content'-less dreams, and the realities of unfeeling companionship, signified by the sleeping husband Colin (Abortive 36). As Luckhurst further points up, 'The rape is not describable, and the abortion is not knowable: both have merged into the same unbearable pain' (Luckhurst: 2015, 38). This 'unbearable pain' together with the guilt of having once loved her rapist proves too much for Roz. Completely at a loss to recollect herself, Roz obsessively dwells upon the memories and experiences of carrying her now-aborted baby. Her occasional absentmindedness, continued frigidity, neurotic pleadings, and then confused and sudden withdrawals are also symptomatic of

the post-abortive trauma that has ruptured her identity to such an extent that the fragments can hardly be put together to some identifiable shape.

If *Abortive* portrays the traumatic impact of abortion on the mother figure of Roz then *A Mouthful of Birds* captures the tortured psyche of the mother Lena who decides to kill her own child. *A Mouthful of Birds* is Churchill's collaborative project with David Lan. It was first performed on 2nd September 1986 at Birmingham Repertory Theatre in association with the Joint Stock Theatre Group. The play opened in Royal Court Theatre the same year on 27th November. According to Helene Keyssar, *A Mouthful of Birds* is 'an elaborate theatrical representation of violence' (Keyssar: 1988, 140). In fact, *A Mouthful of Birds* can profitably be read as a tour de force into almost all the possible variants of the themes of disruption and transgression. In the play Lena appears as a mother suffering from Puerperal psychosis. We first see Lena when she is busy making preparations for dinner. Her husband Roy arrives with a shot dead rabbit and asks Lena to cook it. When Lena expresses her discomfiture to skin the rabbit, Roy proposes to help her. In his excitement Roy however fails to notice how Lena is visibly disconcerted, if not disgusted, to see the brutally killed animal. Needless to mention, this is the very first occasion when Lena displays the signs of an impending nervous breakdown:

LENA: (to audience) Look at the hole in its stomach.
(to Roy) I couldn't possibly. (*A Mouthful of Birds* 3)

These words are important on three different scores. First, the way Lena draws attention to the 'hole' in the stomach of the rabbit indicates her sense of unease at the sight of the dead animal. Second, that her addressee is her intra-textual audience and not her inter-textual audience i.e. Roy highlights a quite similar uneasiness felt by Lena to express and thereby be herself before her husband. And last but not the least, this opening line acts like a topic sentence that Lena will be heard to repeat again and again to give vent to her utter frustration with life as she will start identifying herself with the helpless dead rabbit.

It is at this point that in a final attempt to reach out to the husband Lena urges Roy to 'look at' the 'face' of the rabbit. Roy, however, fails to notice anything and instead enthusiastically starts recounting his childhood memories. Needless to mention, such a reaction instead of helping Lena recover from her deep anguish makes her seek refuge into a shell of apparent normalcy:

ROY: I'll skin it for you.
LENA: Look at its face.
ROY: My grandmother used to cook them with prunes.
LENA: Do you know how to skin it?
ROY: I've shot rabbits.
LENA: Look at the hole in its stomach.
ROY: It's like chicken.

LENA: It's so white. (A Mouthful of Birds 3)

The next time when we meet Lena and Roy, the play captures 'breakfast times on four successive days' (A Mouthful of Birds 10). Lena is seen laying the table but she is still brooding on the dead rabbit and repeats the line with which her narrative had actually begun, 'Look at the hole in its stomach' (A Mouthful of Birds 10). It is at this point that a new character steps into the world of Lena's private narrative. This new character is a spirit seen and heard only by Lena which indicates its fictitious nature. In fact, the spirit is as much an embodiment of Lena's unuttered fears of the unknown as that of her pent up anger against her husband who fails to notice almost everything about her. Through its almost omniscient presence, the spirit not only tries to fill in the gaps of Lena's life but also proposes to do what she in her proper senses cannot 'possibly do'. In fact, in the narrative of the play, the spirit operates like a Dionysian presence that lets the always shut up human instincts a free reign and thereby initiates the release of the repressed. Thus it is not without significance that from its very first onstage appearance, the spirit tries to make Lena unmindful of Roy either with irrelevant but rather timely demands for things like tea or by mocking Roy incessantly:

ROY: [...] I'm on the outside so
I've every right but I
know SPIRIT: teapot teapot teapot teapot
(A Mouthful of Birds 10)

It is during the very first morning visit by the Spirit that Lena gets involved in a struggle with it as the preternatural being transforms itself into myriad animate and inanimate objects ranging all the way from a frog, a train, to a bird. During this struggle, Lena too gets transformed first into a snake violently attacking its other i.e. the spirit as frog, then into a baby bird fed and fostered by the spirit in the guise of a big bird and then ultimately into a panther freeing herself from the obtrusive maternal clutches of the spirit. Though Lena's metamorphosis from a prey like a baby bird into a predator per se like a panther signifies liberation from the evil influences of the spirit, we can hardly lose sight of the fact that instead of being an external power the spirit is a projection of Lena's internal crisis. Thus, even after being 'attacked' (repressed) by Lena (the conscious agent), the spirit (the subconscious) 'leaps up' (resurfaces) with a 'fierce roar' (proud self-proclamation) and follows her into the next scene (A Mouthful of Birds 12).

The next breakfast scene presents the spirit as the agent in command. More interfering and intimidating than ever, its near incantatory mumblings wash out whatever Lena or Roy need to say to each other:

ROY: Don't forget to phone your
mother.
Remind me to get a light blub.
LENA: I better go to the launderette
today.

SPIRIT: You're useless.
Can't wipe your own bum.
Useless baby.
You're going to be unborn.
You are unborn.
(A Mouthful of Birds 12)

It is at this juncture that the audience for the first time comes to know about the existence of Lena's child. Interestingly, it is not until the spirit starts talking about the baby, that Lena becomes interested in conversing with Roy. Her incoherent responses to what Roy says, however, make it clear that it is only to avoid listening to the words of the spirit that Lena was trying to get herself engaged into the conversation. It also lays bare that no matter how hard Lena tries, she can hardly stay aloof from what the spirit — 'her spirit' (inner self) — says; for the voices do not merely come from outside, they reside within. That Lena is a mother suffering from puerperal psychosis becomes doubly important when the spirit virtually brainwashes her into believing the 'uselessness' of the baby. For this 'uselessness' is never an exclusive attribute of the baby; it is also shared by Lena as a woman, as a wife and as a mother.

It is at this point that the full import of the dead rabbit with which Lena's story had actually begun can be realized. According to Raima Evan, 'Roy's distant, matter-of-fact stance towards the rabbit points up Lena's very different relation to it. When she looks at the rabbit, she does not see a meal. She sees a stomach, a face, a bloody hole — in short, she sees a once-living creature and the dead body it has become' (Evan: 2002, 271). In fact, for the troubled mother and alienated wife in Lena, the rabbit symbolizes her own being — naïve, helpless, tormented and sacrificed for others. The fatal wound in the stomach of the rabbit and the blood oozing out of it reminds her of her menstrual cycles, of her first sexual intercourse and of her childbirth — experiences that involve pain, bleeding and a little dying of the innocence within the female. Thus, the 'white'-ness of the rabbit emblemizes not merely purity but loss of vitality and imminent death. In fact, as Marc Silverstein puts it, Lena is 'a woman whose identity remains totally confined within the perimeters of the ideologically charged subject position of Wife/Mother' (Silverstein: 1997, 182). Thus, when she sees her husband 'holding a dead white rabbit' and skinning it she immediately feels an uncomfortable affinity with the lifeless body; for just like the rabbit's body being cut to pieces by Roy's knife, as a wife and as a mother she too has been pierced by alien powers — be it the husband's penis or the doctor's knife.

Coming back to the play we can see that the next injunction of the spirit is to hate 'him' — the husband who has been the cause of Lena's sufferings, 'He's disgusting. He fills the whole/room up. His hair smells. His eyes have got yellow in the corners. (...) His mouth tastes of shit because it's directly connected to his arsehole' (A Mouthful of Birds 12). That Lena needs to find faults with Roy is not due to any inherent fault in Roy but because of faults that are universal. It

is a sort of defense mechanism whereby Lena expresses her own deep seated dissatisfaction with the changes in her post-partum body and lifestyle through extreme hatred for each and everyone she is surrounded with — be it the husband or the child. The spirit too doesn't wait much to echo Lena's feelings and soon imprecates the impending death of the child, 'The order is to kill the baby. Because the baby is directly / connected to him. (...) When you kill the baby you'll be free of him. You'll be free of yourself' (A Mouthful of Birds 12). The birth of the child for a mother symbolizes her own re-birth. But for Lena such a re-birth entails the death of the mother's own being. To her the child represents the hegemonic fulfillment of socio-cultural aspirations achieved at the cost of herself and it is only through eradicating that oppressive little existence of the child that she can retrieve the unity of her being and restore her pre-lapsarian world.

Thus it is during the fourth breakfast scene that Lena ultimately breaks down and succumbs to the evil temptations of her own psyche:

LENA: I have to talk to you. I think if you go to the bathroom. I think Sally's drowned.

ROY: What did you say?

LENA: I poured the teapot and blood came out. (A Mouthful of Birds 15-16)

According to Evan, Lena's act of maternal filicide is actually 'an attempt to differentiate herself from the being that came out of her' (Evan, 2002, 272-273). But, what is interesting is the gendered identity of the child. While killing the male child can be viewed as what C. Alder and K. Polk calls 'spouse revenge' whereby the killing actually obliterates the patriarchal bloodline (Alder and Polk: 2001, 51), murdering a female child entails a far more complicated issue. Since for the mother a female child is a projection of both the father and the mother, it becomes a site of gender hatred and self-pity simultaneously. If on the one hand, the child's existence sparks off memories of pain and bloodshed in the mother making her hate the child which has been the cause of all her sufferings, then on the other hand, the gendered identity of the child makes the mother identify with the child and recognize it as a potential victim of the same cycle of male-inflicted pain and sufferings. Thus, by killing her daughter Lena not only avenges herself on her husband but also saves another Lena from falling prey to patriarchy. This differentiates the killing from a simple murder and makes it some sort of a hate crime, a mercy killing and a ritualistic suicide all rolled into one.

It is at this juncture that Lena's words for her husband become all the more important, 'I poured the teapot and blood came out' (A Mouthful of Birds 16). Since the child died by drowning as Lena herself reports to her husband, the blood that she sees pouring out from the teapot can safely be viewed as a figment of her imagination sparked off by the image of the dead rabbit and its bleeding wound and by extension all its personal implications. On another level this may as well refer to her killing of the baby as unintentional — what she wanted to do i.e. pouring the teapot (freeing herself from an overpowering maternity) actually produced an

unwanted result i.e. coming out of blood (the death of the baby). The dejected woman in the mother Lena has already murdered her new-born baby to give her own unhappy self a chance to 'get born' again and thereby to fulfill her dreams, and now in her post-possession avatar, she tale posits a completely different picture of herself. According to Evan, 'Lena's possession frees her from the constraints imposed by motherhood as she murders her infant daughter' (Evan: 2002, 264). She has seen both life and death from very close quarters and now when she reappears for the epilogue, she appears mature enough to accept and exercise both power and responsibility:

Every day is a struggle but that's all right. (...) Some of the old ladies know me, some of them don't know anymore. You can get fond of them. You tuck them up like babies. Everyday is a struggle because I haven't forgotten anything. I remember I enjoyed doing it. It's nice to make someone alive and it's nice to make someone dead. Either way. That power is what I like best in the world. The struggle is every day not to use it. (P3. 51)

That 'every day' for Lena is a 'struggle' and that it is 'all right' for her indicates her stoic acceptance of and readiness to fight against odds that life may offer. Her assertion that she is no longer 'squeamish' or 'frightened' of anything highlights her new found self-confidence. That she can now get 'fond' of the old ladies and can actually 'tuck them up like babies' plays up her ability to provide love and care to those who need — something that she could not afford in her pre-possession life.

Interestingly, Lena's self-confidence is directly linked to her own personal history. Lena's pregnancy had caught her off guard, and motherhood had burdened her with responsibilities she couldn't cope with. Thus the child had never been a welcome experience for her. It became rather a symbol for her own captivity and uselessness in a patriarchal setup. Thus, it is not until the killing of her daughter Sally that Lena becomes aware of her own powers. That Lena has not forgotten anything is not merely because she cannot forget but because she prefers not to forget. That she had actually enjoyed the power to decide one's life and death makes her stand somewhere on the same pedestal as her husband Roy who can decide the rabbit's fate. But what makes her stand apart from others is the knowledge of propriety. As Lena herself comments 'The struggle is every day not to use it' (A Mouthful of Birds 51). That the real power lies in not using it and the real struggle is to overcome the temptation to use power is what she has learnt from her life and it is this realization that gives her strength to move forward in life.

In *Abortive* and in *A Mouthful of Birds*, therefore, we can see that both the mother figures fall victim to their own decisions that were taken under extreme outside pressure. Unable to tolerate their present life but at the same time bound to it by strings of memory and morality, these mothers frantically revisit their traumatic pasts of compulsory heterosexuality, marital/extra-marital rape, unwanted pregnancy and unprepared for motherhood, and try to effect a change in their personal histories. According to Rena Moses Hrushovski:

Traumatized people ... relive the event as though it were continually recurring in the present, not only in their dreams and thoughts, but also in their actions. Often they re-enact the traumatic moment ... wishing thereby to change the traumatic encounter retroactively, so that they can, as it were, overcome it differently this time (Hrushovski: 2000, 25).

Since traumatic memory is by and large a non-declarative one, the victims of trauma often try to express their uneasiness with their surroundings through conditioned habits, neurotic responses and violent conduct. Both Roz's and Lena's absentminded replies to their respective partners along with their unexplained fears and sudden mood swings are symptomatic of their traumatized psyches. Since trauma is registered in the consciousness of the victim on the basis of his/her sensory perception, emotional perceptivity and the expectations of the society he/she inhabits, it impacts the realms of thought and action directly in proportion to the acuteness and the durability of the experience. As a result, therefore, both Roz and Lena are seen to break down under the tremendous pressure of playing their normal selves. Though both of them continue to live, the very meaning as well as the charm of life, as Churchill shows, gets lost on them.

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