

*A NUMBER AND THE GOAT; OR, 'WHO IS SYLVIA?'*  
(NOTES TOWARD A DEFINITION OF TRAGEDY).  
THE POSTHUMAN DYNAMICS IN DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILIES

Dilara Önen

Faculty of Science and Letters,  
Western Languages and Literatures Department,  
Kırklareli University, Turkey

dilaraonen@klu.edu.tr

**Abstract.** This paper aims to demonstrate the posthuman elements in *A Number* by Caryl Churchill and *The Goat* by Edward Albee concerning the familial relationships that emerge within these two contemporary plays. Churchill constructs the posthumanist dynamics in her work through the clone life forms that bear genetic similarities to the real children of the problematic father in the play, who is in search of total authority to abuse and violate the notion of family. While the first play emphasizes the hierarchical side of the posthuman relationships between man and clone, the second one deals with the role of animals, deconstructing the anthropocentric view. In *The Goat*, the unusual bond of the father with a goat is regarded as love by him, whereas it turns into some kind of a rivalry for his wife. The contrast between the father's attitude towards his gay son and his effort to justify his sexual relationship with the animal, problematizing the borders of rape, takes the posthuman relations to an extreme level. In this context, our study shows that the line between human and inhuman is blurred, and the social and familial values become questionable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Keywords:** posthumanism, Caryl Churchill, Edward Albee, family, identity, technology, crisis

## 1. POSTHUMANISM IN CULTURE

The 2000s, which saw major changes in human understanding and life practices due to the technological improvements and the related popular culture movements, transformed arts and literature through new types of questionings towards life and humanity. "In February

1997, Scottish scientists sparked worldwide controversy by announcing the birth of a lamb, Dolly – the first mammalian clone successfully created from an adult cell” (“Caryl Churchill” n.d., 1605). This new reproduction technology raised the interest in science and led some circles to interrogate science’s limitations about human life together with other existing and possible inhuman organisms. These issues, at short notice, became the subjects of studies about posthumanism, which can be defined as “the acknowledgement and activation of the trace of the inhuman within the human” (Badmington 2004, 155). Focused on the inhuman forms developed by human-made technologies, posthumanism also encompasses animal studies, which indicate animals as significant life forms like humans. Demonstrated the inability of the nonhuman, in general, and animals, in particular, to speak for themselves within a long-standing anthropocentric world, posthumanism essentially leads to thinking beyond all of the dichotomies that create hierarchy and domination, including human and machine, human and animal, man and woman, or homosexual and heterosexual. In line with the desire of posthumanism studies to interpret humanity beyond the hierarchical order and based on morals, which make the core of the human, the dramatic arts that have been displaying the human condition since the beginning of its emergence began to question what humanity means in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## 2. CARYL CHURCHILL AND EDWARD ALBEE

Dramatist Caryl Churchill, who produced many works about identity in this age of technology, in her impressive play, *A Number*, which was staged for the first time in 2002, depicts a damaged family whose mother commits suicide and father loses himself by being an alcoholic and neglecting her son. The inconceivable attempt of the father, whose name is Salter, to let scientists create the clones of his son Bernard’s, for the sake of recovering his lost relationship of

father and son, initiates the tragic rise of the play. Contemporary to Churchill, Edward Albee's play, *The Goat; or, Who Is Sylvia?* (*Notes toward a Definition of Tragedy*), which was also staged in 2002, conceptualizes the similar issue of inhuman within a family through a goat, instead of the clones. Martin, the father, falls in love with a goat, whom he named Sylvia, and this secret of him comes as a bombshell into his family, in which Stevie, the wife, goes nuts and Billy, their gay son, sinks into an identity crisis more than ever. Both of the plays merge the posthuman dynamics by placing the inhuman subjects, the clones and a goat, which blur the line between human and inhuman, with the dysfunctional families, which as a concept based on the chaotic and undesirable marriages at that time. These families portrayed a new type of gathering with full of stepparents, strangers and spoiled kids, or in other words, "[i]f the traditional family was dead, the new extended families developed in eye-watering complex ways, with a plethora of relationships" (Sierz 2011, 163). *A Number* and *The Goat* portray such inextricable families, which is actually the smallest unit of society to teach morals, the meaning of humanity and family to an individual in the first place, with a posthumanist perspective to demonstrate the violence of the human race, who tries to understand its own meaning by testing the limits of the notion of humanity and trying to conquer this notion, through inhuman forms which are silent and defenceless.

### 3. "A NUMBER"

The family, in *A Number*, which is made of a psychologically ill father, an absent mother, a neglected son and multiple clone sons, represents the query about the functions of each family member, all of whom turn away from nurturing into poisoning each other, just like the family does in *The Goat*. As Gobert says about the family concept in the play,

*A Number* situates itself in a long tradition of domestic dramas that interrogate the family structure, whose role in identity construction is as fundamental as it is problematic... Identity hinges on a subject-position, and (...) we begin as sons and daughters. The twentieth century's most compelling articulations of subjectivity show that the subject originates in, and is reinforced by, its difference from others. Thus, the family proves crucial, since the 'I' that anchors the subject is produced early. (Gobert 2009, 106)

Such a crucial element in the construction of identity, as Gobert indicates, the family, in *A Number*, is in the strongest sense harmed by the father figure, who is traditionally expected to lead his family to the right path. However, within the play, the only path Salter leads, both himself and his family, is the road to collapsing values. Salter, the problematic father, by producing the idea that he should have the clones of his son Bernard to control the father and son relationship, in which he failed at first, initiates the fact that he completely misunderstands fatherhood. “[Salter] is concerned with ‘doing’ rather than ‘being’ a father, with his practice as a father rather than with his status as father” (Griffin 2012, 15), which means he perceives his familial existence and bond as the palpable and exchangeable properties. He believes his sons, much the same as he thinks about any family member, belong to him, and if he makes mistakes with raising a child, he can easily replace the first one with other genetically identical sons until he proves he is an accurate father. Therefore, his plan of cloning appears solely as a symbol to imply his mentality of possession within the supposedly sacred family. As it is revealed within a conversation of Salter with B2, the clone son, he calls the clones “copies” and “things” (Churchill 2002, 10). Moreover, he estimates the price of his clone son, whom Salter permits to be created with the purpose of repairing his fatherhood. He says to him, “I think it's more like half a million each person because what they've done, they've damaged your uniqueness, weakened your identity” (Churchill 2002, 11). Much the same with his dare to price an inhuman life form looking like his son, that Salter has no right to subordinate, his words about killing B1 if he wants to display the inhumanity within him which emerges as a result of his mentality of domination. To B1, he says,

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 though you were this disgusting thing by then anyone in their right mind would have squashed you but I remembered what you'd been like at the beginning and I spared you... (Churchill 2002, 24)

Inwardly, he regards being a father as grace in the same vein as being an ethical human. Salter's opinions about fatherhood are inseparable from his thoughts about the inhuman forms, which prioritize the hierarchy and domination, and justifies the possible violent act.

The unnamed and non-existent mother, in *A Number*, contributes to reflect the violence within a human in a silent manner, as opposed to constantly speaking father. Although the mother's story is not fully known, her suicide and some hints in the words of her son B1 imply that her motherhood, together with her humanity, are subject to decay. The utmost violence she does within the play is to herself by taking the life of a human being, even if this is her own life. Besides, as pointed out, "Salter's wife, the play makes clear through B1's bitter observations, was not a good mother. B1 simply remembers her inadequacy at protecting him from his father" (Griffin 2012, 16). By deciding her own absence, both as a human in textual space and as a mother in familial space, she silently harms her family relations and the humane respect of letting someone live. The son, Bernard, of this highly technologized and much the same disjoined family, as a consequence of lacked family connections cannot fulfil a humanely constructed subjectivity. Abandoned by his mother physically and by his father mentally, B1's process towards an identity inevitably turns into a crisis especially after his identical brothers take part in the family, which is an offending concept by nature for Bernard. Years later when he returns to his father from the clinic, where he receives mental treatment, B1 comes face to face with his father's continuing mistake. Salter, who believes that raising a kid necessitates possessing him, maintains the same perceptive by trying to own the father and son relationship through the clones, that Salter thinks he has a right to lead, violate or abuse until they fit the scheme inside Salter's head. Worse, he cannot see that he not

only misunderstands the concept of humanity but also the meaning of having a son, as he confesses to his son Bernard,

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, I could have had a different one, a new child altogether that's what most people but I wanted you again because I thought you were the best. (Churchill 2002, 17)

As Salter reduces the meaning of being human and the function of a family into a genetic commodity, which he can value and devalue, B1 diminishes the morals within him completely by killing B2, which functions as a scapegoat to display how cruel and corrupted the human race can be. Between the B1 and B2 emerges a familial rivalry, that is likened with “Cain and Abel, or Jacob and Esau” (“Caryl Churchill” n.d., 1608). By being very similar with the brotherly enmity in the oldest myths, the hatred within B1 essentially indicates the history of violence to the notion of other, that is produced in the human mind after apprehending the distinction of ‘I’ and ‘you’ early in the family.

Unlike the degenerate and dysfunctioning family of Salter, the other family of one of the sons of Salter, Michael's family, is demonstrated as the only accurately functioning family in *A Number*, despite the fact that a clone is the father of this family. Salter's obsession with genes, which he sees as the most significant aspect of humanity, is proved utterly irrelevant in the process of being a human along with being a father with the intense example of Michael. Through the end of the play, when Salter meets his clone son Michael, he sees that Michael is seemingly a healthy adult with three children and a normal marriage, as a portrayal of a basic nuclear family. On the contrary to Salter both in mentality and relatedly in the father role, Michael does not give the highest importance to genetics and does not accept blood tie as the sole determinant. He says,

We've got ninety-nine per cent the same genes as any other person. We've got ninety per cent the same as a chimpanzee. We've got thirty per cent the same

as a lettuce. Does that cheer you up at all? I love the lettuce. It makes me feel I belong. (Churchill 2002, 28)

In the character of Michael, Caryl Churchill, impressively re-conceptualizes humanity. As he clarifies, as human beings, we are part of a larger family with other species, whom we have no right to dominate. The other life forms' inability to speak, when compared to the human beings, does not add up to the idea that the human race is superior. Through caring for their right to live as freely as we live is the key to humane behaviour. That's why Michael has as a clone.

#### 4. *THE GOAT; OR, WHO IS SYLVIA?* (NOTES TOWARD A DEFINITION OF TRAGEDY)

The search for humanity within the tool of family, which is the first unit a human being, steps in to grow and be edified, in *The Goat; or, Who Is Sylvia? (Notes Toward a Definition of Tragedy)* is as fundamental as in *A Number*. The playwright of *The Goat*, Edward Albee, whose "vision was not absurdism nor any species of philosophical nihilism, but the result of a commitment to values he saw neglected or ignored" (McCarthy 1987, 8), renders the chaos of society with strikingly mad symbolism. The fictional family that Albee creates in the play becomes "an indictment of the hypocrisies inherent in the current rhetoric of family values" (Edward Albee n.d., 1564-1565). Each member of the family goes under a crisis which displays the battle with humanity inside them in different ways. Martin, the father, by cheating on his wife with a goat, puts the questions into both the limitations of humanity and the dynamics of the conjugal community along with the fatherhood. Sinks into the sense of emptiness in his being, Martin attempts to fill the gaps within by using an animal and deceiving himself with the idea that what he does is in the name of love. Though he rises as the only person who is the closest to see beyond anthropocentric perspective among his family, he still fails to grasp the difference between companionship

and abuse about the subject of inhuman livings. Martin equalizes the goat with himself by his words, which he says, “[t]he subject is a goat; the subject is Sylvia” and “I thought we all were... animals” (Albee 2002, 49). He balances the subjectivity of both himself and the goat in his statements, yet, in fact, he tries to justify his act of rape to the goat. The silence of the goat reveals the violent urge, to be camouflaged by the excuse of love, within Martin. The justification desire of immoral tendency of Martin unfolds, even more, when he tells the story of a man who is seduced by his own babysitting on his lap. After narrating the incident to his family, he adds, “things happen” and he continues with a question that, “is there anything anyone doesn’t get off on, whether we admit it or not – whether we know it or not?” (Albee 2002, 52). His indication of the common instinct and compulsion, such as survival and reproduction, within the human and animal beings, for the fact that human is the animal kind in origins, implies the point Martin skips, similar with Salter in *A Number*. He does not comprehend how impactful can be the behaviours of humans towards other humans or kinds to determine the humanity within. His understanding of the inhuman life is not completed without questioning himself about whether he has a right to violate the goat he thinks he cherishes so much. Besides, he does not show enough respect even to the ones, his wife and son, who have been living together with him for years. When he describes what his wife means to him, he begins to his words by glorifications such as the ‘love of my life’ and ‘my playmate’, yet he finalizes by saying to her “my cook, my bottlewasher” (Albee 2002, 68). Gradually, Martin reduces her into a machine he can use as long as it functions. In the same vein, when he gets uncontrollably angry, he brings out the inner thoughts about his gay son with such harsh words as, “fucking faggot!” (Albee 2002, 81). The confusion about the limits of humanity in Martin fuses with his loss of realization about the meaning of family and the essence of human relations. He wastes not only his humanity by physically harming an inhuman being, but also his familial bonds by psychological destruction. In the end, as he confesses, Martin

becomes “diminished” (Albee 2002, 90) as a father, husband and human.

The member of the family who gets the most affected by the chaos Martin creates and the one who seems to depend on the hierarchical order mentality, between the human and inhuman or man and woman, in the strongest sense is demonstrated as Stevie, the wife of Martin. After the shock of the betrayal, in which her pride of womanhood is damaged, she experiences the more unsettling trauma, that transgresses the marriage problem, with the fact that she is cheated by her husband for a goat. For such a woman as Stevie, who is willing to sacrifice the rights of her own gender for making her husband satisfied, the identity crisis arouses in both her femininity and humanity. As remarked,

Stevie, who has been defined so far by and within Martin's gaze and desire, confesses to have been happy within this objectifying position. As she states, she has followed her mother's advice and has fallen in love carefully marrying accordingly the one man she has ever wanted. (Rád 2009, 140)

She is a woman who proudly exhibits the servant role by disregarding her own female rights to reject to do things that put her into the position of a slave of the family and restrict her freedom to do things in life that make her happy. She seems grateful for being the cook of her family, compatible wife to her husband, and caring mother of her son, in other words, to turn into a woman for everyone else but herself. However, same with Salter in *A Number*, Stevie is concerned with doing rather than being. Her blind devotion to the roles she does perform for her family and to fit in the description of her mother about womanhood is deeply shaken with the intervention of Sylvia since she never questioned the nature of her existence and the function of the notion of “family” before. As it is implied at the beginning of the play with her words, “Who am I? Who am I?” (Albee 2002, 68), the whole play is processed as an interrogation for her. She strongly relies on the belief that love is specific to humankind and the human race is indisputably superior to animal kind since she can say without thinking that, “[h]ow can

you love me when you love so much less?” and “[y]ou have brought me down to nothing!” (Albee 2002, 82) to Martin about Sylvia. In fact, she deep down knows the reality about human nature, which she claims to be a higher level of life form than the animals. In an attempt to compare herself with the goat as she says, “[b]ut I’m a human being; I have only two breasts; I walk upright; I give milk only on special occasions; I use the toilet. You love me? I don’t understand” (Albee 2002, 82). Stevie, at the bottom, elucidates the common nature of human with inhuman. Nevertheless, her depraved subjectivity, which is constructed with inaccurate principles about humanity, femininity and family, is proved with her violence within, exposed by killing the goat.

The last member of the family, Billy the son, who already has been in a query about his identity, doubles the questioning process with the means of humanity related to his father’s acts. Albee’s characterization of Billy, which is likened with the majority of children characterization of his works as “either deeply troubled or highly idealized” (Edward Albee n.d., 1564), reflects the contemporary dysfunctional family concept and its effects upon the kids of these families, who are about to become self-aware individuals to participate in larger communities later in life. The homosexual preferences of Billy, which are not acceptable for some people, and the coming-of-age period he has been undergoing in such an indifferent family even before the starting point of the play put him into a cycle without an outcome. As if everyday activities, he narrates his struggle caused by his distorted family as,

I will probably go to my room, and I’ll probably close my door, and I’ll probably lie down on my bed, and I’ll probably start crying and it’ll probably get louder and worse, but you probably won’t hear it – either of you – because you’ll be too busy killing each other. But I’ll be there, and my little eight-year-old heart will for certain be breaking – in twain, as they say. (Albee 2002, 83)

In addition to the detrimental routine Billy has due to his family, the calling of Martin of him as faggot or Martin’s obvious incomprehension of Billy’s sexual choices when he says to his son,

“[y]ou know, your own sex life leaves a little to” (Albee 2002, 81), make the construction of the sense of self and family harder for Billy. Though he seems to be the only person in the family who does not attempt to violate any life form physically, his biased thoughts towards the animal life is very similar to his mother’s. Billy’s identity crisis, dysfunctional family and lack of cognizance about the value of any life, without discriminating the species, evoke the portrayal of B1 in *A Number* and signal the possibility that Billy may be in an incubation period to reveal the violence in the future like Bernard.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Both contemporary plays, *A Number* and *The Goat; or, Who Is Sylvia? (Notes Toward a Definition of Tragedy)*, lead the reader to question everything he or she knows about being a human, claiming his or her existence on this earth with the awareness towards all livings and belonging to a family. Testing their values and beliefs after inhuman forms, clones, in *A Number*, and *the goat*, join their family. Both members of Salter’s and Martin’s families reveal the inner violence in different ways and reflect their intolerance to the act of blurring the lines between human and inhuman. Clones and the goat disturb the anthropocentric perspective by showing the families how imperfect they are. Once the decadence of human families is clarified and the forgotten fact about the larger family the human race belongs to, together with all kinds of living, is demonstrated, the verbal and physical violence within the characters towards inhumans become more visible. All human characters represent their ruthlessness and desire to conquer in one way or another. As portrayed in literary history, human, whose intention to dominate is everlasting, has always found a way to create binaries such as man versus God, man versus nature or man versus society. The ‘versus’ mentality is so strong in the human race that, instead of dissolving in a seemingly civilized and improved society, it turns now into the dichotomy “man versus humanity”. Leading humankind to self-

destruction, the notion “versus”, which is excellently exposed in these plays, essentially brings forth the need of a ‘and’ mentality, as Michael in *A Number* accurately embraces. The only solution which both *A Number* and *The Goat* try to show is to accept human and inhuman together as the only basic family.

#### CONCLUSION

The Other’s silence in the examined Coetzee’s select novels is more than being just a mere renunciation of agency. Rather, it is adopted as a strategy of resistance to escape the authoritative and hegemonic process of subjectification that tends to thematize and interpret the Other’s agency according to its epistemological framework. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the Other’s story is hardly told by speech as much as by silence. The barbarian girl’s systematic recourse to silence occludes the Empire’s representatives’ attempts at deciphering her. In *Foe*, the possibility that only Friday’s tongue can tell his story reveals that the Other in Coetzee’s fiction remains impenetrable and incommensurable. However, it is only in *Age of Iron* that silence acquires ethical empowerment that leads Mrs Curren to question her belonging to the South African oligarchy and to disavow the colonial language of apartheid, which fails to establish an authentic and constructive dialogue between different cultures and races. In the above-studied texts, Coetzee orchestrates silence as a modality of subversion and resistance that potentially enables the oppressed figures of otherness to perpetuate and defend their autonomy and difference against the totalizing and homogenizing discourse of the Self.

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