

Reading the Spaces of Ethics in Caryl Churchill's A Number

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⁴ ABSTRACT

Caryl Churchill's play *A Number* came in the wake of the path breaking creation of Dolly, the cloned sheep. The play occupies a position of total relevance even today where we witness new phenomenal Artificial Intelligence advances on the way to technological singularity.

This article is an analysis of the stand the play takes in placing cloning into the rigid rubrics of good and bad duality. This article concludes that Churchill has adopted a balanced stand in giving voice to the issue of cloning, which stands against the popular contention of it being an advocacy opposing cloning.

INTRODUCTION

The formulation of cloning as an ethical issue rather than a scientific advancement has its roots in religion, popular culture, media and art. To place the idea of cloning in a poor light has been a practice even before the cloning of Dolly, the sheep. as Frazzetto discusses in his 2004 article:

² Other faiths are more difficult to pin down, as their positions towards science and reproductive techniques are less categorical and more diverse. Most theistic religions, for instance, strongly reject reproductive cloning because they consider life to be a 'gift' from God. Bringing into being a new human by cloning—as opposed to normal sexual reproduction—is considered to be an act against God's creation or a usurpation of the Creator's power. Buddhism, by contrast, does not have the same fundamental opposition to cloning. “Many of these theological objections disappear when cloning is viewed from a Buddhist perspective,” said Damien Keown, a Reader in Buddhism in the Department of History at Goldsmiths College, University of London, UK, and an authoritative voice on Buddhist responses to cloning and other biomedical issues.

ANALYSIS

Caryl Churchill's *A Number* came a short while after Dolly's creation when the debate over whether cloning is ethically right or wrong was at its zenith. Even before the advancements in this regard, society at large was influenced in their perception of human identity, nature of human beings, the creation of humans and their copies by humans through such works which can now be categorised as Clone-literature. *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley and Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* is often cited as examples of technology going wrong when God's mechanism is tried to be altered. The formation of such an inherent hostile attitude towards this technology is immensely influenced by religion and traditional philosophical concepts of human identity and anthropocentric views. As Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Mannien, 2010) puts it:

Human clones have often been depicted in movies as nothing but carbon copies of their genetic predecessor with no minds of their own (e.g., *Multiplicity* and *Star Wars: Attack of the Clones*), as products of scientific experiments that have gone horribly wrong, resulting in deformed quasi-humans (*Alien Resurrection*) or murderous children (*Godsend*), as persons created simply for spare parts for their respective genetic predecessor (*The Island*), or as deliberate recreations of famous persons from the past who are expected to act just like their respective predecessor (*The Boys from Brazil*). Even when depicting nonhuman cloning, films (such as *Jurassic Park*) tend to portray products of cloning as menacing, modern-day Frankensteinian monsters of sorts, which serve to teach humans a lesson about the dangers of "playing God." ("Cloning")

Since human cloning still remains as a hypothetical situation, a judgement whether clones will have a lack of identity or a closed future or bad impact in the society is something we cannot definitely arrive at. It is from the fictional accounts that the majority of the ideas regarding cloning exist. Caryl Churchill's *A Number* when read superficially seems to be a work that is in centum confirmation with the hitherto negative portrayal of scientifically produced organisms. The bleak setting of the play, to cite an instance, itself projects a notion of an impending tragedy. So is the case with the portrayal of the characters. The desperate father, the sons (two among the three versions) and the happenings as sequenced in the play at first gives the idea that cloning has been the sole reason for all the mishaps.

But on a closer look we can understand that Caryl Churchill does not exactly demarcate the good and evil of cloning. To judge the ethical soundness of cloning technology is something, in fact, the text does not do at all. Instead of a value based appraisal, the text as well as the author attempts to elucidate a possible heightening of the intricacy of human identity, as perceived by the society at large, if at all human cloning is to become a reality.

The replacement of human beings with posthuman entities underlines the nature of identity as a social construct. The idea that identity is not something that a divine being installs, by default, into a human being is a fact beyond debate. The socio-political milieu, culture, economy, gender and so on goes the list of factors that affect one's identity formation. All throughout his/her life the identity keeps on evolving and changing. Thus the concept of "original identity" in itself is an illusion.

³ It is obvious that identities do not come into being in a vacuum. Nor do they emerge first and then merely seek out a suitable context for themselves. Thus, societies clearly play an important causal role in creating and shaping identity. Then again, it is also clear that identities are not merely created by society and foisted willy-nilly on helpless, hapless individuals. People clearly do exert considerable choice and influence on their identities. (Baumeister & Muraven, 1996)

The idea of "original" in itself is a tricky and elusive term. In a world where values are in a constant flux of change, the validity of the term "original" too changes. In the context of cloning, terming the source from which the substance for cloning is obtained as original, becomes a fallacy owing to the fact that the created being too has its own identity, traits and characteristics very much as the initial organism. What a clone becomes depends entirely on how it survives, where it survives and why it survives. The identity formed in the clone will be entirely different. The clone is called a clone not to establish the idea that it is a copy, rather it is done so to indicate that it ⁵ is the end result of a process called cloning; thus the product can be considered as a posthuman entity. This is exemplified in the play through the characterisation of the third Bernard who goes by the name Michael and is unperturbed to know that he is a clone.

The politics of gender in the context of scientific advancements is also a concept that has been subtly and quite ingeniously, dealt by the author. The rise of cloning can mean that, the social construct of woman being the more responsible partner in the process of reproduction can get thwarted. In the play all the versions of Bernard except the first have been created

without the help of a female. However, if closely analysed one can see the fact that the point of crisis in this play is Bernard's mother who committed suicide. The plotline has an indirect connotation to the possibility of Bernard1 being a normal child (and hence not having the need for his father to look for another version) had he been raised not just by his father but also by his mother. The idea that mother or female even though not required for reproduction plays an important role in the sound bringing up of a child is indirectly or unknowingly projected here. This idea, therefore, is in direct alignment with the social construct of a mother being ethically responsible for a child's health, conduct and morality.

Churchill seems to strike a chord of beautiful balance between the contesting views related to cloning. For instance the root cause for such an action of cloning in the text is Salter. He did not do it entirely to avoid his son. He was looking for a second chance to raise his son in a way that seemed correct and right to him. Technology provided him the second chance he wanted albeit with a glitch that he was not aware of. This contrast between Bernard 1 and the second one is validated by the following:

Intentionally taking steps to create a child via cloning (or any other kind of reproductive technology) could be seen, instead, as a mutual affirmation of love on behalf of the prospective parents and clear evidence that they really desired the resulting child. Whereas in sexual reproduction the child may be a product of chance, a cloned child would be a product of deliberate choice, which, according to some philosophers, could be a superior method of creation in some respects. (Brock & Buchanan, 2007)

The fact that how Bernard2 came to know of a possible existence of others like him or why the doctors cloned many Bernards is not mentioned in the play. "The primary characterization of cloning as an ethical issue centres around three connected concerns: the loss of human uniqueness and individuality, the pathological motivations of a cloner, and the fear of out-of-control scientists." (PD, 2018)- the text could be said to be deliberately under exploring these motifs so as to exhibit an unbiased stand towards the concept of cloning.

Murder is often used as a strong tool to underscore the evil nature of an "unnatural" creature. The best example is Frankenstein itself. In this context the murder of Bernard 2 by Bernard1 can be mistaken as a manifestation of the same idea. However, throughout the play Bernard1 is depicted as a traumatised and aggressive person who cannot come to terms with his

father's choice of a "copy" over him. Thus the murder motif sprouts from the aggressive behaviour rather than cloning process. Bernard1 even plans to kill Bernard2's child if he has one. The following excerpt from the play elucidates the argument:

B1 again and again and again, every night I'd be

SALTER No

B1 so you didn't hear?

SALTER no but you can't have

B1 yes I was shouting, are you telling me you didn't

SALTER no of course I didn't

B1 you didn't

SALTER no

B1 you weren't sitting there listening to me shouting

SALTER no

B1 you weren't out

SALTER no

B1 so I needed to shout louder.

SALTERER Of course sometimes everyone who's had children will tell you so sometimes you put them to bed and they want another story and you say goodnight now and go away and they call out once or twice and you say no go to sleep now and they might call out again and they go to sleep.

B1 The other one. Your son. My brother is he? my little twin.

SALTER Yes.

B1 Has he got a child?

SALTER No.

B1 Because if he had I'd kill it.

SALTER No, he hasn't got one.

B1 So when you opened the door you didn't recognise me.

SALTER No because

B1 Do you recognise me now?

SALTER I know it's you.

B1 No but look at me.

SALTER I have. I am.

B1 No, look in my eyes. No, keep looking. Look.

(Churchill, 2013)

Therefore, unlike the representations of cloning and cloned beings in hitherto popular science fiction works, Churchill has quite poignantly presented the subject without much of a bias. Instead of taking sides with pro and anti-cloning groups, she has highlighted the very valid question of what qualifies us as humans.

Conclusion

Thus, from one angle it can be seen as a science fiction and from the other it can be totally denied the status of being a fiction owing to the potential prefiguring it holds about the current as well as upcoming technological developments that are posing a “threat” to humanity. Cloning was a fiction then but not so now. The fact that Churchill conceived a play that is minimalistic in terms of set, costume and characters to give voice to an issue of massive importance that too with serious undertones is a laudable fact. In total, with the rhetoric of hope and fear that Churchill adequately mixed, *A Number* becomes a prophecy, document and piece of art, all at once.

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