



An Interpretation of the Identity Crisis of Human Clones in the Play *A Number*

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ABSTRACT

*After the birth of cloned sheep Dolly in 1997, cloning technology, especially human cloning, has become a controversial topic since the end of the last century. It has brought infinite impact to both natural science and human science in the world. Although up to now, there has not been a successful attempt at human cloning, people have never stopped worrying about this issue. Drama and science fiction frequently address this subject. The most important contemporary British female dramatist, Caryl Churchill, tells of alternative father-son relationships in the age of cloning and exposes the identity crisis of human clones in her play *A Number*. In this paper, the identity paradox, value inquiry, and subjectivity of clones are interpreted separately to feel the identity crisis of clones and to experience Churchill's thoughts on the technological advances on the identity of clones and the relationship between clones and human beings.*

KEYWORDS: Caryl Churchill, *A Number*, human clones, identity crisis

INTRODUCTION

Caryl Churchill (1938-) is the foremost contemporary British female dramatist. Churchill has written 49 works to date, which have made a significant impact on the Western theater community. She has been honored with the Richard Hillary Memorial Prize, the Obie Award, and the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize. In 2010, she was elected to the Theater Hall of Fame in the United States. One of the reasons why her works are widely admired is her refusal to repeat herself (Aston and Elin 164). She is an exploratory and experimental playwright who focuses on female identity, historical memory, and the ethics of power in contemporary society, and presents them in a magical way that speaks to the heart and is thought-provoking. The play *A Number* (2002) is one of her representative works, which tells of alternative father-son relationships in the age of cloning and exposes the identity crisis of human clones.

When *A Number* was first introduced in 2002, cloning was a controversial issue, as Britain legalized the cloning of human embryos for therapeutic purposes in 2001. Although cloning for reproductive purposes remains illegal, Britain was the first country to legalize it for research (Campos 27). As a result, the play has attracted a lot of attention and discussion upon its release. It features two actors playing four roles: father Salter, son Bernard 1 (B1) and two cloned sons, Bernard 2 (B2) and Michael Black. B2, who grew up thinking he was his father Salter's only son, accidentally found that he was just one of several clones. Salter had a biological son, B1, who

did not pass away as he claimed, but was abandoned by him and genetically cloned. Although the play is short, consisting of five acts in total, Churchill intertwines the motivation and ethics of human cloning, the identity of human clones, and father-son relationships in the play, demonstrating her reflections on the impact of technological advances on the identity of the human clones and on the relationship between the human clones and the human beings.

At present, there is relatively little research on this play compared to Churchill's feminist plays. Anghel focuses on the analysis of alienation in this play (154). By examining the three aspects of physical alienation, psychic alienation, and social alienation, Anghel reveals Churchill's attitudes towards scientific evolution and the impact of cloning on social and moral values and relationships. Campos first explores the mathematization of identity at work in *A Number* (28). Secondly, she makes her argument that Churchill's stage defines itself as a non-analytical space, contrary to the scientific worldview it suggests. Finally, Campos analyzes the failure of ethical relations in the play. The above three analyses provide an exhaustive analysis of Churchill's shaping of humanity in this play, causing readers to think deeply. Savilonis innovatively analyzes the play in detail from the perspective of the absence of mother (233). The mother, who has never appeared in the play, becomes the subject of a conversation that triggers the central conflict. Moreover, Savilonis believes that Churchill raises questions in this play of how mothers and ideas about mothering both shape and are shaped by existing social structures



(ibid 251). Furthermore, Muhi concentrates on the impact of technology on creating a dystopian world as suggested by Churchill in the play *A Number*, revealing Churchill's fear of the misuse of technology as well as the range of adverse effects of technological advances (677). In summary, existing research mainly analyzes the alienation reflected in the play, the shaping of humanity, the absence of characters, and the misuse of technology in this play, without a detailed analysis of the identity crisis of human clones. Therefore, combined with the theme of the play, this paper mainly focuses on human clones B2 and Michael Black, interpreting the identity paradox, value inquiry and subjectivity of the human clones respectively. Moreover, in Caryl Churchill's writing, the identity crisis of the human clones is experienced, and her ethical attitude toward human cloning can be felt.

THE IDENTITY PARADOX OF HUMAN CLONES

In the opening scene of the play *A Number*, B2 discovers some clones that look just like himself during his regular trips to the hospital. This discovery sparks a profound and lengthy conversation between father Salter and son B2 about the family's story and how science plays a role in it. During the conversation, B2, who grew up thinking he was an only child, learned that he was just one of many genetically identical copies of B1. This shocking discovery sends B2 into a nightmare. Who am I? Who are my parents? Am I real? These confusions embody the identity paradox of human clones in this play.

From the biological perspective, it is difficult to determine the genetic identity of cloned human beings. Unlike sexual reproduction, which determines the role of parents, cloned human is the product of asexual reproduction. The process of human cloning is first to remove the original DNA from the fertilized egg, inject the DNA with the cloned human, and then generate human embryos. Human clones are people born by somatic cell nuclear transfer technology. Therefore, this inevitably leads to doubts about the family structure and personal identity of cloned humans. In the play *A Number*, the clone B2 is faced with such confusion. Churchill describes the birth of B2 in the dialogue between Salter and B1 in Act II:

SALTER a scraping cells a speck a speck
B1 a speck yes because we're talking that microscope world of giant blobs and globs
SALTER that's all
B1 and they take this painless scrape this specky little cells of me and kept that and you threw the rest of me away (Churchill 180).

This suggests that B2 is the scientists and doctors who obtained B1's scratch cells and then generated B2 and other clones in the laboratory. B2 has the genetic information of B1, that is, B1 as the donor who provided the somatic nucleus for B2's birth. However, in the play, B2 called Salter his father until he discovered the other human clones, and

was not even aware of B1's existence. Indeed, B2's entire genetic information comes directly from B1. Therefore, if a father had to be identified for B2, that person would seem to be more likely to be B1. B2 became confused about his kinship after meeting other clones: he realizes that he may be one of the human clones, which means that his father, Salter, is not actually his biological father, and his mother is just an invention. He has no family, as he was conceived in a laboratory. His family relationship and personal identity have also collapsed.

At the psychological level, B2 has been unable to define its self-identity after learning that he is one of the clones of B1. Until B2 learned that he was a clone of another person, his life was quiet and ordinary. However, when he saw the existence of other clones and gradually learned the truth of the matter in his conversation with Salter, everything changed. At first, Salter told B2 that he was the original, and others are copies, "they belong to you, they should belong to you, they're made from your" (Churchill 170). Later in B2's repeated inquiries, Salter told B2 that his wife and 4-year-old son "had been killed in a car crash" (ibid 177) and he wanted the original son, so he cloned B2. Although B2 believes Salter's statement, "I'm just a copy. I'm not the real one" (ibid 177) still shows that B2 is lost in its identity. After knowing that he was a human clone with the same B1 gene, B2 could no longer regard himself as Salter's real son. In addition, in the play, B2 is five years younger than B1. Scholar Xu mentioned that the age gap caused by cloning will cast a shadow over the younger ones (221). Many people believe that the younger ones in the gap twins will suffer great psychological harm and state that their birth is a mistake. In the later conversation with Salter, B2 learned that his name was exactly the same as B1:

B2 Did you give me the same name as him?
SALTER Does it make it worse?
B2 Probably (Churchill 178).

It further exacerbates B2's crisis of self-identity, as it turns out that B2 is just a substitute for B1. In the Act III, B2 met B1. Through their communication, B2 not only realized that Salter's claim that his previous son had died was a deception, but also understood the trauma that Salter has brought to B1 and the fact that Salter's love for B2 himself has harmed B1. Then B2 felt guilty towards B1 and thought that his existence was a mistake. Therefore, amidst the guilt towards B1 and the loss of his identity, B2 painfully claimed that he could not "feel himself" (ibid 192) and decided to "leave this country" (ibid 192). His guilt towards B1, as well as his fear that B1 would retaliate against him, and his inability to feel his existence, all caused great distress and harm to him. He does not want to be the substitute for B1. But denying that identity means he loses the certainty of his own origin. He does not know who he really is, he has no ownership and wanders forever.

From the above analysis, it can be seen that B2 shows

confusion about kinship after learning that he is a cloned human, and his family relationship collapses. At the same time, being a cloned human not only makes him feel guilty about B1, but also aggravates his crisis of self-identity. Under a series of pressures, he decides to leave this country and escape everything here. These are all good examples of the identity fallacy that technology may bring to human clones.

THE VALUE OF HUMAN CLONES

Existence precedes essence (Sartre 20). In the philosophical sense of existentialism, the birth of a person has no special purpose. People are free and have unlimited possibilities. However, cloned human is clearly a purposeful existence, as no one would create a substitute for another person for no reason. Therefore, the significance of human cloning lies not in the existence itself, but in the purpose of existence. It is obvious that the existence of clones in *A Number* also has a purpose, which may lead to nightmares and questioning of their own value: why do I exist?

The ability of man to determine the purpose of his existence is a prerequisite for his freedom and dignity. In the play *A Number*, before B2 found himself a clone, he never doubted the significance of his existence. But when he comes to understand the truth of his identity, he realized that he had been completely exploited and used as a comfort to Salter, who had completely deprived him of his freedom and dignity. After Salter's wife committed suicide, Salter showed a cold attitude towards his son B1, and even had the welfare people pick B1 up, which made himself lose his father's identity. Later, in order to satisfy his wish to be a father and have a perfect son, he cloned B2 and other clones with B1's cells. It is therefore not difficult to realize that not only is B2's birth not sexual reproduction, but he is even born with a purpose. He was brought into the world passively, used as Salter's comfort, and passively raised in deception as the perfect son Salter expected him to be. When B2 learned of his identity as a clone, he could no longer be able to regard himself as a real human being, plan his future and survive in the society. He was caught up in a quest to find out the value of his existence. Unfortunately, in his search for the value of his existence, he was hated by B1, who believed that B2 has deprived him of the love of his father. In the end, B2's life ended in the tragedy of being murdered by B1, and he no longer has the opportunity to find the true value of his existence.

In addition, in *A Number*, human clones such as B2 are not only not treated as normal people, but also materialized and equated with money, which also disrespects their freedom and value of existence. A real person has the right to choose, create, and act in many possibilities. However, the technology of human cloning is a violation of the freedom of clones, which makes them materialized and reduced to means, tools and commodities. In this play, clones are equated with goods and money by Salter. In the dialogue with B2, Salter repeatedly used words such as "things" and "it" to refer to human clones. This shows that in his opinion, clones are not real people,

they are just goods made under the drive of human purpose. B2 has repeatedly expressed indignantly that these clones are not things, but people: "you called them things. I think we'll find they're people." (Churchill 168), which shows that he is trying to establish the real existence value of clones. In addition, after learning that scientists and doctors had made other clones besides B2, Salter's first reaction was not angry. On the contrary, his first reaction was to equate those clones with money:

SALTER what? is it money? is it something you can put a figure on? put a figure on it.

B2 This is purely

SALTER yes

B2 suppose each person was worth ten thousand pounds

SALTER a hundred

B2 a hundred thousand?

SALTER they've taken a person away from you (ibid 171).

He equated each human clone with one hundred thousand pounds, and tried to seek a lawyer to "sue the hospital" (ibid 170) on the grounds of being deceived, in order to receive money. It can be clearly seen that Salter tried to quantify the value of the uniqueness of clones by reducing them to money. There is no doubt that this is a disrespect for the freedom and significance of the existence of clones, and their dignity has been deeply harmed.

According to the above analysis, it can be found that in the play, human clone B2's questioning of his own value clearly reflects that he is deeply troubled by the question "Why do I exist?" However, the end of his tragedy shows that his questioning of self-value has not been answered. B2 exists as a consolation of Salter, and together with other clones, they are materialized by Salter and equated with money. Their freedom, dignity and existence value are not respected.

THE SUBJECTIVITY OF HUMAN CLONES

Human cloning is a single copy of genes, it will not bring the opportunity to recombine two groups of genes like sexual reproduction. Therefore, in *A Number*, B2, Michael and other human clones have the same gene as B1, which can be said that they all exist as the mirror image of B1. This fact has led to a reflection on the subjectivity of clones: Are human clones and natural humans equal? Should their subjectivity be recognized and respected? In this play, Churchill's description of the process of seeking subjectivity of the two clones, B2 and Michael, seems to answer these two questions.

B2 has tried to conduct a search for his own subjectivity after realizing that he is a clone, unfortunately he fails and his subjectivity is not respected. First of all, B2's subjectivity was lost when he kept asking Salter questions to find his true identity after learning that he was a clone. Because subjectivity should be constructed by oneself, not by others. As early as in the ancient Greek period, Aristotle proposed

that humans should survive for their own survival and not for the survival of others. B2 did not realize this truth, so he lost himself in the process of searching for subjectivity, and fell into extreme pain, and even decided to run away from the city where he was. Secondly, tragedy struck during B2's escape. Out of jealousy of B2 and in order to take revenge on his father, B1 killed B2 and then committed suicide. The loss of life means the complete failure of the process of constructing B2's subjectivity. Besides, the fact that B2 does not have his own name in the whole play also implies the failure of his search for his own subjectivity. The tragic experience of B2 makes people feel that cloned human and natural human are unequal, and the subjectivity of cloned human has not been recognized and respected, which also reflects Churchill's sympathy for B2.

Different from B2, another cloned human, Michael Black, succeeded in finding his subjectivity. Firstly, Michael Black was educated and brought up as a clone. He knew that he was a clone, but this identity did not cause him to fall into identity crisis and confusion. On the contrary, he celebrated the fact that he shares his genetic material with a number of other clones and contextualized this fact for his biological father:

MICHAEL 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 percent the same as a lettuce. Does that cheer you up at all?

love about the lettuce. It makes me feel I belong (Churchill 211).

He abided by social rules and did not show strong emotions. Therefore, his life did not end tragically like B2. Secondly, Michael had a strong self-awareness and was not influenced by external factors. At the end of the play, he clearly expressed his free will:

SALTER And you're happy you say are you? you like your life?

MICHAEL I do yes, sorry (ibid 211).

He had a fixed job, a warm family, and he loved his wife and children. Unlike Salter, Michael was not obsessed with perfection. As his admiration for his wife's "slightly odd ears" (ibid 207) suggested, he found happiness in what Salter considered ordinary things:

MICHAEL The world's a mess of course. But you can't help, a sunny morning, leaves turning, off to the park with the baby, you can't help feeling wonderful can you?

SALTER Can't you?

MICHAEL Well that's how I seem to be (ibid 206).

Even though Salter has been trying to emphasize his clone identity when they talk, he has not been affected. He continued

to move forward through self-acceptance and self-identity, gaining his own value, establishing his own subjectivity, and enjoying his own life. In addition, unlike B2, Michael has his own name and true identity, which also reflects his success in seeking subjectivity. This makes people see the possibility of equality between cloned human and natural human beings, and also reflects Churchill's approval that the subjectivity of clones should be recognized and respected, and this is also her positive expectation that clones can establish their own subjectivity.

From the above analysis, it can be seen that Churchill gives her thoughts on the subjectivity of cloned human in this play. Through her description of the process of seeking subjectivity of the two clones, B2 and Michael, her sympathy for B2 and her positive expectation for cloned human to establish his own subjectivity can be felt.

CONCLUSION

Through the interpretation of the identity crisis of cloned human in *A Number*, it is not difficult to see Churchill's own thinking about the impact of the development of technology on the identity of clones. First of all, her views on the development of cloning technology or the emergence of clones are negative, because the development of cloning technology may cause the clones represented by B2 to have an identity fallacy, confusion about kinship, and not know who they are. It can also lead to the violation of the clones' freedom and dignity and the value of their existence, as well as the failure of the clones' search for subjectivity. However, Churchill's positive view of cloning technology can also be felt in this play: although Michael only appears in the Act V, it is not difficult to see from his dialogue with Salter that Michael accepts his identity as a clone frankly, with a strong sense of self, he pays attention to small things, and he could also harvest joy from ordinary small things. In addition, he successfully finds his own subjectivity. These facts reflect Churchill's view that the subjectivity of human cloning should be recognized and respected.

Although no cloned human has been announced yet and all countries in the world maintain a prohibition on the appearance of clones, Churchill's play *A Number* helps people envision a world with clones and enriches their thinking about a range of issues brought about by technology.

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