

ALIENATED LIVES: HAVING AS A DEHUMANIZING MODE OF EXISTENCE IN CARYL CHURCHILL'S *OWNERS*

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Abstract. *Marx's 'radical humanism', as presented in Erich Fromm's prominent study, To Have or to Be, is reflected in his criticism of the capitalist system, not only in terms of its social and economic aspects, but also in terms of its devastating effects upon the human psyche. The capitalist system, Marx and Fromm maintain, produces an impoverished human character dominated by avarice and greed, which tends to alienate all the physical and intellectual senses and replace them by the single sense of having. Instead of the myriad of ways in which an individual can appropriate an object, or human reality in general - such as by the faculty of senses, by thinking, feeling, observing, acting or loving - only the utilitarian, materialistic form of appropriation is considered relevant by the dominant Western mindset. Such a reduction of meaningful human relations to the world is depicted in Caryl Churchill's Owners. Churchill's characters' obsessive need to own - both objects and other people - deprives their lives of deeper meaning and fulfilment, either driving them into despair, madness and suicide, or turning their vitality into destructiveness, compelling them to annihilate everything that cannot be possessed. The paper also focuses on another common feature of Fromm's study and Churchill's play, namely, their recourse to Buddhism, which for both authors represents a system of thought diametrically opposed to the spirit of capitalist society centred in property and egotism.*

A number of parallels may be drawn between Caryl Churchill's play *Owners*, written in 1972, and Erich Fromm's prominent study, *To Have or to Be*, written four years later, in 1976. Both writers have felt compelled to elaborate on what they view as the dominant existential choice of the contemporary Western civilization and to warn of the devastating effects this choice may have upon the human psyche. Both authors also search for alternative modes of being which would liberate dormant human potentials and provide an individual with a more balanced understanding of reality and the self.

In his study, Fromm distinguishes between two forms of 'having'. There exists an innate drive, rooted in human existence, to 'have, keep, take care of, and use certain things in order to survive. This holds true for our bodies, for food, shelter, clothing, and for the

tools necessary to produce our needs.' It is a healthy, natural impulse directed 'in the pursuit of staying alive', which Fromm has labelled *existential having*. Opposed to it is *characterological having*, defined as a 'passionate drive to retain and keep', which has developed 'as the result of the impact of social conditions on the human species as it is biologically given.' It is an existential mode centered in egotism, selfishness, craving for material possessions and personal aggrandisement¹. This obsessive, 'pathological' form of having and its impact upon various spheres of human activity are the focal points of Fromm's study.

Although Fromm provides a historical background of this orientation, his primary concern is with the modern age and the capitalist system which, in his view, not only appeals to human avarice and greed, but actually generates these traits in order to function and sustain itself. In a society so utterly devoted to acquiring property and making a profit, Fromm maintains, it is difficult for an individual even to understand that 'having' is only one possible mode of living, or to conceive of others which would be based on different ethical and psychological premises.

It is in this context that Fromm refers to Marx, 'the real Marx, the radical humanist, not the vulgar forgery presented by Soviet communism.'² Marx's works, Fromm points out, repeatedly advance the idea that the capitalist system produces an impoverished human character, which tends to alienate all physical and intellectual senses and replace them by the single sense of having. Instead of a myriad of ways in which one can appropriate an object, or human reality in general - such as by the faculty of senses, by thinking, feeling, observing, acting or loving - only the utilitarian, materialist form of appropriation is considered relevant by the dominant Western mindset. In Marx's words, 'private property has made us so partial that an object is only ours when we have it, when it exists for us as capital or when it is directly eaten, drunk, worn, inhabited, etc., in short, *utilized* in some way.'³ To give a graphic example of Western man's essential illness, Fromm quotes a poem by Tennyson in which the author's persona reacts to seeing a beautiful flower by wanting to *have* it. He 'plucks it', 'root and all', in order to speculate about its potential function in attaining some spiritual insight; however, as a result of his interest in it, the flower itself is killed⁴.

Such a reduction of meaningful human relations to the world and, by implication, of the ways in which an individual can express his/her life and innermost being, is depicted in Caryl Churchill's *Owners*. Caught up in an intricate web of proprietary games and relations, and driven by an obsessive need to own - objects as well as other people - Churchill's characters feel miserable and discontented and yet, with a single exception, fail to find a way out of the dehumanizing structure which deprives their lives of deeper meaning and fulfilment.

This struggle against the ideological construct is rendered even more tragic when combined with issues of feminine inequality. As Fromm writes, 'the greatest enjoyment is perhaps not so much in owning material things but in owning living beings. In a patriarchal society even the most miserable of men in the poorest of classes can be an owner of property - in his relationship to his wife, his children, his animals, over whom he can feel

¹ E. Fromm, *To Have or to Be?*, New York, Harper&Row, 1976, p.85.

² *Ibid.*, p.16.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

he is an absolute master.⁵ Marion, 'the powerful rich property developer' who takes a perverse pleasure in owning the lives and destinies of people under her sway, was in the play's pre-history herself considered property by her despotic, chauvinist husband Clegg. ('She's not like other women in just one important respect. She is mine. I have invested heavily in Marion and don't intend to lose any part of my profit.') Marion's great vitality and inner strength naturally conflict with the passive role traditionally assigned to women in a patriarchal society. As she says, 'I always said I wasn't the butcher's wife.' Striving to establish a different identity, she attends evening classes, has an unfortunate love affair and eventually ends up in a mental institution. Her husband recounts:

When Marion was in hospital they tried to tell her she'd be happier and more sane as a good wife. Comb your hair and take an interest in your husband's work. Find a hobby. She had her painting, which was all right. Creative hobbies are very nice for a woman...But she wouldn't listen. She came out of there with staring eyes and three weeks later she bought her first house.

Any artistic inclination that Marion may have had could not bring her contentment in a world which degrades creativity, viewing it not as an essential human endeavour in interpreting reality, but as a 'feminine pastime' (while simultaneously degrading femininity). Instead, Marion decides to invest her energy in the sphere of life most highly cherished and given central significance within the societal structure - namely, in making a profit. Ironically, Marion's rebellion against being regarded as men's property concludes with her becoming a proprietor herself.

In *To Have or to Be* Fromm hopefully wrote:

The growing movement for women's liberation is of enormous significance because it is a threat to the principle of power on which contemporary society lives - that is, if the women clearly mean by liberation that they do not want to share the men's power over other groups.... If the movement for the liberation of women can identify its own role and function as representative of 'antipower', women will have a decisive influence in the battle for a new society.⁶

If Marion's character epitomizes one of the existing fractions within the modern women's lib, then it is evidently a fraction which has failed Fromm's great expectations. Far from being representatives of 'antipower', women such as Marion only want their share or power within the men's world. Ironically, Marion's own 'act of liberation' comes down simply to her discarding all femininity and identifying completely with the mainstream patriarchal tradition of conquest, pride and greed:

Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war. That was my favourite song when I was seven. Fight the good fight... I know the bible stories aren't true but that makes their meaning matter most. God gave him dominion over every beast of the field and fowl of the air. Gave the land to him and to his seed forever... How did man get to the moon? Not by sitting staring at an orange. Columbus, Leonardo de Vinci, Scott of the Antarctic. You would be content on a flat earth. But the

⁵ Ibid., p. 70.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 192-193.

animals are ours. The vegetables and minerals. For us to consume. We don't shrink from blood...

In terms of Althusser's theories⁷, Marion has failed to attain an independent identity, to become an 'individual'. She is still a 'subject', a practitioner of the same ideology which has always informed her life and understanding of reality. The 'Ideological State Apparatuses' (i.e., family, marriage, educational system, health service) easily translate the energy of Marion's original protest into socially acceptable terms, by leading her to believe that the only possible direction of 'growth' is from 'being owned' to 'owning', from being a victim to becoming an executioner. Marion never questions the validity and appropriateness of the ideological practices governing her life; when, after a successful sale, she treats her husband by taking him to a strip club, she suggests: 'If you want a girl I'll buy you one.' From the beginning to the end of the play she is 'acted' by the same principal ideology of 'having'.

For the same reason, Marion's feelings for her lover Alec are distorted by her possessiveness, and she is deeply disturbed by the realization that, due to his peculiar mental disposition, he is someone who cannot be possessed. Throughout the play Marion will attempt to take control over Alec's life - to own him - first by buying the house which he tenants with his wife Lisa and the children, and then by managing to legally adopt Alec's and Lisa's new-born baby. The child becomes a piece of property, a part of Marion's lover which she attempts to claim. Incapable of understanding the concept of genuine, selfless love such as Alec offers her, Marion turns into a monster, a kind of modern Shylock who demands a pound of human flesh as a substitute for true affection:

Every one of you thinks I will give in. Because I'm a woman, is it? I'm meant to be kind.... I won't. I can be as terrible as anyone. Soldiers have stuck swords through innocents. I can massacre, too. Into the furnace. Why shouldn't I be Genghis Khan? Empires only come by killing. I won't shrink. Not one of you loves me. But he [the baby] shall grow up to say he does.

Even this, however, fails to bring Alec under her sway and so Marion decides to destroy him ('pluck' him, as it were - like the flower in Tennyson's poem.) The fire set by Marion's employee, Worsley, kills Alec along with an innocent child, symbolically also turning into ashes the last remnants of Marion's humanity. Having killed love, Marion now feels she is capable of anything:

I'm not sorry at all about Alec. Or about that other baby. Not at all. I never knew I could do a thing like that. I might be capable of anything. I'm just beginning to find out what's possible.

⁷ L. Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. J. Rivkin and M. Ryan, Blackwell, 1998., pp. 294-303. According to Althusser, in order to understand the way ideology functions at the micro-level of the individual, we need to replace the notion of the individual (which stands for 'natural and given') with that of the 'subject' (which is a social construction). Althusser maintains that we are all constituted as subjects-in-ideology by the ISAs (Ideological State Apparatuses), whereby the ideological norms naturalized in their practices constitute not only our sense of the world, but also our sense of identity, of relations to other people and the society in general.

The play draws implicit analogies between Marion's moral downfall and the events on a larger scale. The backdrop against which the destinies of Churchill's characters unfold is an incessant Orwellian 'war-is-peace' - in which Clegg feels only a vague sting of conscience for having killed a man while he was in the army (Worsley: 'Oh the army. Why didn't you say so? Anyone can kill somebody when they're in the army'), while Worsley's cousin in America 'reckons he killed any number' without feeling anything much at all, since he was bombing from a plane. ('Bombing isn't what I call killing. You can't feel over a certain distance.') Churchill seems to suggest that, just like Marion, the modern Western world has got rid of the last remnants of humanity and is now capable of anything in the pursuit of wealth and power.

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While Althusser's theories provide an insightful account of the process by which an individual is transformed into a 'subject' of a given social system, for authors such as Fromm or Churchill it is essential to point out that this process is not completely overwhelming and that there still remain standpoints from which it is possible to resist it. Contrary to the capitalist ideology, which tends to represent 'having' as the only available existential mode, Fromm discerns a whole tradition within European thought, starting with certain ideas in the Old and New Testament, through early Christian scholars and individual philosophers such as Eckhart and Spinoza, up to Marx and contemporary humanists such as Schweitzer, whose teachings all have in common the condemnation of the having structure. It is a school of thought which views 'having' as an obstacle to the full development of human potentials and a meaningful, joyous existence. Fromm also discusses Buddhism which, in his opinion, is in many ways akin to such views and objectives.

Caryl Churchill's *Owners* also express the idea that resistance to ideology is possible. The character whom Marion (in the above quote) accuses of 'sitting staring at an orange' and 'being content on a flat earth' is her ex-lover Alec, whose life philosophy is quite different from hers. Alec and Marion set out from the same feeling of discontent which they cannot quite define and to which no cure is satisfactory. They both attend evening school, where Alec initially shows great thirst for knowledge, but quickly gets disappointed:

MARION: We were going to better ourselves. What did we go to evening classes for? We both felt we'd missed something. You were never sure what subject was the answer. Everything seemed to lead to something else you wanted to get hold of. There were books in bed. You couldn't let a single fact go.

ALEC: Learning things wasn't any use.

If ideology, as Althusser puts it, is a set of practices forming an imaginary relation to one's actual conditions of existence⁸, then all the subjects Alec studies (the educational system being one of ISAs) refer not to his actual life, but to this imaginary distortion, supporting the illusion in various ways. Alec's situation is similar to what Orwell describes in the appendix to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, when he explains that further reduction

⁸ Ibid., p. 295.

and ideological colouring of Newspeak will practically disable those growing up with it to articulate any feeling of disagreement or protest.⁹

Unlike Marion, however, who remains entrapped by the ideological construct and whose emancipation is only illusory, Alec manages to get 'beyond language' and enter a different mode of being:

Slowly everything... fell through. Lisa, children, work - there was no point. There was no point in the things I wanted instead. There wasn't any point in killing myself. That went on for some time. I didn't know how to make things better. I didn't care if they were better or not. I didn't know what better meant. But now the same things seem quite simple. Lisa, children, work, why not?

...I longed very much one morning for the sea in winter. Grey sea, I thought, gritty sand. So I leapt up from the bed, grabbed a train, went. I got there and it was nothing special. Grey sea, like I thought, gritty sand... Just right. I saw what it was. It's just that I'd had a lot of difficulty. Wanting things. Or seeing no point in them. And since then I haven't.

The experience may appear to Marion as a 'breakdown' but for Alec it was actually a 'break up' or a 'break through' - to a new attitude to reality and the self. Although Alec's experience of quiet content and inner harmony with the world is presented in the play as instinctive and completely authentic, the author herself recognizes the influence of Buddhism. In terms of the Buddhist teachings, the metaphor used for Alec's revelation is 'the bottom fell off a pail' (i.e., as Alec says, 'everything fell through'). This means that all of one's problems are suddenly solved; not in the sense of some particular (positive) solution, but in the sense that the problems have ceased to be perceived as such.¹⁰

The same psychic disposition, related to the Buddhist notion of 'enlightenment', is presented in two Zen stories which are also relevant for the understanding of the play. The first exemplifies the absence of craving for material possessions. A thief breaks into a poor hut inhabited by a Buddhist monk. The monk has no properties apart from his prayer bowl and so, seeing that the intruder is dissatisfied with such poor loot, gives away his robe as well. After the astounded thief has gone, the monk remains naked in his hut and watches the moon rising. "Poor man!" he exclaims. "I wish I could have given him this beautiful moon!"¹¹

The second is concerned with the need to give up possessive love and the tendency to own people. A monk is accused of having fathered a young girl's illegitimate baby and her family demands that he should take care of the child. He asks, "Is that so?" and accepts. He takes excellent care of the baby and treats him/her as a loving father until one day the girl admits that she lied and demands to get her child back. Again the monk says, "Is that so?" and complies.¹²

Alec's behaviour in the play observes practically identical patterns - when he discovers that he and his wife Lisa have been robbed, and later on, when Marion manages to get legal possession of Lisa's and Alec's baby. Alec's attitude that the thief should be allowed

⁹ G. Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1983, p. 266.

¹⁰ V. Bajac, prir. *Zen priče*, Beograd, ^igoja, 2000, str. 31.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, str. 16.

¹² *Ibid.*, str. 11.

to keep his loot if he needs it so much, and that it is acceptable to leave the child with Marion, since it is well taken care of, need to be placed in the context of the relevant Buddhist teachings to be properly appreciated.

Perhaps the most striking consequence of Alec's 'revelation' is his new attitude to love. He decides that it would be wrong to 'love anyone more than anyone else'. His wife Lisa finds it very difficult to grasp: 'He's very nice to me all the time. But I sometimes wonder if he knows who I am. I think he'd be nice to anyone.' Alec also decides not to deny sympathy and affection to anyone who needs it: at her request, he makes love with Marion at the moment when she's practically plotting to destroy him and his family - not because he succumbs to her blackmail, but out of genuine desire to help her. It is the same kind of selfless love which prompts him, at the end of the play, to give his life trying to save his landlord's baby from a burning building.

Alec's character may also be viewed as contrasted to Worsley, Marion's underling who is completely under her sway. Worsley's utter despair and repeated farcical attempts to commit suicide point to the overall failure of life and death in the modern world as depicted in Churchill's play. In such an environment, Alec's altruism and willing sacrifice contour a new, hopeful and encouraging map of meaning.

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Nowadays, a full thirty years after it was first staged, Churchill's play hasn't lost anything of its contemporariness. The same may be said of the prophetic words of the Nobel Prize winner Albert Schweitzer, addressed to the developed world in 1952: 'To the degree to which his [man's] power grows he becomes more and more a poor man... It must shake up our conscience that we become all the more inhuman the more we grow into supermen.'¹³

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¹³ E. Fromm, *op.cit.*, p. 3.

OTUĐENI ŽIVOTI: POSEDOVANJE KAO TRAGIČNA OPSESIJA U *SOPSTVENICIMA* KERIL ČERČIL

Nataša Tučev

*U svojoj značajnoj studiji **Imati ili biti**, Erih From osvrće se na Marksa kao na "radikalnog humanistu", čija se kritika kapitalizma ne odnosi samo na društvene i ekonomske aspekte, već i na pogubni uticaj koji ovaj sistem može imati na ljudsku psihu. I Marks i From, naime, smatraju da kapitalizam formira osiromašenu ljudsku ličnost kojom dominira pohlepa, čiji su duhovni i fizički potencijali otuđeni i svedeni na potrebu za posedovanjem. Iako postoji mnoštvo načina na koje pojedinac može da prisvoji objekat svog interesovanja, ili stvarnost uopšte - putem čula ili osećanja, razmišljanjem, posmatranjem, delovanjem ili ljubavlju - za dominantnu kulturu Zapada merodavna je samo utilitarna, materijalistička forma prisvajanja. Takva redukcija smislenih ljudskih odnosa sa svetom predstavljena je u drami **Sopstvenici** Keril Čerčil. Likovi ove drame ispoljavaju opsesivnu potrebu za posedovanjem - objekata kao i ljudi - koja njihove živote lišava dubljeg značenja i ispunjenja, terajući ih u očaj, ludilo i samoubistvo, ili pretvarajući njihovu vitalnost u destruktivnost koja ih navodi da unište ono što ne mogu imati. Rad takođe razmatra zajedničko interesovanje E. Froma i K. Čerčil za budizam, koji za oba autora predstavlja filozofski sistem dijametralno suprotan kapitalističkoj usredsređenosti na vlasništvo i egotizam.*