



*“As if sky was blue”: An Eco-Marxist Reading of Caryl Churchill’s Play
Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen*

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”وكان السماء زرقاء“: قراءة ماركسية بيئية لمسرحية كارل تشرشل
(الأوكسجين ليس ليس ليس ليس ليس كافياً)

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المستخلص

تواجه الإنسانية مجموعة متزايدة من التحديات البيئية التي تتطلب اهتماماً فورياً ولا يمكن تجاهلها. إن أحد المشكلات التي تواجه العالم هي تلوث الهواء الجوي، الذي يشكل خطراً كبيراً على البيئة ورفاهية الإنسان حيث يؤثر النظام الرأسمالي بشكل كبير على تفاقم تلوث الهواء الجوي وتدهور البيئة. يتجلى هذا التأثير في مسرحية ما بعد المروع (الأكسجين ليس ليس ليس كافيًا) (١٩٧١) لكارل تشرشل. تقدم المسرحية سيناريو مستقبلي تواجه فيه الإنسانية عواقب جسيمة بسبب ممارسات التلوث الناتجة عن الرأسمالية واستغلال الموارد الطبيعية بشكل غير مستدام. حيث تصور مستقبلاً يدفع فيه الانحلال البيئي الناس إلى العنف واليأس. وفي مثل هذه الحالة، فإنها تسلط الضوء على الحاجة إلى اتخاذ إجراءات فورية بشأن تغير المناخ والانهيار البيئي. يعتمد هذا البحث على الماركسية البيئية كإطار نظري لأجراء تحليل شامل لكيفية استغلال الرأسمالية للموارد الطبيعية في سبيل تحقيق مكاسب مالية فورية، مما يؤثر بشكل ضار على البيئة. الكلمات المفتاحية: الرأسمالية، الماركسية البيئية، تلوث الهواء، حقبة التأثير البشري، كارل تشرشل

Abstract

Humanity is confronted with a growing array of environmental challenges that demand immediate attention and cannot be disregarded. One of the issues the world faces is air pollution, which presents a significant risk to both the environment and human well-being. The capitalist system has a great impact on the exacerbation of air pollution and environmental deterioration. This impact is reflected in Caryl Churchill's post-apocalyptic play Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen (1971). The play presents a futuristic scenario in which humanity faces grave consequences due to the polluting practices of capitalism and the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources. It depicts a future in which environmental degradation drives people to violence and despair. In such a situation, it highlights the need for immediate action on climate change and ecological collapse. This paper draws upon eco-Marxism as a theoretical framework to comprehensively analyse how capitalism extensively exploits natural resources in pursuit of immediate financial gains, hence detrimentally impacting the environment.

Keywords: Capitalism, Eco-Marxism, Air Pollution, Anthropocene, Caryl Churchill

Introduction

1.1 Environmental Crisis and Capitalocene

The effects of human-made environmental damage are obviously one of the most significant challenges of our time. Human activities such as deforestation, overfishing, urbanisation, and the use of oil and gas are only a few examples of how humans have significantly impacted the Earth’s climate, ecosystems, and biodiversity. As a result of these significant changes, the Anthropocene¹ geological epoch has emerged, in which human activities have taken centre stage in changing the Earth’s systems. In the same breath as the Anthropocene, the Capitalocene² is the epoch in which human activities, mainly capitalist ways of production and consumption, have had an essential impact on the Earth’s ecosystems, geology, and atmosphere.

The transition from the Anthropocene to the Capitalocene epoch shows that scholars and activists are beginning to recognise the capitalist system leading to the current environmental disaster. While the Anthropocene acknowledges that humans have had an impact on the environment, it offers neither an explanation nor a solution for this environmental catastrophe. But Capitalocene focuses more on capitalism and encourages an in-depth study of the economic system that has brought us to this crisis point. Eco-Marxists argue that capitalism’s focus on profit and accumulation is the cause of the exploitation of Earth’s resources, the ruin of ecosystems, and an increase in social and environmental inequities. They suggest that for society to become fairer and more sustainable, it needs to change in order to handle the problems of the Capitalocene and the Anthropocene.

More criticism of environmental damage and climate change has been placed on capitalism and the free-market system. The Capitalocene “captures the fact that our ecological crises have

been precipitated not by humans in some undifferentiated and generalised way, but more specifically by the global spread of capitalism and its socio-economic-ecological injustices” (Arons, 2020, p.17). Capitalocene asserts the capitalist economic system, which puts profits before environmental protection, primarily caused the current environmental disaster. Therefore, the capitalist system’s priority of immediate financial gain above a sustainable future is at the core of the ecological crisis.

1.2 The Political Theater as a Medium of Social Critique

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, British theatre emerged as a platform for political expression, aiming to confront prevailing social and political problems. It means that theatre became a space for political engagement and activism, with playwrights using their performances to rise against the power systems and social norms. The playwrights of this era focused on creating pleasure and used their stage to effect social and political changes, frequently drawing on Marxist and Feminist theories. Thus, they noticed themselves as a part of a broader movement for social justice and were willing to take risks and push obstacles to reap their desires. In her book *Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain since 1968*, Catherine Itzin describes this era:

1968 therefore marked the coming to consciousness—to political consciousness—of the war-baby generation, to an awareness of environmental plundering and pollution, to cold-war imperialism, to conspicuous consumption in the first and second worlds and to the struggles of the third world. The response was disillusionment, despair, pessimism—and anger. The significant thing was that this response—the rebellion—did not remain random, but became a movement of the political left, appealing (however confusedly) to

Marx as a symbol of the revolutionary transformation of society. All of this came to be reflected in theatre. (p. 3)

Itzin here shows how the generation born after World War II in Britain became politically aware in 1968. They started to recognise various issues such as environmental destruction and pollution, cold-war imperialism, visible consumption, and struggles of the third world. This generation shows its feelings of despair, pessimism, and anger. They united as a movement of the political left, and this movement was influenced by the ideas of Marx, who was observed as a symbol of revolutionary change.

The theatre of the time served as a reflection of this political growth. Playwrights then started producing works that directly tackled these themes, successfully mirroring the political awareness of the time. Furthermore, the British theatre, which has a strong foundation in matters concerning the environment and capitalism, emerged as a notable platform for delving into these subjects. In the transition to the twentieth century, numerous dramas from this era eloquently depict the profound influence of the capitalocene. This era explores the historical context and elucidates how humans have significantly influenced the natural environment. This impact is most apparent in social and political conflicts around natural resources. Crucially, playwrights actively tackle these environmental concerns by utilising the influential medium of drama. They aim to analyse the intricate interplay among society, politics, and the environment by emphasising eco-Marxist principles. In doing so, their collective aim is to advocate for creating just and equitable societies. By examining these environmental issues through the lens of drama, they not only enlighten but also inspire, fostering a deeper understanding and compelling the reader to consider the urgency of addressing these critical concerns for the betterment of society as a whole.

1.3 Caryl Churchill: A Voice of Social and Environmental Justice

The British playwright Caryl Churchill is well-recognised for her political theatre regarding subjects like capitalism and the environment. What worried Churchill was Margaret Thatcher's "right-wing politics," which only "benefited a minority of Britons," leaving "the less fortunate behind" (Tycker, 2008, p. 2). Unlike Thatcher, the first female Prime Minister in Britain who was against feminism, Churchill's ideas are mainly concerned with both socialism and feminism. She says: "I feel strongly about both and wouldn't be interested in a form of one that didn't involve the other" (Aston, 2003, p. 25). Churchill is considered a feminist playwright who emerged during the second wave of feminism in the United Kingdom. Though the main concerns of this movement are women's rights and gender inequality, there is indeed another element that focuses on economic inequality and socialism. The second wave of this movement called for a revolutionary force within society. It thought that protesting was the only way to change social and political problems. The members of this wave agree with the Frankfurt School's ideas about "the need for the reexamination of Marxian concepts" against the effects of capitalism (Green, 2014, p. 9).

In her book *After Brecht: British Epic Theater*, Janelle Reinelt demonstrates that Churchill "combines socialist feminist strategies with Brechtian techniques" (1996, p. 86). Churchill uses Brechtian epic dramaturgy to show that the theatre could be a powerful tool for political and social change. In his epic theatre, Brecht "strove to make the audience understand and reject the unfair, excessive conditions of the capitalist world and illustrates the need for

suffering and sacrifice and the unwillingness of human beings to do either” (Green, 2014, p. 27). Unlike Aristotelian theatre which “makes you accept what you see as inevitable” by producing the feelings of pity and fear in the spectators, the epic theatre suggests that the situations presented on stage “can and should be prevented” and instead of pity and fear it creates a feeling of “outrage, anger, and an urgent desire to change the society for the better” (Woodruff, 2008, p. 169). Similar to Brecht, Churchill exposes the negative consequences of capitalism and emphasises the need for social change. She also focuses on the suffering and how the audience should understand the political and economic systems that destroy their society and environment. Alicia Tycer notes that “the clearest parallel between Churchill and Brecht is their commitment to socialist politics” (2008, p. 44). Thus, Churchill used the theatre as a platform for social change, encouraging her audience to take action against those who destroyed society.

Churchill is regarded as “an environmentally conscious author” who “has foreseen the environmental crisis in a period as early as the 1970s” (İkiz & Tan, 2021, p. 115). Her works, including *Not Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen* (1971), *Fen* (1983), *Lives of the Great Poisoners* (1991), *The Skriker* (1994), *Far Away* (2000), and *Escaped Alone* (2016), are considered to be significant contributions to the development of ecological theatre. In these plays, Churchill incorporates environmental imagery to depict a form of theatre that unites humans and nonhumans to confront ecological disasters caused by the capitalist system (Ahmadi, 2022). Her plays examine this difference between biological and economic cycles through the lens of the relationship between humans and their environments and urge readers to think

thoughtfully about how they are affected by human activities and political issues.

2. Eco-Marxism Interpretation of Caryl Churchill's *Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen*

In her works, Churchill explores the conflict between two contrasting perspectives in ecological philosophy: environmental justice and deep ecology. The former stresses on taking responsible actions towards the environment, while the latter criticises the idea of human superiority over nature and human-centric thinking. Churchill's plays examine these contrasting viewpoints and question the ideologies that promote human dominance and gauge justice based on human exploitation. In her play titled *Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen*, Churchill conveys significant ideas regarding the Anthropocene and Capitalocene, specifically in terms of how capitalism affects the environment. Despite being originally broadcast on BBC Radio in 1971, the play still offers a relevant criticism of capitalism and its environmental consequences. She is predicting how the world will become apocalyptic and that humanity will suffer as a result of the capitalist system. In his book *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Mark Fisher says: "It's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" (2009, p. 1). According to Fisher's idea, the widespread influence of capitalism has made it difficult for individuals to explore alternative options, leading to a belief that capitalism is the only feasible solution. Fisher suggests that capitalism's impact is not limited to the economic system but also extends to cultural, social, and individual aspects of life.

Churchill depicts a post-apocalyptic London in her play *Not Enough Oxygen*. It envisions a future London in 2010, forty years

ahead, where air pollution has become humanity's gravest danger due to extreme capitalism. Although 2010 has already passed, pollution is increasing year by year. It is counted as “a major global problem” (Abdullah & Aziz, 2021, p. 1) that needs immediate solving. Solving this problem is necessary to ensure that future generations live in a safe and healthy world. In the introduction to her book *Shorts*, Churchill says that after reading *Not Enough Oxygen* twenty years later, she realises it is “more obviously relevant now than it was then” (1990, p. i). That is why she often shows a strong concern for the future in her drama. According to Jackie Kay, Churchill can “predict popular concerns before they become popular [and] to anticipate crucial issues” (1989, p. 41). Moreover, her play represents a world where capitalism has reached its extremes and has severe environmental and social consequences.

In the post-apocalyptic world in which the play is set, human life is no longer possible because of the pollution in the atmosphere. Consequently, people in London are forced to wear oxygen masks due to severe air pollution. Characters are shown struggling to survive in a world with limited resources and polluted air, highlighting the possible repercussions of a society prioritising profit over sustainability. The scarcity of oxygen in Churchill’s play can be seen as a consequence of the unbridled pursuit of profit and growth that characterises capitalism, vividly portrayed through the sale and purchase of oxygen bottles. Importantly, the play illustrates the impact this has on society. Not only is selling oxygen bottles a reflection of the scarcity of this vital resource, but it also underscores the privatisation of natural resources that were once freely available.

As a result, Londoners in the year 2010 live in high-rises comprised entirely of one-bedroom flats, and they are afraid to go

outside or even open their windows due to the high pollution levels in the city. In order to refresh the air, they have to purchase oxygen in a bottle and spray it all over the place. Dangerous “fanatics” (Churchill, 1993, p. 29) who often murder themselves and others in spontaneous assaults, populate the streets, and pollution makes breathing difficult. Such a situation offers a serious charging of industrialisation’s harmful effect on the environment and raises significant questions concerning our connections with one another and the natural world. By portraying a future in which people are compelled to act of violence and despair in response to a failing environment, Churchill underlines the urgent need for action on climate change and the collapse of the environment.

The action takes place inside Mick’s small and overcrowded room. Despite yearning to buy a cottage, Mick’s financial limitations hold him back. He recalls a time wandering in the Londons when birds still flew freely and children were allowed without permission. The post-apocalyptic world might alter the meaning of dreams by removing them from the harsh reality of everyday life. He feels excited about the possibility of settling into peaceful scenery in the countryside, reflecting on and cherishing his accomplishments and goals. There is a possibility that his famous musician son, Claude, may feel obligated to help, eventually making a visit. He hopes that Claude will provide him with funds so that he can live his life as he pleases.

Churchill keeps the play’s backstory in the shadows, offering few specifics about the events that led to the ecological disaster depicted onstage. However, highlighting socioeconomic gaps could imply that capitalism contributes to environmental degradation. Then, an eco-Marxist reading of *Not Enough Oxygen* demonstrates how capitalists’ destructive political and economic

structures are the root causes of ecological disaster and social inequality. Karl Marx writes in his *Early Writings of Karl Marx*: Man lives from nature, i.e. nature is his body, and he must maintain a continuing dialogue with it if he is not to die. To say that man’s physical and mental life is linked to nature simply means that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature. (1975, p. 328) In the aforementioned quote, Marx puts the central thought of eco-Marxism that man and nature should be in harmony. But capitalism breaches this concept and exploits nature and its resources as much as possible. Its need for constant growth has led to a devastating influence on the ecosystem.

The capitalist system that shaped the lives of Londoners is making an “irreparable rift in the interdependent process of social metabolism, a metabolism prescribed by the natural laws of life,” according to Marx’s theory of metabolic rift (1981, p. 949). The operation of various industrial facilities, such as printing, factories, and power plants, by corporate entities has resulted in environmental degradation in Londons. Such anthropogenic activities can potentially contribute to the emission of significant amounts of pollutant gases into the atmosphere, turning Londons into a polluting city.

The “blind desire for profit” (Marx, 1976, p. 348) turns people’s lives into tragic ones, leaving them struggling with little breathable air. Thus, the metabolic rift is based on the insight that economic considerations precede environmental considerations. As the eco-Marxist John Bellamy Foster claims: “the greater capitalism’s expansion, the more intense its ecological demands, and the greater the level of ecological destruction it imposes” (2000, p. 66). Foster extends Marx’s analysis of the metabolic rift and suggests that this rift is worsening under modern capitalism. It is resulting in ecological issues such as climate change and

biodiversity loss. He highlights the idea that capitalism and ecological sustainability are incompatible. As capitalism expands, it demands more resources and generates more waste, leading to greater ecological destruction. This destruction is not limited to environmental damage but also affects the health and well-being of human communities.

Foster developed Marx's metabolic rift theory; he theorised that there is a fundamental rift in the relationship between capitalist societies and the natural world. This rift arises from how capitalist production systems extract resources from the Earth and dump waste back into the environment. Foster claims that this process disrupts the natural metabolic cycles that sustain ecosystems, leading to environmental degradation, resource depletion, and social dislocation. It is the same society that Churchill portrays in *Not Enough Oxygen*. Her characters live in a world where simple human natural rights are on sale. If they are not buying oxygen, they will be all "dead corpses in the faster lifts" (Churchill, 1993, p. 25) of the building because they are the victims of the capitalist system's avarice.

The play starts with Vivian, who looks much older, very pale, and sick, though she is thirty. She suffers from the effects of air pollution and industrialisation like the people in William Blake's poem "London". Her dialogue with Mick suggests that she is a victim of a society that prioritises profit over its citizens' health. She asks Mick, a sixty-year-old man: "Shall I tell you what what I bought today?" (Churchill, 1993, p. 25). For sure, she buys oxygen because it seems that there is nothing special to spend money on in the Londons rather than a spray can of oxygen: "So what I bought what I bought was look an oxygen spray and spray spray oxygen in the room" (p. 26). The reason they are in such a plight

is that they live in a world where capitalism, as Foster argues, is a “disruption” in the “nutrient cycle.” (1999, p. 377).

People should share resources like land, water, and pasture for their livelihoods. Consequently, the commons played a significant part in many societies. However, with the rise of capitalism and industrialisation, many resources that used to be considered commons have been privatised and commodified. Thus, in her play, Churchill has examined the consequences of privatising the commons and its impact on society. She emphasises:

[T]he commodification of what had once been a common good, thus deftly pointing to capitalist, consumerist attitudes as a cause of environmental degradation: the profit motive leads to short-sighted exploitation of a world seen purely as a resource, and the capitalist response to pollution is simply to exploit resulting scarcities. (Rabillard, 2009, p. 90)

Churchill examines the concept of the commons on a global and a local level to reflect on our connection with the natural world. She also suggests that privatising public spaces like parks could lead to more considerable societal disparities and divisions.

Frederick Engels’s vital work, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1844), reveals how capitalists ignored the environment and the working class. He condemns the pollution of the streets, rivers, and air in nineteenth-century England. Workers died and became sick due to poor housing and insufficient waste management. He says:

These east and north-east sides of Manchester are the only ones on which the bourgeoisie has not built, because ten or eleven months of the year the west and south-west drives the smoke of all the factories hither, and that the working people alone may breath. (2010, p. 59)

In this citation, Engels notes that the capitalists were well conscious of the problem of pollution from their factories and, therefore, chose to dwell away from them and avoid the smoke. In Marx's words, the emerging "bourgeois order" was like "a vampire that sucks out its [small-landholding feudal peasants'] blood and brains and throws [them] into the alchemistic cauldron of capital," leaving the lower classes to solve their problems on their own (1963, as cited in Foster & Clark, 2020, p. 36). In Churchill's play, the wealthy people become selfish, exploiting nature for their benefit and hurting the disadvantaged majority. After causing environmental deterioration, they enjoy what little is left of the natural surroundings and fresh air in their cottages, leaving lower social classes to deal with pollution in their tiny rooms, hoping they will someday live in the parks. But that will not happen because the parks are already full of cottages.

Vivian asserts that those who own wealth are more likely to survive, whereas the government neglects and forsakes those who do not. She says: "[L]ocal authority won't give us won't give us the money" (Churchill, 1993, p. 25). Not only does the authority have a hand in destroying London's environment, but it also has a hand in deciding where people can live. Moreover, its power shows how man's "freedom and individuality decline as he becomes the dominated not the dominator" (Muhi, 2018, p.680). This is similar to Michel Foucault's notion of "Eco-governmentality" or "environmental government" (Castree et al., 2009, p. 489), which emerged during the 1970s and 1980s. It demonstrates how institutions and states govern population growth, ecological concerns, resource management, and environmental crises. Likewise, the government in this play exerts dominion over the populace. It keeps people experiencing poverty confined within stuffy buildings while allowing the affluent to

relax leisurely in parks, resembling a “mad cat cat in cage at the zoo” (Churchill, 1993, p. 25). This stark contrast exemplifies the social disparities within the city.

Within the eco-Marxist framework, the idea of birth licenses involves looking at how we control population growth for the environment. Eco-Marxism criticises capitalism for putting profit first, and it sees birth license as addressing symptoms, not the real issues like unequal sharing of resources and overusing them. Thus, in the play, capitalism does not miss a chance to make a profit in this post-apocalyptic city. The government sets regulations that prevent people from having a baby unless they buy a license. If they break the law and evade abortion, they will be imprisoned. Before the environmental crisis, capitalism was interested in population growth since it meant large markets, cheaper labour, and new construction; as Marx believed, overpopulation is “a characteristic of capitalism” (Brackett, 1968, p.160). However, he also noted that this growth often resulted in overcrowding, poverty, and social unrest. Authoritarian government typically exercises a high degree of control over their citizens and may limit their freedoms and rights in the name of stability, security, or economic growth. They may also prioritise the interests of a small elite or ruling class over the general population’s needs.

In *Not Enough Oxygen*, overpopulation in a highly polluted place threatens the lives of wealthy people. Their primary concern pertains to the apprehension that the lower class could seize their parks. However, the system ought to be the primary target of concern. An influential ecologist, Barry Commoner, succinctly emphasises this systemic concern when he declares, “Pollution begins not in the family bedroom but in the corporate boardroom” (Egan, 2007, as cited in Angus & Butler, 2011, p. 14). Contrary to individual actions, corporate decisions appear to be the principal

source of pollution, according to Commoner. Adding to the complexity, the government had previously licensed Claude's birth. Yet, at present, Mick's older son from his first marriage, Alexander, suffers from population control. He and his wife have faced hard obstacles while caring for their child without a license. They opt to participate in winning the lottery rather than pay money to have a child, as Claude says: "Wife wouldn't have another abortion though hadn't got exemption. They kept moving country to country to avoid the regulations. Born in Egypt I think" (Churchill, 1993, p. 35). However, a pivotal shift occurred when they "changed their minds. It cleared their conscience. It wasn't a licensed child" (p. 35), resulting in the difficult choice to end the child's life. Although they can buy a license with Alexander's mother's money, they choose to go against the regulations; thus, it leads them "as doctors to one of the epidemic areas" (p. 36). This assignment comes after they were given "[f]ive years" suspended sentence for illegally "evading an abortion" (36), which was no longer necessary due to the death of the child. Killing a baby is a fanatics action from Vivian's perspective: "It's fanatic to kill a fanatic to kill a baby like killing yourself killing myself I'd never but fanatics do do do it hundred at a time" (p. 36). The intimidation factor of the capital system makes Alexander and his wife act like fanatics and kill their child after they suffer to get it. The pursuit of profit, as Churchill observes, can sometimes come at the expense of social and environmental well-being, leading to issues such as inequality, exploitation, and environmental degradation. The impact of this social stratification extends to the city's name. London is commonly seen as a single city; however, it is referred to as "Londons" in the play. In the theatrical rendition, London is separated into two discrete and isolated segments, engendering a duality within the metropolis. Consequently, the term "Londons"

embodies this duality, effectively illustrating how two distinct ways of life converge within a single city. This duality becomes particularly evident as Vivian and Mick, hailing from a lower social rank, grapple with the challenges imposed by this societal divide.

Marx often refers to capitalists exploiting the Earth’s natural resources and violating social metabolism. For him, Foster and Clark say, “the narrow pursuit of value-based accumulation, through the ‘robbery’ of the Earth itself, at the expense of eternal natural necessity, generated a metabolic rift in the relation between human society and the larger natural world” (2020, p. 192). The best example of this is when the government in the play monopolises plants in the hands of the rich, preventing the lower classes from obtaining “big plants plants plants in every room” (Churchill, 1993, p. 25).

Vivian asserts that “plants would take money. Earth plants earth would all have to come in from the park and the park the park authority the park authority wouldn’t permit” (p. 25). She implies that in order to obtain plants from the park, payment is required. While plants are the property of all humans, irrespective of social standing, collecting them from the park presents a challenge. Vivian and others find it challenging to obtain them due to the park’s authority’s unwillingness to permit their removal. The reason behind plants’ monopolisation is their “air pollution tolerability” (Jasim et al., 2018. p. 13). Plants provide “huge amounts of free oxygen” (p. 9). This fact makes Vivian consider bringing them into her room. However, if the situation is still the same, the wealthy minority will face the same in a few years because “hardly any park left” (Churchill, 1993, p. 25). Even nature will not help them since the plants in the park are scarce, and vegetation is expensive. On the other hand, the grass in the

park is a “precious commodity” (Savilonis, 2016, p. 234) that the underprivileged groups eagerly want to see as they are stuck in the mud. Vivian says:

The grass in the park the grass can only be seen over the over the over the heads heads of the crowd and fenced off so you can see see some because of course where the crowd walks where the crowd walks it’s just mud. (Churchill, 1993, p. 26)

Her speech illustrates how people yearn for a glorious past because the grass has become an artefact to be viewed from behind fences (Vangöli, 2017).

Marx insists that humans are a part of nature, and the metabolic rift refers to how humans become alienated from their natural resources due to capitalism. According to him, “[t]he alienation of man appeared as the fundamental evil of Capitalist society,” and “this evil finds its embodiment in the proletariat (1964, p. 27). The poor suffer from the consequences of capitalism, not the rich. They have laboured for years to make the wealthy even wealthier, and when the environment is destroyed due to the greed of the capitalists, they are the only ones who have to pay the price. They have to cope with feelings of alienation from nature, from “one’s self, dwelling place or one’s home” (Yousif, 2020, p. 47). For example, the characters in *Not Enough Oxygen* are alienated from their natural resources: fresh air, which is monopolised by the rich. This sense of alienation has profound effects on interpersonal connections. Mick, for instance, feels separate from Vivian even though she is his girlfriend. He tells her to return to her husband because he cannot stand sharing his tiny room. But Mick, for her, is like a shelter as she states: “Mick you know I only only I only live with him for the room. Where where else can I go where can I go if you won’t won’t have me in your room to live?” (Churchill, 1993, p. 26). Thus, the capital system does not only make a rapture

in the metabolic interaction between humanity and nature but also between humans themselves.

The miserable situation prevents Mick from doing his usual stuff comfortably, as he lives on purchased oxygen; the room he stays in is “too small for two” (p. 26), and “[a]ll the rooms are the same are the same size” (p. 26). He even cannot take a walk outside the room in the haze. He has no choice but to be stuck in his “little box” (p. 38). His son, Claude, is the only one who can rescue him from this place. His feelings for his son are not paternal; his eyes are on Claude’s wealth:

Claude will see his poor old dad knows how to live. He can give me all the money he likes and be sure I’ll make good use of it, unlike his mother, who won’t take a pound from him. Say nothing about her. But I know what money buys. I can enjoy a fortune. (p. 26)

He sees him as a saviour who will change his life. He even kisses his son when he appears on television, just like an obsessed fan girl with Claude’s look. He says: “If I’m alone sometimes I kiss him. That is to say I kneel down and put my mouth to the screen” (p. 27). However, Mick’s expectation for Claude to give him money fails when his son arrives and declares that he donated all his wealth to strangers. Television, here, might represent loneliness and alienation. Mick’s dependence on television indicates his lack of emotional connection. In the first scenes, Mick is eager to see his son on television. This means that it becomes a substitute for personal interaction or important events in his life. The final scene shows how Mick does not depend on someone to tell him the news directly. He does not care what his son will do because he is sure that “his death might get a mention” on the news (p. 42).

Churchill intends to demonstrate, through the character of Mick, that there are people who do nothing but wait for a miracle to take place. She wants to highlight the fact that the inaction of human beings is partially the cause of environmental disasters. Being selfish while the world is on the brink of collapse is immoral, just like Mick, who only cares for his comfortable life and waits for things to fall into his lap. He seems not to pay attention to the lack of oxygen since he is dating a woman who buys him oxygen and gets a “Large television. Lots of music.... [He has] books. [He] read. It passes time. And puzzles. All kinds of puzzle. Jigsaw, Chinese, mind tickles in the paper” (p. 34). The only thing he cares about is getting a cottage. But his hope of leaving the tower block like the rich has been dashed by the news that his son has given away his entire fortune:

CLAUDE. Going to the park?

MICK. It's what I hope for.

CLAUDE. Live there?

MICK. It's all I want. (36–37)

Jigsaw, here, is the finest metaphor for humans' disconnection. It highlights the theme of human connection in the face of crisis that is present throughout the play. This game presents a fragmented image of modern life, where characters move through puzzle pieces. As long as they are a part of the capitalist system, it is difficult for them to find answers to their questions.

Besides the air pollution problem, Churchill points out another consequence of capitalism: the extinction of species. Vivian thinks she sees a bird flying outside, and Mick seems surprised because he knows no longer birds are in the Londons. Mick raises a question: “A bird in the Londons?” (p. 30), but Vivian considers it a sign of good luck. She says: “But the bird was a good a good-luck sign good luck for us, Mick” (p. 30). Mick

is haunted by memories of a time when the air was clean and fresh. He tells about a time when birds were still able to fly freely in the Londons:

There were still some birds in the eighties. When I was a young man there were flocks of birds. What you remember is pigeons. Now they were a plague before elimination.... And birds whose names you may have seen at the zoo, blackbird, starling, bluetit, I have seen them with my own eyes wild in the gardens of the Londons long ago. (p. 31)

This previous citation shows that Churchill’s main concern is species extinction. She criticises the disappearance of bird species due to human activity. She also expresses her frustration at humanity’s callous disregard for the lives of other beings, namely the birds whose homes have been destroyed along with whole forests. N. Z. Farajallah and A. J. Lewis confirm that “Man’s cruel act of clearing the forests causes huge destruction in the ecological balance and it also reflects his irrational anthropocentric attitude towards the ecosystem” (2021, p. 72). Vivian and Mick’s speech here shows how capitalism exploits animals and alters their metabolic relations. In this scene, Churchill highlights the probable consequences of abandoned environmental degradation and the need for urgent action to address these issues. Elaine Aston sees that “the ‘Londons’ is presented to us as a city of pollution, congestion and violence, where all kinds of life forms (birds, grass, people) are either extinct or threatened with extinction” (2005, p. 168). As more and more species become endangered or extinct, the ongoing environmental crisis has led to the emergence of a new term, which is Necrocene³. Thus, the hegemonic practices of the capitalist system affect the existence of species and create a new age of death. Justin McBrien says, “Capital does not just rob the soil and worker... it necrotises the entire planet” (2020, p. 116).

Marx calls it the “degradation” (1975, p. 239) of animal species under capitalism.

Furthermore, Churchill’s post-apocalyptic world is depicted as unfriendly and threatening; the sky is always murky, and the air is heavy with smog. Through the attendance of Claude at the flat, the dangers outside come to be precise. The stage direction shows that the moment he enters, he collapses. He could not handle the pollution. He thinks getting rid of his car and walking in the Londons might be a good idea, but he “didn’t know how far how far it would be” (Churchill, 1993, p. 32). People like Mick and Vivian do not risk getting out since “walk[ing] in the Londons [is] only fanatics and bad bad” (p. 33). Those fanatics are oppressed people who resist totalitarian authority’s disastrous logic by “kill[ing] themselves or others” (p. 29) as a violent revolution. They evoke fear and insecurity among the public. For example, Vivian is afraid that someday they will come and put the blocks on fire: “At night night in the night I’m afraid I’m afraid Mick I’m afraid if I wake in the night I think the block the block is going to go up to go up in flames any any any any moment” (p. 29). She sees on the news how fanatics murdered people and committed suicide happily: “I saw saw last night on the news a hundred hundred in a burning block some singing singing and some screaming and today today they say there are more more something going to happen” (p. 36). Their reckless actions negatively affect Londons as they increase pollution, and they are aware of it because their self-immolation is to show how serious their case is.

When Claude comes to see his father, Vivian becomes scared. She accuses him of coming to kill them like the fanatics, saying, “Mick don’t you see see how he looks how he looks at you? Don’t you see why why he’s come he’s a fanatic Mick come to kill us kill kill

kill us come to kill us” (p. 39). But Claude tells his family that he came for the last time and reassures them that he will not “kill anyone else” (p. 40). The word “else” here suggests that Claude may have already killed someone or planned to kill someone else before coming to see his family.

In the context of eco-Marxist thought, traffic congestion can be seen as a manifestation of larger systemic problems arising from the capitalist system and environmental degradation. Churchill addressed vehicular traffic as a prominent factor contributing to air pollution. Traffic is a significant source of “ambient air pollution in cities” (Younis et al., 2021, p. 686). This is due to the exhaust emissions produced by cars and other vehicles. These emissions play a major role in deteriorating air quality. Vehicular traffic emits various polluting gases into the atmosphere (AlObaidy & Rabee, 2018). In addition to exhaust emissions, traffic can also generate dust and other particles from tires and brakes, as well as noise pollution. In the play, there are many references to both traffic and pollution. The traffic congestion has exacerbated the city’s situation. It has a negative impact on London’s air quality. The rising number of cars is a significant cause of air pollution. The traffic jam makes it impossible for Mick and Vivian to open the window and see Claude approaching. Vivian makes an effort to search for Claude’s car by saying, “I’ll look out and see if there’s a car in the jam,” but she is unable to do so because of the “fumes and fumes and haze” that prevent her from seeing anything other than “buses hardly moving” (Churchill, 1993, p. 29). The burning of fuel in automobiles is the source of all these fumes and haze.

In his book *Escape from Freedom*, the German Marxian sociologist Erich Fromm delves into the subject of psychological despair and explores various ways in which individuals attempt to

escape from it. He argues: “The individual overcomes the feeling of insignificance in comparison with the overwhelming power of the world outside of himself either by renouncing his individual integrity, or by destroying others so that the world ceases to be threatening” (Fromm, 1941, p. 185). He further proposes another escape mechanism by “withdrawal[ing] from the world so completely that it loses its threat” (p. 185). According to Fromm, there are two fundamental ways for people to face the overwhelming influence of the threat: giving up their personal identities or participating in self-destructive actions in order to get rid of the apparent threat. As pointed out by Fromm, one might avoid being frightened by the environment by isolating themselves from it. He reveals that individuals grappling with despair and frustration have two choices when confronted with capitalism. They can either assimilate into the capitalist system or seek alternative methods to evade the perceived threats posed by capitalism. In the play, the mother character utilises protest demonstrations as a mechanism of escape. Her actions reflect an extreme response, as she adopts self-destructive behaviour as a means to alleviate her psychological despair and overcome her fear stemming from the effects of capitalism.

Claude’s mother is a sensitive woman; she cannot handle how the world is getting worse, as Mick tells Claude:

I never did understand your mother. She was always sad about one thing or another. I used to turn the news off, it upset her so much. Twenty years ago. The news is very much worse now and it must have turned her mind, poor woman. (Churchill, 1993, p. 34)

She chooses to leave her husband and die somewhere else than the block. Mick tries to convince her to stay, but she tells him to end their lives together: “There’s still meat in the Londons if you can pay. There’s rations of food and water for each room. We can stay

alive if we stay in the blocks. I told her that but she would go” (p. 38). Then she writes to Claude that she will get rid of her stuff and commits suicide: “February she wrote me she’d formally relinquished her room, burnt her cards, just gone. So many do” (p. 34). Therefore, Claude decides to end his life as well. He texts his father to see him for the last time, donates all his money, and walks to his father’s flat in the pollution. He is “one of the last children born in the Londons” (p. 38); thus, he does not live in the time before the crisis, so Claude has a passion for changing the world by joining the fanatics group as he says: “Risk is you starve of course like most people” (p. 37). That is why he does not accept spending money to live in nature when it is supposed to be free: “Half a million to put you in the park? You’d be better dead” (p. 39). However, Mick and Vivian share the same wish: to have a cottage in the park. They accept the injustice and have no interest in revolt because the priority is their pleasure. Mick faces many worse events, but caring about others’ misery is not his way of surviving, as he tells Claude:

Do you think no one was starving then? In the sixties, seventies, eighties? Do you think there weren’t any wars when I was a young man? You’re not the first person to see horrors. We learnt to watch them without feeling a thing. We could see pictures of starving children and still eat our dinner while we watched. That’s what we need to survive. (p. 38)

Like his mother, Claude could not ignore the idea of licensed children or “starving” them. He seeks to alter their way of life, while Mick appears to accept capitalism’s hegemony. As Kritzer notes, “The play warns against the tendency to concentrate on personal relationships and individual concerns while ignoring global dangers and the fate of others besides oneself” (1991, p. 31). Therefore, Churchill wants the audience to focus on Mick’s

attitude in the play because everyone on Earth shares the same fate if nothing is done to protect the planet.

Churchill, as Alvin Tan Cheong Kheng observes, “seems always to be conveying a positive creative strength” (1998, p. 58). The metaphorical shutting of the window by Mick, for instance, represents a desire to shut out the outside world and deny the reality of their situation. He invites Vivian to leave her husband and stay with him in his small room. Mick’s invitation is a significant shift in his character, as he had previously been focused on his own survival and comfort. This moment represents a break from their previous attitudes and a rejection of the consumerist values that had previously governed their lives. Mick says: “You’d better move your things into this room” (Churchill, 1993, p. 42). He decides to live the rest of his life with her, playing jigsaw and going on adventures to the park.

In the play’s ending, Vivian’s choice to buy more jigsaw puzzles can be seen as a critique of how environmental issues are often treated superficially within the framework of eco-Marxism. Her statement, “I can’t do the sky on the big jigsaw with all those blue blue bits of sky – as if sky was blue – all look the same but you’re so good at it” (p. 42), suggests that pollution and environmental degradation create an artificial or illusory perception of the sky’s natural state. This scene implies that in a capitalist system, the fundamental values and beauty of the natural world are commodified and lose their deeper ecological meaning. Vivian’s decision to purchase more puzzles symbolises the perpetuation of consumerism and the desire for material possessions, which can contribute to environmental problems rather than addressing them at their core. Eventually, the play underscores the superficiality and detachment from nature that can occur under capitalism,

where environmental concerns often take a backseat to profit-driven motives.

Churchill’s play *Not Enough Oxygen* reveals her futuristic vision of humanity by distinguishing the past from the present through Mick and Vivian. Although Mick is sixty, he speaks appropriately. He had a good upbringing because industrialisation and environmental degradation were not as widespread in his youth’s era. On the other hand, the thirty-year-old Vivian is stuttering in her speech. She was born during the flourishing of capitalism; thus, she grew up in an industrial and polluted environment. Her constant vocal twitches are apparent throughout the play. She cannot form a simple sentence without repeating words. Through Vivian, Churchill knows how to “connect a character’s struggle for air and speech with the emotional isolation of that character” (Bay-Cheng, 2004, p. 21). Vivian’s upbringing and life experiences in such an environment have taught her to suppress her feelings, contributing to her emotional isolation. Elaine Aston and Elin Diamond observe that “the most prominent figure – and language – on the Churchill stage is that of the isolated woman, sometimes a daughter or wife, often a mother, whose words are an unsentimental register of longing, confusion, fear and rage” (2009, p. 9). Their observation indicates that a solitary female character in Churchill’s play assumes a significant role, symbolising intricate emotions amid challenging circumstances. Therefore, by portraying Vivian in this manner, Churchill aims to demonstrate that her stuttering can be attributed to the adverse effects of environmental contamination from capitalist activities.

Metaphorically speaking, Vivian might represent the Earth itself. Her name in Latin means “lively” or “full of life,” and if we want to associate this name with Earth, we will find that both are suffering and “endure[ing] pain silently” (Khalid, 2021, p.14).

Throughout the play, the technique of repetition of Vivian's words and phrases serves to show how the Earth is suffocating and exhausting. Even in the title of the play, *Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen*, Churchill uses repetition to indicate that this play is filled with anxiety and uncertainty. The repetition of the five "Nots" might symbolise the five fingers of a hand, serving as a metaphorical gesture of resistance against pollution and capitalism. Each "Not" could be regarded as a refusal or rejection of the damaging effects of pollution and an expression of opposition against the capitalist system that contributes to environmental degradation.

Conclusion

Reading *Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen* from an eco-Marxist lens reveals how Churchill attributes the damage in the ecosystem to the hegemonic capitalist systems that exploit nature's limited resources even after the crisis. It serves as a cautionary play for the audience. Through this perspective, "man needs a revolution in thought" (Amer, 2022, p. 194). The play helps as a stark reminder of the urgent need for radical change to address the grave consequences of unbridled capitalism on our environment. If humans are still accepting and do not take action, things will be out of their hands in the future. Capitalists' total world control is apparent, but people choose to be silent even if it threatens their planet. They think it is not that severe; if it is, someone would stop it, but one hand cannot clap. Albert Schweitzer, a philosopher, once said, "Man has lost the capacity to foresee and to forestall. He will end by destroying the earth" (Schweitzer & Cousins, 1984, p. 88). Expressing concern regarding humanity's diminished capacity to predict and avert

detrimental behaviours, Schweitzer cautioned that this dearth of foresight may finally culminate in the planet’s destruction. Therefore, Churchill’s *Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen* can eventually be read as a warning message for future generations.

Footnotes

1 The term “Anthropocene” was first used by Nobel Prize-winning atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen in 2000. He used this term to describe the current geological epoch in which human activities have had a significant impact on the Earth's ecosystems and geological processes.

22 The term “Capitalocene” was first proposed by Jason W. Moore, an environmental historian, in his book “Capitalism in the Web of Life” in 2015. Moore used this term to emphasize capitalism's role in shaping the current era of environmental change.

3 Justin McBrien (2016) coined this epoch with the term Necrocene, the age of death and extinction as a result of capitalist accumulation.

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