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Before the Wound: Anticipatory Trauma and Affective Materiality in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*

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This study investigates Virginia Woolf's final novel, *Between the Acts* (1941), through the theoretical intersection of affect, materiality, and anticipatory trauma. Drawing on non-representational theory of affect and trauma scholarship, this article argues that the affective materials of the novel such as the gramophone, mirrors, the barn, and the pageant itself function at once as figures of impending catastrophe and as active producers of anticipatory trauma materially: the felt weight of a war not yet fully arrived. Set on a single June day, *Between the Acts* incorporates its objects and landscapes with a pre-traumatic affect that circulates through bodies, surfaces, and sounds before it can be articulated in language. Within this frame, the study reveals how Woolf's materiality of language, manifested through syntactic fragmentation and deliberate silences, performs the collapse of meaning at the limits of representation. By positioning the text at the junction of the material turn, affective turn and trauma studies, this analysis provides a new theoretical perspective for Woolf studies as well as modernist affect scholarship.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts*, anticipatory trauma, affective materiality .

Introduction

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) completed *Between the Acts* (1941), weeks before her death, and the novel bears the undeniable pressure of a world already at war. Set at Pointz Hall in rural England on a warm day in June 1939, it describes the Oliver family as they host the annual village pageant, a theatrical portrayal of English history that has always been interrupted, incomplete, and unstable. The novel has long been evaluated by critics as an elegy, an exploration on fragmentation or a critique with the form of the novel itself. However, less attention has been paid to the way the novel's material world such as its objects, sounds, surfaces, and organic matter serves as a field of feeling, an interconnected network of affect that registers the weight of a catastrophe not yet fully experienced.

This study draws on recent discussions of anticipatory traumatic response and affective materiality and utilises the term anticipatory trauma to define a physical as well as psychological condition in which bodies and material surfaces absorb the perceived weight of catastrophe before its ultimate material arrival. Traditional trauma theory, as pioneered by Sigmund Freud and later developed by Cathy Caruth, has posited trauma as a strictly retrospective phenomenon. In *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth argues that trauma is not fully comprehended at the moment of its occurrence but returns “belatedly” through haunting repetition and deferred experience (92). In *Tense Future*, Paul K. Saint-Amour explains, “the traumatic event” is experienced “belatedly,” usually after a “latency” period, through symptoms that may involve the “return of repressed memories” and the “compulsive repetition of behavior,” gestures, nightmares, and fantasies connected with the traumatic event. These symptoms and the condition that they represent are “exclusively post-traumatic” (14). However, he challenges this backward trajectory regarding the relationship between anticipation, injury and future, and states that anticipation “has become a new medium for delivering injury” (8). He maintains that living under the constant threat of an imminent total war is to experience a trauma in advance of the event. When applied to the interwar literary landscape, this framework uncovers “a proleptic mass traumatization, a pre-traumatic stress syndrome whose symptoms arose in response to a potentially oncoming rather than an already realized catastrophe” (7-8). Within this frame, this study proposes that Woolf's writing during the interwar years registers a shift from a retrospective trauma framework to a proleptic one. This shift is best understood through Brian Massumi's “The Future Birth of the Affective Fact” concerning political ontology of threat as he suggests, “[f]ear is the anticipatory reality in the present of a threatening future. It is the felt reality of the nonexistent, looming present as the affective fact of the matter” (54). In *Between the Acts* this “affective fact” turns the material environment into a space where the weight of an unfulfilled war is felt as an immediate, physical presence before an actual eruption of violence. Thus, this anticipatory or proleptic trauma is not only an intellectual anxiety but also an affective force that pervades the material environment before the real outbreak of global violence.

Following this framework, this article contends that *Between the Acts* transforms the atmosphere of impending war into a materially distributed affective condition, revealing trauma not as a purely retrospective experience but as an anticipatory state circulating across objects, bodies, sounds, and spaces. The novel's gramophone, mirrors, fragmented theatrical performance, and language are the indicators of the dread of the pre-war time, and they are parts of the circulation of a pre-traumatic intensity which is beyond conscious articulation. Woolf develops a textual landscape of catastrophe encountered prior to its historical actualisation through grammatical fragmentation, interrupted speech, and the recurring failure of representation. Ultimately, it reveals how *Between the Acts* reconsiders trauma as an atmospheric and material state of living toward disaster, rather than a retrospective return to the wound, by integrating affect theory, materiality, and anticipatory trauma.

Material Affect vs. Affective Materiality: Materializing Anticipatory Trauma in *Between the Acts*

In its most generative configurations, affect theory imposes a distinction between affect and emotion that is theoretically significant. For Massumi (2002), affect is a pre-personal, non-conscious intensity, a bodily capacity to act and be acted upon, which comes before its capture in the identified emotions of cultural discourse. Massumi states, “affect is autonomous to the degree to which it escapes confinement in the particular body whose vitality, or potential for interaction, it is” (xxxv). This autonomy is not the absence of the social but a residue that exceeds it such as the vibration in the room after the music has stopped, the sense of approaching significance before its content is known.

Based on affect theory and material criticism, this study proposes a distinction between material affect and affective materiality. Material affect denotes the transmission of affect via material entities, wherein objects and surroundings serve primarily as channels for the circulation of human feeling. In contrast, affective materiality highlights autonomous affective agency of matter: the potential of objects, sounds, surfaces, and spaces to produce intensities that surpass human intention or conscious emotional expression. In *Between the Acts*, Woolf progressively moves from depicting affect through materiality to portraying materiality as affectively productive. The architectural spaces, the gramophone, mirrors, and fragmented theatrical forms reflect collective anxiety about the impending war while actively engaging in the creation and circulation of anticipatory trauma as a material and sensory phenomenon. This distinction is critical because the two notions imply different ontologies of matter. Material affect assumes that objects mediate or transmit emotion from human individuals, while affective materiality assumes that affective agency is inherent to matter itself, and that objects and environments are active participants in the production of affect. The analyses that follow use this distinction to show how Woolf repeatedly shifts from representing objects as mediators of affect to presenting them as active participants in the production of affective intensity.

Material affect theory extends this account by claiming that affect is both a quality of human bodies and matter itself. Jane Bennett's notion of "vibrant matter" questions the strong ontological boundary between animate and inanimate; non-human things like food, electricity, metal, trash own a type of "vitality," which means "a capacity," participating in the composition of events (Bennett viii). Objects are not merely passive containers of human-generated meaning but active participants in affective "assemblages" as "an actant" that "is a source of action" (viii). As Derek Ryan argues, "Woolf's writing offers new conceptualisations of the material world where the immanent and intimate entanglements of human and nonhuman agencies are brought to the fore" (4). In *Between the Acts*, the gramophone, mirrors, swallows, and even the material textures of Pointz Hall function as vibrant forms of matter through which anticipatory trauma circulates before it can be consciously articulated, which will be analysed below.

The non-human circulation of pre-traumatic intensity is readily apparent when analysing the architectural and natural landscapes of Pointz Hall, which transforms from a passive architectural space into the most significant macro-level affective assemblage of the novel. For Bennett, an assemblage is not a singular object but an "ad hoc grouping of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts" whose agentic capacities emerge through the relational interactions of heterogeneous human and nonhuman actants (23). Following Saint-Amour, anticipatory trauma is generated through the experience of living toward an expected catastrophe rather than through its retrospective aftermath (95). Within Bennett's framework of assemblages, Pointz Hall materialises this temporal suspension by participating in the circulation of affect before war becomes historical reality. Thus, Pointz Hall is a heterogeneous assemblage of historical objects, architectural spaces, surrounding landscapes, human bodies, and the material atmosphere of an impending war. In other words, the house is both a physical structure and an affective environment, representing the burden of war to come, connecting the English historical past to the looming future of aerial bombardment. The house's materiality with its echoing hallways, shifty shadows and silent areas emerges as an environmental catalyst for collective anxiety, establishing a core level of sensory tension which has not been expressed. In *Between the Acts*, Woolf effectively displays such an autonomous materiality in the gap at the heart of Pointz Hall, stating that "the room was empty. Empty, empty, empty; silent, silent, silent. The room was a shell, singing of what was before time was; a vase stood in the heart of the house, alabaster, smooth, cold, holding the still, distilled essence of emptiness, silence" (Woolf 46-47). The narrative entirely separates affect from human presence by presenting the domestic interior as an "essence of emptiness." The space becomes an affective object, a hollow vessel that physically contains and holds the collective dread of a historical moment on the brink of catastrophe. Pointz Hall exceeds the logic of material affect. The house reflects the emotional state of its residents and actively engenders the atmosphere of expectancy by its architecture, silence, and spatial organization. Instead of the transmission proposed by material affect, Woolf moves affective agency away from human subjects and onto the material environment itself, illustrating affective materiality. Pointz Hall is also a geographically exposed building and a landmark of historical significance. Its wide

terrace and exposed position are a sign of the distant vibrations of aircraft approaching. In terms of its vacant halls and clean landscapes, Woolf indicates that Pointz Hall does not passively wait for history; instead, its very stones and essence of silence are actively participating in the affective endeavour of absorbing a crisis before it materialises. Therefore, the displacement of affect from human interiority into material space is not merely an aesthetic strategy but an ontological reconfiguration of agency. Rather than locating affect within individual consciousness, Woolf redistributes it across a network of human and nonhuman actants. The anticipatory atmosphere surrounding Pointz Hall belongs to the assemblage itself. As Melba Cuddy-Keane asserts, Woolf's experimental language functions as a form of cultural and political "intervention" that seeks "to insert the values of literary language into the public issues of the day" (121). In this sense, the "essence of emptiness" permeating Pointz Hall becomes more than atmospheric description; it materialises the collective unease of a society living under the pressure of an imminent catastrophe.

Woolf redirects this pre-traumatic absorption into a micro-level force field with the ancient barn. It serves as an affective assemblage where the past and an ominous future converge through tangible textures. Inside its confines, the communal apprehension of the village is both articulated and experienced through the "vibrant matter" of the surroundings. By detaching affect from human interiority, Woolf enables the physical realm of the novel to bear the materialist burden of upcoming war, revealing that the landscape is anticipatorily traumatised before the historical occurrence:

Mice slid in and out of holes or stood upright, nibbling. Swallows were busy with straw in pockets of earth in the rafters. Countless beetles and insects of various sorts burrowed in the dry wood. A stray bitch had made the dark corner where the sacks stood a lying-in ground for her puppies. All these eyes, expanding and narrowing, some adapted to light, others to darkness, looked from different angles and edges. (Woolf 119-120)

Within this frame, the ancient barn presents a "vibrant materiality" where the human psychological burden of the coming war is distributed across a non-human "assemblage" (Bennett 23). The creatures including mice, swallows, beetles, insects and stray bitch in the barn represent "actant" defined as "a source of action ... which has the efficacy ... to produce effects" (Bennett viii). It can also be interpreted that Woolf removes affect from human interiority to various animals in accordance with material agency. The barn's "vibrant matter" including the "corn," "sacks," and "rafters" functions as a physical site that sustains the perceived weight of catastrophe prior to actual occurrence. In other words, the barn serves as the micro-level evidence of the affective assemblage. Unlike material affect, where objects primarily mediate pre-existing emotions, the barn generates affective intensity through the interaction of animal, architectural, and organic matter. The heterogeneous assemblage does not simply express human anxiety; it actively produces the sensory conditions through which anticipatory trauma becomes materially perceptible. These non-human elements and the barn's architectural structure function as

affective agents, converting an imminent historical catastrophe from mere human cognitive dread into a material reality profoundly embedded in the “thing-power” of the world (Bennett 3).

From spatial materiality to acoustic materiality, the gramophone serves as the novel’s most persistent material actant. Prior to being perceived as a symbol of failure, it operates as an agent for pre-personal affect: an instrument that produces atmospheric intensities that the gathered audience assimilates without understanding how to respond to them. At the beginning of the pageant, the gramophone’s output anticipates and surpasses the theatrical content it is intended to complement:

Chuff, chuff, chuff sounded from the bushes. It was the noise a machine makes when something has gone wrong. Some sat down hastily, others stopped talking guiltily. All looked at the bushes. For the stage was empty. Chuff, chuff, chuff the machine buzzed in the bushes. (Woolf 93-4)

Unlike Caruth’s model of belated trauma, where the wound returns only after the event, the gramophone embodies Saint-Amour’s theory of anticipatory trauma. Its repetitive mechanical sound does not reactivate a past catastrophe but gives sensory form to a future one. The audience experiences the war as an affective certainty before it becomes a historical reality, demonstrating how anticipation itself functions as a mode of injury.

Woolf depicts the gramophone as surpassing its role as a household object to emerge as a principal actant that dictates the rhythmic power of the village pageant. The machine’s repetitive “chuff, chuff, chuff” and the insistent “tick of the gramophone needle” (Woolf 100) exemplify a significant manifestation of thing-power as Bennett defines it as “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (6). If the gramophone merely transmitted the characters’ anxiety, it would function as an instance of material affect, serving only as a vehicle for already existing emotions. Instead, Woolf grants the machine its own agentic efficacy. In this sense, the mechanical stuttering of the gramophone not only interrupts the performance but also generates a somatised condition of suspension in the audience. By emphasizing this mechanical noise, Woolf interferes with the collective psychological state of the community; as Michele Pridmore-Brown highlights, she exploits the “noise or static inherent in communications technology” to “short-circuit the herd impulse” of the audience (408). The machine becomes an auditory foreshadowing of the forthcoming historical catastrophe. The constant “chuff, chuff” becomes as an acoustic representation of impending mass traumatisation, with the needle’s ticking echoing a countdown to a disaster that the assembled community perceives physically, despite their inability to express it verbally. Thus, this is a matter of ontology and a change from material affect to affective materiality. Material affect suggests that matter is a passive vehicle for human feelings to pass through. However, affective materiality reaffirms the autonomous power of the object itself. In *Between the Acts* the gramophone both carries the concerns of the characters and creates an atmospheric intensity which anticipates and influences human response

with its materiality, particularly its own mechanical stuttering. Considering affective materiality, it becomes noticeable that the coming horror of 1939 is a mental concept for the Oliver family as well as a material force imposed by the thing-power of the mechanical and architectural surroundings they live within. While the gramophone circulates anticipatory trauma through the instability of sound, Woolf's mirrors expand this fragmentation to visual and social surfaces, turning perception into an affective centre of pre-war unease.

Mirrors in *Between the Acts* are unstable devices of reflection and affective surfaces that transmit fragmentation, uncertainty, and emotional turmoil through bodies and objects. Where the gramophone creates anticipatory trauma through the interruption of sound, the mirrors convert this instability to the visual, rendering vision a broken and disturbed experience. Woolf recurrently distorts the idea of unified self-recognition, portraying reflection as multiple, unstable and materially mediated. At the beginning, Isa Oliver is in front of a "three-folded mirror," and she sees "three separate versions of her rather heavy, yet handsome, face" in it, while observing "outside the glass, a slip of terrace, lawn and tree tops" (Woolf 19). The mirror does not unify identity into a single image; it multiplies perception and dissolves the border between internal consciousness and the external environment. In the reflections on surfaces, the self is fragmented, implying that subjectivity in the novel is already unstable before the calamity of war fully arises. This instability obtains an affective dimension through Woolf's emphasis on vibration, circulation, and sensory overflow. Isa's feelings cannot be safely placed in the hidden interiority of the self. Rather, feeling emerges as scattered among objects, movements, and material environments. Woolf proposes, words and bodily presence "attach themselves to a certain spot in her; and thus, lie between them like a wire, tingling, tangling, vibrating" (20). Within this frame, Massumi's conceptualisation of affect as an "autonomous" intensity that escapes rigid "emotive identification" (38, 43) resonates with the language of vibration and circulation in *Between the Acts*. Isa's emotions are not clearly delineated psychological states but unstable intensities moving between bodies and material surfaces. The mirror is both a symbolic item and an affective medium that gives sensory form to anticipatory anxiety. This instability also reconfigures trauma temporality. Rather than reflecting a fractured memory of past violence, the mirror materialises the uncertainty of a catastrophe that remains imminent. The fractured image functions as an affective anticipation of historical rupture, allowing the future to reorganise perception before violence has taken place. The mirrors move beyond material affect. Rather than functioning as passive reflective surfaces onto which characters project their emotions, they actively reorganise perception and distribute affect across fragmented images and material surfaces. Their agency resides not in symbolic representation alone but in their capacity to participate in the production of affective intensity.

Woolf challenges the conventional relationship of mirrors and true self-knowledge. The narrative often depicts reflection as distorted and incomplete. When the narrative speaks of books as "mirrors of the soul", the metaphor is revised: "A tarnished soul, a spotted one in this case" (Woolf 22). Reflection is no longer transparent but fractured and blurry. The spotted mirror stands for a larger crisis of

representation in the pre-war atmosphere of novel, as neither literature nor historical memory can totally stabilise collective identity. Woolf's depiction anticipates the fragmentation that is later realised in the pageant itself, which presents English history as discontinuous and insecure, rather than united. This distribution of affect across reflecting surfaces can also be associated with the circulation of emotions across bodies, signals and objects through recurrent contact and proximity. In this context, material objects serve as an affective archive, where fear and anticipation attach to surfaces like mirrors, so creating what Sara Ahmed calls the "stickiness" as "an effect of the histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs" (90). The "stickiness" aligns with the broader definition of affect: "affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds" (Seigworth and Gregg 1). In *Between the Acts*, dread sticks to mirrors, books, gestures, surfaces of vision, and the material environment becomes an affective archive of approaching catastrophe. Therefore, the mirror scenes depict anticipatory trauma not as a fully conscious fear of war but as an atmospheric condition that pervades everyday perception before historical violence has fully materialised. Woolf builds a universe where calamity arrives as sensation in fractured reflection. The mirror's capacity to retain and circulate affect also resonates with Bennett's understanding of vibrant matter and thing-power (Bennett 3, 6). Its affective force does not derive solely from symbolic meaning but from its participation as a material actant within a broader assemblage of bodies, surfaces, and sensations (Bennett 23). Woolf thus presents reflection as an event produced collaboratively by human perception and material agency.

The most crucial mirror scene of the novel comes in the final moments of the pageant, when Miss La Trobe turns mirrors toward the audience itself. Rather than presenting the viewers a unified sense of national identity, the mirrors provide fractured, unstable images that undermine the idea of historical continuity that the pageant aims to depict. Here, Woolf changes the mirror from a reflective object into an affective surface that spreads dread through the collective body of the audience: "Look at ourselves, ladies and gentlemen! Then at the wall; and ask how's this wall, the great wall, which we call, perhaps miscall, civilization, to be built by (here the mirrors flicked and flashed) orts, scraps and fragments like ourselves" (Woolf 219)? Mirrors are a symbol of social dread, and they help to transmit it, forcing the audience to face the chaotic atmosphere of a society that anticipates a catastrophe. In other words, this scene signals the collapse of stable spectatorship. The spectators are no longer distant witnesses to national history, but they are materially involved in the affective uncertainty surrounding the upcoming war. The sonic fragmentation linked to the gramophone evolves into a visual fragmentation in the novel's affective atmosphere, which is articulated through mirrors, extending anticipatory trauma beyond sound to fragmented collective perception.

The fragmentation shown in the mirrors necessarily converges in the composition of the pageant itself. The performance seeks to construct a cohesive narrative of English history, yet it always devolves into interruptions, discontinuities and formal instability. Aylin Atilla states, "the pageant seems to attempt to define the prevailing sense of fragmentation and isolation in the modern world and its

historical basis” (80). The formal instability of the pageant is not merely a theatrical failure but a direct consequence of the affective materiality of its physical environment. The pageant transcends material affect. Its interruptions convey societal dread and deliberately produce anticipatory trauma through the dynamic interaction of theatrical performance, sound, material objects, weather, animals, and audience. Affective intensity originates from the assemblage itself, rather than from individual psychological reactions. The collapse of theatrical coherence also reflects Saint-Amour’s reconfiguration of trauma temporality, in which the anticipated future becomes a source of present injury rather than merely a deferred historical event (Saint-Amour 7–8). Rather than representing the aftermath of catastrophe, the interruptions stage the instability generated by an anticipated future. The pageant therefore performs anticipatory trauma formally, allowing the future war to reshape the present before its historical arrival. While Miss La Trobe endeavours to sustain a coherent narrative of English history, non-human actants disrupt the performance, exerting their own “thing-power” over the human script. As Jane Goldman remarks, Woolf’s technique “extends beyond the individual lyric impulse to include other voices and incidental objects” (85). In this context, Woolf portrays that “cows annihilated the gap; bridged the distance; filled the emptiness” (165-66), implying that the landscape is an active participant in the composition of the pageant. These environmental disruptions serve as anticipatory indicators of the impending disaster; they embody the “the interminable geopolitical suspense” that Saint-Amour associates with the pre-war state, particularly Woolf skilfully uses in her fiction (Saint-Amour 96), wherein the stability of historical representation is physically undermined by the vibrant, uncontrollable forces of the material world. Moreover, the inherent frailty of the pageant’s costumes including “cardboard crowns, swords made of silver paper, turbans that were sixpenny dish cloths” (Woolf 77) embodies the fragile nature of European civilisation. By highlighting the improvised quality of these historical garments, Woolf demonstrates that the shelter of national heritage is as unstable as the physical textures of the stage, shaking under the material burden of a world on the edge of catastrophe.

Beyond the materiality of objects and spaces, Woolf ultimately inscribes anticipatory trauma into the texture of language itself. Repetition, interruption, ellipsis, and linguistic fragmentation turn language from a transparent medium of representation into an affective structure that enacts unease and suspension. With the repetitions of the phrases like “empty, empty, empty” and “silent, silent, silent” (Woolf 47), the rhythmic intensities of the expressions exceed semantic meaning to circulate affectively throughout the text. Hence, war emerges not only as a thematic catastrophe but also through the instability of linguistic form itself. Woolf’s disjointed sentence structures and broken speech patterns show a world where language is no longer capable of stabilising perception, history, and collective experience within an affective atmosphere of an approaching catastrophe.

Conclusion

Between the Acts represents catastrophe not as a fully realised historical event, but as an affective condition already circulating through material environments, bodily experience, and fragmented acts of perception. This article reveals that Woolf turns the atmosphere of imminent warfare into a pervasive sensory experience distributed across objects, sounds, architectural spaces, and visual surfaces, through a combination of affect theory, material studies, and anticipatory trauma. The mechanical stutter of the gramophone, the shattered reflections of mirrors, the unstable textures of Pointz Hall, and the interruptions of the pageant both serve as symbolic representations of crisis and as affective agents that materialise the felt pressure of a forthcoming disaster. In this way, the novel opens up the possibility of understanding trauma not solely as a retrospective experience but also as an affective condition shaped by anticipation and impending catastrophe.

Woolf locates trauma in memory and psychic aftermath as well as in a pre-traumatic universe in which matter itself absorbs and distributes collective anxiety. The instability of language, the collapse of coherent spectatorship and the fragmentation of historical narrative all create an affective atmosphere where representation collapses repeatedly in terms of the looming threat of war. This interwar cultural moment is defined by a “proleptic” preoccupation with ruins and fragments, which establishes Woolf’s modernist aesthetic as an “active form” of response to political crisis (Snaith 2). Therefore, her modernist experimentation is a formal innovation as well as a response to the sensory and historical conditions of late-1930s England. As Ryan suggests, this form of modernist ethics is “embedded in material relations between human and nonhuman, culture and nature, and that gains its force through experiments in both content and form” (300). Through this experimentation, *Between the Acts* marks how ordinary existence is transformed into a state of suspended anticipation through its affective materiality, where disaster exists not yet as an actual occurrence but as vibration, interruption, and atmospheric intensity. In doing so, the novel shifts from material affect, in which objects merely mediate human emotion, to affective materiality, in which matter itself participates in producing affective intensity. Consequently, trauma emerges not as an exclusively human psychological condition but as an ontological event distributed across material environments and nonhuman actants. This study explores the novel via the integration of materiality, affect and anticipatory trauma, arguing that Woolf reconceptualises trauma as a state of living toward disaster, showing how the future may already be in the textures, objects, and silences of the present.

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Eco-Collapse in Everyday Spaces: Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone* and Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children*

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From nature writing to ecological anxiety, theatre, as a visionary medium, portrays not only how ecological catastrophe permeates life but also how humans and non-humans witness this spectacle. Set in a garden and a cottage, Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone* (2016) and Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children* (2016) portray the apocalypse through the practices of everyday life. The former is fragmented, mirroring the mental and environmental decline throughout, whereas the latter differs in its natural flow of dialogue and the traces of trauma. However, the characters, or the survivors, live in both comfort and demolition, using domestic space as a base for recalling and sharing the reasons for and remedies of the catastrophe. Therefore, both plays present environmental trauma through the practices of daily life in the intimate spaces, where characters' anxieties are exposed. Considering related works and articles, this paper offers a comparative analysis of *Escaped Alone* and *The Children*, showing how everyday life mediates between disaster and remembrance.

Keywords: *Escaped Alone*, *The Children*, Apocalypse, Environment, Memory, Trauma, Language.

Introduction

This article draws on spatial, ecological, and trauma-based theories to examine how *Escaped Alone* and *The Children* portray environmental catastrophe through domestic spaces and the everyday rituals practised within them. When ecological disaster threatens the home, which should be free of it, symbolic significance is primarily attributed to domestic settings, as is the case with the characters' psychology. Una Chaudhuri's ideas on how both plays turn familiar settings into houses of environmental and psychological dread suggest that place itself can become a site of trauma. Additionally, Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* highlights that such spaces, as well as their rooms within, are emotionally charged, preserving and passing down memories and fears. Furthermore, Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, as presented in her work *Unclaimed Experience*, particularly the idea that trauma reveals itself belatedly through fragmented speech and language, as well as awkward silences, can be seen in both plays. These perspectives indicate that catastrophe is not only represented on stage or in texts but also actively performed through characters' language, speech, and intimate spaces, as the home is where ecological trauma quietly and decisively permeates.

Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone* (2016) and Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children* (2016) are two contemporary plays that present environmental catastrophe not as a backdrop, but as a familiar occurrence embedded in everyday spaces. In a sunny backyard, where four older women are together for tea and conversation, *Escaped Alone* unfolds through fragmented dialogues and Mrs Jarrett's monologues, revealing horrifying visions of social, cultural, economic, and ecological ruin, sometimes with a sarcastic touch. Similarly, *The Children* unfolds in a seaside cottage where retired nuclear scientists get together after a nuclear disaster. Throughout an afternoon of Rose's visit to his retired scientist friends, Hazel and Robin, they recall, question, and answer, through everyday practices of cooking and setting the table, juxtaposing ignorance with the acknowledgement of environmental damage.

Premiered in 2016, *Escaped Alone* and *The Children* are products of a time when climate anxiety was prominent in British theatre. These two plays employ different dramaturgical strategies for presenting the issues in the text or on stage: Churchill with a fragmented structure of overlapping group conversation, Kirkwood with a naturalistic, realistic flow of dialogue. Such a difference then enables a comparative analysis of the styles used in both plays, enriching the aesthetic and emotional, in other words, spatial and trauma-based, explorations of the ecological disasters. By situating disasters in the garden, kitchen or a problematic bathroom,

these two plays demonstrate that the apocalypse is a progressing condition intertwined with daily life. Set in a backyard and a seaside house, Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone* and Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children* focus on ecological disasters not as an unexpected event but as slow permeating condition encircling the intimate space which is a base for recalling, sharing, and puzzling over the reasons and remedies of the catastrophe by the characters who live in both comfort through engaging in conversations, preparing food and practising yoga, and demolition through being traumatized and anxious.

Knock, Knock. Who's There? Apocalypse!

In the era of ecological disasters such as global warming and toxic and nuclear pollution, the environment is the stage for developing dramas following the catastrophic occurrences. In *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama*, Chaudhuri examines the relationship between the character and setting in the context of the crisis, foregrounding the idea that “the figure of home and ideal of belonging are shot through with otherness” and “[t]he initial mode of this paradoxical coexistence ... is conspicuous enough to warrant its own label, which I provide, coining the term geopathology to refer to the double-edged problem of place and place as problem...” (*Staging Place* 53). Such geopathic settings, where disasters outside the home yet slowly become one with the place, manifest as distress for the characters, who carry them as devastating memories in their psyches. Since the crisis cannot be avoided even in everyday places, such as the garden and the cottage, and in the characters' thoughts, there is nothing left for them but to face and accept or endure the reality. The world is full of crises that manifest in the characters' minds at home; thus, they cannot step back from intrusions. Overall, they are living amid environmental destruction, with ruined memories, struggling to return to their previous interior spaces rather than settling for geopathic settings.

Characters in Churchill's or Kirkwood's plays are not only enclosed by their everyday physical surroundings but also by the global consequences of ecological problems. Away from the toxicity of the outside world until the moment the disasters are recalled, the “topography of our intimate being” is full of thoughts and memories of the previous world (Bachelard [xxxvi](#)). According to Bachelard, the inside is intimate and includes protection, while the outside is cruel and sometimes unknown. As the storm far away can be witnessed within “the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind” (6), the sense of safety is reinforced. However, permeation of the developing environmental catastrophe into the house turns such an ideal setting into a site of anxiety and unsafety. Therefore, closed spaces within the plays are not entirely safe shelters as the toxicity of the outside leads to the mental state of

the characters, causing them psychological distress. Churchill and Kirkwood, in their plays, use the safe interior space in the Bachelardian sense but to stage the opposite. The debris is not just outside; radiation and the chemical atmosphere also penetrate the home and the characters' psyches. Therefore, the wreckage is not just ecological; it is also psychological within the walls of an ordinary cottage and a backyard garden.

Since the traumatic incident cannot be fully comprehended at the moment of its happening due to the overwhelming consequences, it comes back later to haunt the survivor “in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena” (Caruth 91). Such *Nachträglichkeit* in the Freudian sense is significant for the slow environmental change that is unrecognised in the moment and later grasped through delayed effects. The belated aftermath of human decisions made up to the moment the characters face hardships in *Escaped Alone*, and *The Children* is now being understood in the present. Plans for nuclear power plants, carbon emissions, or the misuse of industrialisation in general have slowly brought their effects into homes. Through the unfinished recallings, overlapping dialogues, and disastrous monologues in *Escaped Alone*, and through the silences, responsibilities to be acknowledged, and harsh discussions in *The Children*, the works precisely present this pervasive destruction and the disruptive narrative arising from trauma.

Lastly, referencing Walter Benjamin's idea that progress is seen through the concept of catastrophe, the “imperceptible process of doom” (7), in Horn's words, rather than an abrupt occurrence, is in the latency of past decisions made by humanity. Overall, such decisions lead the characters into slow suffering, even within Bachelardian shelters. These spatial and traumatic perspectives show that the in *Escaped Alone* and *The Children* do not function as safe spaces, but rather as sites of environmental problems both within the walls and fences and in the psyche. Therefore, the inevitability of the consequences is accepted by the characters as they chat with friends, prepare dinner, drink tea, and practise yoga in their daily lives. By reframing such settings through the perspectives of “geopathology” or “catastrophe without event,” and by examining the latency of trauma in the psyche and everyday life, the following chapters of this work will focus on these plays, demonstrating that the collapse is not an abrupt explosion but a pervasive horror.

Horror in the Garden of *Escaped Alone*

Caryl Churchill's play *Escaped Alone* explores environmental catastrophe in Sally's backyard, transforming the ordinary into a site of apocalypse through Mrs Jarrett's surreal monologues describing horrific scenes. The entire play takes place after Mrs J's “walking down

the street” and seeing “a door in the fence open” (Churchill 7), and there are three women she has seen before. Vi, Lena, and Sally question the woman who has entered the garden and continue speaking. Sometimes they complete each other: “Rosie locked out in the rain,” says Sally, and Vi adds, “forgot her key.” Sally continues adding: “climbed over.” Then the process of adding to the same situation is not completed. Mrs J suddenly exclaims that she has a son named Frank and “he suffers insomnia” (7). At the end of such crowded thought processes, sometimes absurd, but mostly horrific monologues about the condition they have gone through and continue to live with, interrupt the mundane garden time. After sessions of overlapping dialogue, the narrative then shifts to sections of harsh realities disguised in everyday language. Therefore, the destruction is not far off; it is already permeating the home and backyard, as evidenced by the shift. At the end of the first part, Mrs J begins her monologue:

Four hundred thousand tons of rock paid for by senior executives split off the hillside to smash through the roofs, each fragment onto the designated child’s head. Villages were buried and new communities of survivors underground developed skills of feeding off the dead where possible and communicating with taps and groans. Instant celebrities rose on ropes to the light of flashes. Time passed. Rats were eaten by those who still had digestive systems, and mushrooms were traded for urine. Babies were born and quickly became blind...Torrential rain leaked through cracks and flooded the tunnels enabling screams at last before drownings. Survivors were now solitary and went insane at different rates (Churchill 9).

As the ordinary garden is transformed into a stage where only Mrs J is explaining “[t]he uncannily absurd narration of catastrophe,” such a section “most accurately understood not as the projection into an apocalyptic future but rather as a critique of our current ecological situation” (115), Wakefield suggests. Then, by changing the safe garden into a scene of destruction, Churchill shows the collapse of the exploitation of both the environment and private lives. The terror lies within this violent aftermath: the injured children’s heads, eaten Rats, and blind babies are no longer problems of a distant place, but disturbing facts that are present in the intimate spaces. Four women who “are all at least seventy” (Churchill 6), then, cannot completely isolate themselves in their domestic comfort. Within such a threatened condition, the entire play evolves into an overlapping of voices about the ordinary lives of women in the garden, blending with harsh realities.

As Gobert states about Churchill's style, she "has lately veered further into minimalism, producing text whose lack of stage directions, identified speakers, and even plot forces us to find its dramatic meaning elsewhere: in the interaction between the script ... and spectators..." (Gobert 166). The structure of Churchill's play keeps the reader or the audience alert and makes everyone a witness to both the cacophony and the silence. Similarly, the conversation among women in the garden is filled with blanks, unresolved thoughts, abrupt changes in tone or topic, and ellipses that stand for unspoken concerns. "Words or echoing fragments cover silences but are riddled with holes, an emptiness of speaking but not saying," remarks Templeton and goes on, "[o]r rather saying matters of life and death is not different to parroting trivia" (Templeton 40). From time to time, they start a chain of memories, even if it is about a small corner shop from the old days. At the beginning of the second part, Sally starts the chain; then the others continue adding what they remember of their old experiences in the garden, "SALLY. corner shop / LENA. don't like the / VI. mini Tesco / LENA. bit far / MRS J. used to be the fish and chip shop / VI. that other one's gone / SALLY. the old grocer" (Churchill 10). Recalling the old world by completing each other's unfinished sentences or thoughts leaves the audience perplexed and raises questions about what kind of life they have had, what they are missing in a world of disaster, or whether everything is a metaphor. "In terms of linguistics, even though the language used in the play is fluent and conforms within a modernist framework, Churchill does not allow her characters to speak in a coherent sense of order" (632), points out Bağırlar. That is why everything can be read without understanding, just as the characters in the play utter words. They lack information about their current situation, which is not mentioned anywhere except in the final monologues. Moreover, they hardly recall what happened before. Therefore, Vi and Sally confess, Vi says, "there must be quite a few things I missed," and Sally goes on, "not really, it all goes by, I can't remember those years especially" (Churchill 11). Except for Mrs J's monologues, neither the memories nor the current understanding of their world appears throughout the play.

As Templeton gives an example from poetry, "...space on the page is used in many ways but also reminds us that the time of making includes what is not written" (40), so the conversation in *Escaped Alone* invites reading the trauma, considering the victim's delayed and fragmented behaviour and speech. Such belatedness in conveying the terrible scenarios shapes the play's overall tone, so Mrs Jarrett's horrific and sometimes sarcastic accounts of the catastrophe come at the end of other women's conversations, creating an image of both societal and environmental ruin. From surreal to horror, the overall tone shifts as sentences are altered and meaning is dissolved. Also, the characters have their own histories, such as Vi's uncertainty about whether

killing someone was murder or not and being sentenced to prison and Sally's fear of cats. Such fragmented memories create disorientation and present how their lives are fractured in the middle of the disaster; "hence their fragmented conversations, which offer impressionistic reflections on their lives, are contextualised in a post-traumatic universe that rather refracts, like a broken mirror, recognisable figments of the quotidian" (Casado-Gual 237). Rather than demonstrating a coherent flow of what is happening around, and slowly breaking into the garden, trauma comes to light in dialogue and as a big brick of soliloquies that overflows across the pages.

The garden, which provides a fake sense of safety within its fences and door, along with the afternoon tea, highlights the play's juxtaposition. The disruptive moments show that the crisis outside is not a future event but a regular way of life in such a society. Through everyday conversation and abrupt, horrific scenes, their existence hangs between the external war of toxicity and the internal battle of survival. Such descriptions are not metaphors for the human condition, but the horrific ecological realities already present outside the text or the theatre walls. As Horn points out, "[i]t may have many different forms of 'outbreak,' but it essentially (and paradoxically) consists in the sheer perpetuation of current policies, lifestyles, and modes of managing the future" (8-9). Unlike a classical work, the play lacks a proper beginning or a single climax; rather, the catastrophe hangs over, highlighting its ordinariness and its tendency to go unnoticed amid the normality of daily life.

In the face of the climate catastrophe, Mrs J, Sally, Vi, and Lena present their collective defence through afternoon tea and conversation, sometimes with gossip. Repeating such a daily routine, then, is to preserve normalcy, or at least to soothe their minds within the limits of the garden. Despite the peaceful intimacy, Churchill's play always presents an opposition between the aforementioned routine and safety and apocalyptic anxiety. That is why, while the four women are talking about their daily lives or memories lightly, though fragmented, Mrs Jarrett's traumatic descriptions create a contrast after them. In Bachelardian terms, the garden, as the shelter of familiarity and comfort, is sometimes shadowed by traumatic recallings and horrific monologues; it is also a ritualised act of balancing the two. According to Chaudhuri, any place, be it home, neighbourhood, or environment, is burdened by historical violence, which complicates the sense of safety (*Staging Place* 55). Therefore, the peace provided by tea and conversation is fragile and sensitive amid environmental tensions. Wakefield's "artificial safety" (116), this potential illusory, then, is also under the control of the same industrial systems that caused their traumas, yet upon completing her mission of recalling and reminding, Mrs J. says, "thanks for the tea" (Churchill 33) and goes home at the end of the play.

Tilted End in Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children*

Lucy Kirkwood examines the human psyche through the lens of the end of the world in a small seaside cottage. Aside from a few nuances, the audience sees only the aftermath, not the event itself. The disaster in *The Children* is an ecological one “modelled on the accident at the Fukushima Daiichi plant in Japan in 2011” (Hoydis 85). The nuclear meltdown occurs, and it slowly contaminates the daily life of people, including the retired scientists. Since the radioactive zone touched the seaside cottage where they live, the toxicity affects not only the intimate space but also the characters’ psyches. Therefore, the cottage’s protection is disrupted, and both the inside and the outside are gradually overtaken by the catastrophe. As a result of the nuclear disaster and its aftermath, “a one-in-ten-million-years fault sequence” (Kirkwood 22), the dialectic of outside and inside (Bachelard 211) is abolished. Because of the insidious cause and sinister toxicity, the characters check the Geiger counter every time they enter the cottage. Robin, for instance, “takes out a small Geiger counter and runs it over the trike,” and he “gives HAZEL a thumbs up, puts down the Geiger counter” (Kirkwood 26) when there is nothing to worry about. The unsafe external storm, in the Bachelardian sense, is a threat that can imperil both the body and the cottage’s safety, as it did in the earlier play. In this environment, even basic activities such as going for a number two, since “it will cause it to overflow, which is, it’s a very messy / business” (40), become problematic, and natural resources are, of course, depicted as inadequate and inconvenient. Consequently, the characters, now in their sixties, are unable to enjoy a peaceful retirement and instead must prepare to confront the ongoing crisis.

Hoydis points out that “...involving both the sudden destructive and unpredictable accident and the slow violence of its aftermath,” the fault sequence then “literally refers to the particular scenario of building a nuclear plant near the sea and storing the cooling equipment in the basement.” However, she continues, “it is also a metaphor for the destructive impact of the bundle of developments of modernity...unfolding over time in sudden freak accidents as well as slowly building damage” (Hoydis 86). Therefore, the nuclear power station triggers a chain of disasters, as the characters experience throughout *The Children*. Since this is a result of human activity and the characters experience what they did not expect, trauma and anxiety manifest themselves in emotional hesitations and quiet questioning; thus, in everyday dialogues, reminding of Caruth’s ideas on the manifestation of trauma. Again, conversation serves as an expository tool for the suppression of traumas, as in the case of Churchill’s play.

Beginning with Rose’s nosebleed in a slightly tilted room, Hazel tries to help Rose and confesses hearsay about the possibility of Rose’s being dead the whole time. She confesses, “[y]es so it was bit of a shock,” and continues, “[l]ovely you’re not of course” (Kirkwood 6). During

these mundane conversations after years of not seeing each other in the domestic kitchen, Hazel mentions the disaster and tries to recall the details about how it first started: “Yes I was... making banana bread, for the children and, because it was the eggs, they started shaking in the box and – this sound stupid, but I thought, they’re hatching...” (10). Comma interruptions within the play indicate “a beat” that is “shorter than a pause.” They “can also denote a shift in thought or energy” (3) as it is stated in the Key part in Nick Hern Books’ edition of the play. Therefore, after mentioning the first clues, there comes a comma, and Hazel recalls what she did during it, then shifts to the current moment with Rose in the kitchen in the following scene:

HAZEL. ...that’s when I realised the whole kitchen was shaking, the plates started falling and the lights went out and the ground was sort of rolling and

I thought this must be what it’s like on a ship in a storm and then I thought, what are you doing you stupid woman, geet out, just get out, so I did, I just ran outside in my apron, and I saw the road cracked down the middle and then... and then it just stopped.

Pause.

ROSE. God. You must have / been

HAZEL. Yes so then I wanted to call Robin so I walked, I ran down to the beach, because the reception – and that’s when

I saw the tide had gone out. I mean it wasn’t miles but it looked like miles, and then I saw the wave, only it didn’t look like a wave, it looked like the sea was boiling milk and it just kept boiling and boiling and boiling and.

,

And then everyone was running, so I ran too.

,

I’m so sorry, did you say you wanted tea / or (11)

Pausing from time to time, she goes on describing the first moments through homely details. Caruth’s theories on trauma come into play in the latency of comprehension at first, later the acceptance of the horrific aftermath of the nuclear disaster, leaping into the house by the retired scientists, as will be seen through the end of this chapter.

Hazel is fixed on her routines. As an attempt to have control over the reality and sometimes Robin’s mockery, she keeps living healthy and makes her defence against Rose’s claim, “...I find salad deeply depressing,” by answering as follows: “Well, you just become aware of the risks, don’t you. Osteoporosis strokes diabetes blood pressure all the usual suspects” Rose adds, “Cancer” to Hazel’s list. However, she has precautions against such a list, “I do yoga you

know.” She explains her philosophy: “You have a choice, don’t you, exactly, at our age, which is that you slow down...or you make a committed choice to keep moving...This is not the end of our lives but a new and exciting chapter” (Kirkwood 16). Therefore, she begins preparing the salad for dinner. Throughout the get-together, she “produces salad leaves, tomatoes, pre-hard-boiled eggs...” and assembles everything while talking about the disaster and wreckage (19). Rose tries to understand the setting, asks about the farm, “[b]ut, so the farm is... inside the exclusion zone?- Isn’t that / quite –” upon stating Robin’s attachment to the cows, which silently perished due to the permeating radiation. Hazel adds, “I’m deeply attached to them too.” Moreover, she is “more attached to not getting cancer” (20). The repetitive preparation of the salad and concerns with eating habits and not getting cancer, Hazel’s obsessions become a ritualised habit in the face of radiation. This insistence on health, which is the symbolic displacement of the initial trauma, exemplifies Caruth’s trauma theory once again. Also, such a “geopathic” (*Staging Place* 15) relationship creates an illusion of safety within the cottage, which is supposed to be a shelter rather than a place slowly being contaminated with radiation. Maybe as a form of resistance to the disaster, or a silent denial, Hazel’s act of preparing the salad and her obsession with certain things demonstrate the psychological struggle within the home through everyday acts.

Since Hazel’s healthy routines are questioned by Rose and ridiculed by her husband Robin, their attitude in the face of Hazel’s ways of resisting recalls and refers to the “destructive wave which cannot be stopped,” and it “functions as commentary on Hazel’s behaviour as being futile risk management but also foreshadows the play’s ending” (Hoydis 88). No matter how dedicated Hazel is to coping with old age and nuclear reality, the so-called cottage safety only allows her to live with the illusion of order. In the middle of the slow destruction of the world, the seaside cottage, which has served as a sanctuary before, has now become a contaminated place. Moreover, Rose has a purpose in being at the tilted house, and this brings realities that contradict the daily rituals, so “Rose’s presence challenges the fragile stability that Hazel has constructed” (Maya 6). Her arrival is driven by a significant moral responsibility. Rose is serious and determined about going to the mission because the current situation is getting worse, as she explains: “This morning, there was a radiation spike. They should be pulling them all out, but they can’t, there are major leaks in unit two, somehow there’s contaminated water flooding into the discharge channel” (Kirkwood 51). As retired scientists, Hazel and Robin are invited to the mission at the nuclear plant, which means sacrificing for future generations by replacing the young engineers with “whole lives ahead” (48) with themselves. Since Robin knows the conditions they live in, from digging graves for dead cows every day, he shows his care for both

the animals and Rose by keeping anything that could ruin her routines to himself. As a result of this responsibility, he listens to and carefully considers Rose's invitation. Since Rose and Robin have already faced the truth and decided to proceed with the task, Hazel is also confronted with the realities she has been denying. The everyday realism they live in, then, becomes the most disturbing quality; thus, ongoing ecological occurrences affect the very safety of the isolated cottage. No longer a shelter from the radioactive zone, the room, as a reminder of their geopathic condition, becomes a site of difficult decisions.

The disruption, through the Geiger counter's appearance, Rose's nosebleed, practising yoga, dancing, and the house's tilted setting, demonstrates the challenging "fault sequence" as a latent force from the past that disturbs the present. In such a present, the cottage transforms the disaster into a controllable space where conversations about yoga routines, preparing dinner, or just salads are initially evident. However, through the end, layered silences and commas reveal the suppressed and ongoing emotional restlessness. As Hoydis summarizes, "[t]he play is small in scale, but raises large issues, asking what price we will pay in the future for the past and the present" and continues, "[i]t manages to illustrate environmental destruction not as a commonly known disaster-movie scenario (Marvel), but, literally, as a 'kitchen sink' drama – or, considering the ending, juxtaposing the two modes" (95). Addressing significant points, especially regarding humanity's future actions, *The Children* portrays ecological destruction through confused and traumatised characters who gradually come to understand the critical power they hold and, in the end, accept their responsibilities. Since Hazel's decision on joining the research team is uncertain, "the play prolongs the audience's engagement with the dilemmas presented, emphasising the ongoing nature of the crisis" (11), as Maya suggests. Along with the sound of waves, the play then does not show the result, indicating the ongoing ecological crisis and keeping the audience awake to real-life problems.

Post-Apocalyptic Domesticity in Both Plays

In the same year, 2016, Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone* and Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children* offered striking explorations of apocalyptic themes, along with different structures and perspectives for understanding and approaching destruction. One of the differences explored in this paper is the plays' approaches to dialogue. Churchill's *Escaped Alone* adopts a non-linear, fragmented narrative that challenges the structure of typical conversations. Repeatedly interrupted by the remembrances of the old world and horrific scenarios of environmental destruction delivered by Mrs J., the play consists of absurd sequences. Through this, Churchill seeks to present environmental catastrophe in economic terms, reflecting various global problems. In contrast, in *The Children*, Kirkwood uses the natural flow of dialogue to ground

the nuclear crisis in personal relationships and the slow unfolding of the disaster's harsh reality, as well as the secrets: hidden diseases, past infidelities, and, lastly, why Rose visited Hazel and Robin. The structure of the play is Aristotelian, and "that means in a sense unity of time and place" (Lucak 7). Therefore, intentionally Aristotelian, Kirkwood aims to slow people's actions and portray the disaster's overwhelming consequences through real conversations.

According to Chaudhuri, in geopathology, "...the characterization of place itself as a problem, as a site of often-painful psychological impasse and as an ideological blind spot, with devastating consequences" ("The Silence" 46) implies that the places characters live in, the backyard garden, the kitchen, the farm, or the cottage as a whole, are embedded with the environmental trauma and its consequences. The new reality of the safe spaces now haunts the characters in *Escaped Alone*, as they recall phobias and personal memories while suppressing trauma, and in *The Children*, through the deaths of the cows, radiation sickness, eggs shaking in the box, and a flooded bathroom. Then, activities from the old world, such as a simple afternoon tea with conversation or dinner preparation, serve as communal activities in both plays. When the three friends, Vi, Sally, and Lena, and Mrs Jarrett begin talking in a mundane way, reflecting their fragmented memories, routines serve to recall a stable past and unify their anxieties. Moreover, as a communal act, they anchor for the stability through singing, so "[a]ll sing. SALLY, VI and LENA in harmony. MRS JARRETT joins in the melody. They are singing for themselves in the garden, not performing to the audience" (Churchill 24). In the other play, *The Children*, along with a careful usage of electricity and water, the environmental disaster and trauma it causes are embedded in Hazel and Robin's life in the cottage and farm; moreover, for Hazel, even after Robin's arrival and her purpose, the cottage continues to be where she "...finds her yoga mat and rolls it out on a dry patch of the floor" (Kirkwood 78) and salute the sun. To escape the overwhelming reality waiting for them at the doorstep, Rose also joins Hazel, and together they form a communal act of preserving the ordinary.

Churchill rejects the traditional narrative as stated in the previous paragraphs. Juxtaposing everyday backyard gossip with broken apocalyptic conversation and disregarding the linear sequence of the unravelling and surreal catastrophes, *Escaped Alone* utilises Beckettian chaos. As Keyssar highlights, "[i]n Caryl Churchill's plays, neither the sequence nor the unravelling events is central to the drama since she rejects the temptations of narrative and exploits the ability of the live stage to provoke our acknowledgement of the vulnerability and plasticity of human life" (198). Therefore, Churchill underscores the fragility of societal or cultural structures and presents this condition not as an impossible future event but as an everyday reality already permeating our lives. According to one of the interviews with Kirkwood, she

points out that she wanted “to write something that didn’t harangue or nag an audience, but was generous, honest and unsentimental about how difficult it will be to make the changes that we need to, about how overwhelming that might feel – an awakening perhaps, but a terrifying one” (Lucak 7). Inspired by the Fukushima occurrence and the information about “the retired work-force returning to the plant to help with the clean up” (7), Kirkwood challenges the characters, as well as the audience, in not leaving the problem of climate change only as an intellectual topic among people. Still, she wants both the characters and the audience to deal with it emotionally. Therefore, “Kirkwood resists offering simple solutions or utopian visions and instead demonstrates the overwhelming nature of confronting issues that affect us all...” (Maya 12), and invites us to take an active role, just as Rose invites Hazel and Robin to join her at the end of the play. Therefore, through different narrative structures, Churchill and Kirkwood share the same purpose in these plays. Facing the realities through brave monologues and being active agents to go to the radioactive plant, both *Escaped Alone* and *The Children* suggest a portrayal of the condition the world is in and what kind of tomorrow, or today, is waiting for the earth.

Conclusion

This article offers a comparative analysis of Caryl Churchill’s *Escaped Alone* and Lucy Kirkwood’s *The Children*, focusing on environmental disasters, the transformation of domestic spaces into sites of ecological trauma, and the use of habitual practices to address and cope with these realities. In both works, everyday spaces become sites of trauma in which both anxiety and disaster collide. Through ordinary routines, then, the characters try to manage the cruel consequences. While *Escaped Alone* portrays an open-ended entrapment in the ruins, *The Children* concludes with the sacrifice of the retired scientists, who accept their mortality on behalf of future generations. In an increasingly dangerous world, Caryl Churchill’s *Escaped Alone* and Lucy Kirkwood’s *The Children* explore themes of environmental anxiety, cruel realities, and an unsustainable future, offering a warning and a call for immediate action to address ecological problems already at the doorstep.

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