

Embodied Ontologies and Feminist Language in Caryl Churchill's *A Mouthful of Birds* [In English]

Nastaran Ebrahimi¹ , Zahra Bordbari^{*2} , Negar Sharif³

1 PhD. Candidate in English Literature, Department of English Language, Faculty of Foreign Languages, CT.C., Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

2 Assistant Professor, PhD. in English Literature, Department of English Language, Faculty of Foreign Languages, CT.C., Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

3 Assistant Professor, PhD. in English Literature, Department of English Language, Faculty of Foreign Languages, CT.C., Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran



*Corresponding author: bordbari@riau.ac.ir



Received: 16 Nov, 2025

Revised: 25 Dec, 2025

Accepted: 20 Jan, 2026

ABSTRACT

This study examines the construction of female identity in Lebanese society through a sociological analysis of Layla Baalbaki's novel *I Live* (Ana Ahya, 1958). The novel is widely recognized as one of the early Arabic literary works that critically interrogate patriarchal norms and the restrictive roles imposed on women. Through the experience of its female protagonist, the narrative reflects the tensions between individual autonomy and the social structures that regulate women's lives. Adopting a sociological approach to literary criticism, the study analyzes the representation of social pressures affecting women's identity formation, including familial authority, cultural expectations, and class dynamics. The analysis is informed by theoretical perspectives on gender and symbolic domination, particularly Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power and Simone de Beauvoir's reflections on the social construction of womanhood. By focusing on narrative voice, characterization, and the depiction of social relations, the article explores how the novel reveals the mechanisms through which patriarchal authority is reproduced and contested. The findings indicate that *I Live* portrays female identity as a site of conflict shaped by intersecting social constraints. Although the protagonist seeks independence and self definition, her experience exposes the persistent influence of patriarchal values embedded within family structures and social discourse. Consequently, Baalbaki's narrative not only reflects the lived realities of women in mid twentieth century

Lebanese society but also articulates a broader critique of the social order that limits women's agency.

Keywords: Phenomenological Field, Embodied Subjectivity, Feminist Theatre, Linguistic Perception, Ontological Rupture, Perceptual Faith, Caryl Churchill, Mouthful of Birds

Introduction

The interstices between phenomenology, ontology, and feminist theory are highly fertile yet uncharted territory to be explored in the choreography of embodiment, identity, and existential subversion in contemporary theater. Although the ideas of both Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Martin Heidegger are highly influential in providing philosophical frameworks for understanding the nature of perception and existence, these ideas have yet to be brought into conversation with feminist theories of drama, especially in the area of gendered embodiment as a location of ontological disruption. But the body as a location of essential meaning in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, in which the phenomenological field, perceptual faith, or the horizon feature prominently, places great stress upon the role of subjectivity insofar as this subjectivity is constituted in engaged bodily practice rather than in disembodied cognition. Further, Heidegger's phenomenological distinction between the factual-provisional and the ontological in his Being and Time nicely highlights the ways in which the constitution of the real is structured through a specific template that frames the manner in which the appearing of beings occurs in order to make existential sense. The tools of phenomenology and ontology constitute an important but comparatively unexamined approach to the disturbance of the embodied self in feminist theatre. This paper posits the convergence of the related ideas of the phenomenological field and perceptual faith developed by the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty with the concept of ontic distinctions versus ontological structures as articulated by the philosopher Martin Heidegger. These ideas offer an in-depth analysis of the way in which theatre performance articulates the disturbance of perception and being. This paper will demonstrate the application of such a theoretical approach to the play "A Mouthful of Birds" by the feminist theatre artist Caryl Churchill.

One of the most innovative British dramatists of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, Caryl Churchill is internationally recognized for her plays that test conventional narrative structures, challenge gender roles, and subvert societal power relations. Her work often fuses feminist,

socialist, and surrealist elements to extend the possibility of theatre as a means of investigating the human condition. Considering her collaborative works, *A Mouthful of Birds* (1986), which she wrote in collaboration with David Lan and choreographer Ian Spink, stands as a seminal text of feminist theatre. Created through the workshop process of Joint Stock Theatre Company, the play takes Euripides' ancient Greek tragedy *The Bacchae* as its inspiration, refracting its Dionysian ecstasy, repression, and violent transformation within a contemporary context. *A Mouthful of Birds* provides the main corpus for this analysis, offering a rich site for interrogating ontological and phenomenological concerns through its fragmentary, embodied storytelling. *A Mouthful of Birds* is difficult to categorize according to genre; the piece is an experimental hybrid in some respects, integrating drama, dance-theatre, and mythic allegory. The play uses physical movement and choreography to express psychological and existential states; this is tied to postmodern and feminist theatrical practices that mobilize the body as a medium for critique. The text eschews linearity for vignettes and interludes. This genre-blending allows Churchill and Lan to comment on patriarchal structures and think through gendered precarity through visceral, non-verbal elements in addition to text.

To more explicitly connect these dramatic elements to a linguistic and discursive analysis, this study argues that the play's embodied, non-verbal elements radically transform the linguistic text itself and gendered discursiveness. The narrative fragmentation and incorporation of choreography are not simply parallel to the linguistic text but operate to challenge linguistic patterns and illuminate the failure of language to define the lived experience of precarity. The play, therefore, constitutes a dramatic critique where the critical discourse itself is embodied and where the presence of the body denotes a critical, discursive dialogue that counteracts and sometimes substitutes verbal language to define the dramatic portrayal of the ontology of the female subject. The analysis will therefore discuss how these dramatic manifestations of the phenomenological field are enacted not just visually but also linguistically through fragmented discursiveness, repetition of syntactics, and linguistic interruptions that reflect the embodied decay of the dramatic subject.

The traditions of phenomenology and existential ontology, through the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Martin Heidegger, respectively, have irrevocably recast our view of being-in-the-world. They argue that meaning and self are not given but constituted through our embodied, perceptual being-in-the-world, which is always meaningful already. Merleau-Ponty's notion of the phenomenal field and the lived body (*le corps propre*) rejects the Cartesian split between subject and object; consciousness is intrinsically incarnate-its expression and its limits are given in and through the corporeal schema. Meanwhile, Heidegger's work, between the ontic, or the factual, empirical qualifications of entities, and the ontological, a fundamental inquiry into Being itself and its structures-provides a critical lens through which one looks at layers of existence. Both these frameworks have been of invaluable use in critical analyses of literature and drama by providing tools with which to closely examine identity, perception, and reality crises. While these philosophical tools have seen wide application in the investigation of existential uncertainty, their specific utility in underlining the gendered dimensions of ontological precarity remains less charted, particularly in the context of feminist theater. Caryl Churchill's *A Mouthful of Birds* (1986) is a piece steeped in concerns of possession, fragmentation, and the reclamation of the female body, thus serving as a potent text in such an investigation. It stages a world where the stable boundaries of self, body, and world dissolve, forcing characters into liminal states that challenge the very foundations of subjective coherence.

Crucially for an applied linguistics perspective, these phenomenological and ontological frames illuminate not only the visual and corporeal dimensions of performance but also the inextricable interplay between embodiment and language in the constitution of meaning. Thus, Merleau-Ponty's account of the lived body as the primordial site of expression extends into spoken speech, wherein linguistic signification issues from pre-reflective, gestural, and perceptual foundations rather than from abstract cognition alone; language is, in this view, always already embodied, with discourse shaped by the corporeal schema and phenomenal field. In *A Mouthful of Birds*, this is manifested in its hybrid form of dance-theatre, where physical movement and choreographed possession sequences disrupt and reshape spoken dialogue-syntax fragmented, narrative coherence interrupted, gendered discourse precarious and ontologically unstable. Moments of trance, violence, or reclamation are performed through the simultaneous layering of bodily gesture and verbal utterance, which shows how ruptures within the perceptual field produce corresponding ruptures in linguistic

expression, such as shifts from coherent speech to ecstatic or fragmented discourse. Applying these tools to the play's text and performance, the analysis will show how this sets out the way in which embodied experience conditions communicative practice, yielding insights into the discursive construction of gendered identity.

The interplay of perception and embodiment, primarily within the framework of being, provides numerous insights into human existence. It allows one to make an argument concerning theatrical texts and their performances more convincingly. The phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the importance of a living body as a primary site of meaning production. He opposes Cartesian dualisms by asserting that perception arises from an active, corporeal engagement with the world, not from passive reception. Complementing this, Martin Heidegger's ontological inquiry distinguishes the ontic (the empirical facts of entities) from the ontological structures underlying the appearing and becoming meaningful of beings. The existential themes of identity crisis, uncertainty, and possibilities in literature become more understandable through these frameworks.

For an applied linguistics agenda, though, these ideas are very fruitful when expanded into the discursive and linguistic sphere. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological emphasis on embodied perception indicates the constitutively somatic nature of linguistic expression, whereby the expression of text, written and spoken, springs from embodied, pre-reflective foundations of gesture and perception, and is mediated by the somatic embodiment of the text within the world and the communicative process it implies. Indeed, the Heideggerian emphasis on ontological interpretation also emphasizes the possibilities of discursive rupture, as, for instance, in instances of fractured or precarious language discursively representing states of being as precarious, possessed by forces outside of control, and, conversely, in the discursive erasure of powers and presences, as for instance when the text 'forgets' its own language and 'unwrites' its own inscription in the world, as can often be seen in the feminist dramatic tradition, in plays that explore possession and dispossession and the erasure and presence of feminine presence in the world, where the instruments of examination here allow for the close consideration of the performative interaction between dialogue and stage actions in the definition and erasure of gender discursively performed.

In *A Mouthful of Birds*, the monologue of Spirit represents the ontological break and phenomenological disturbance in language and embodies the ideas of Merleau-Ponty through the use of disrupting

speech acts. The phenomenological field itself—that space of meaning shared between others—undergoes disturbance not as theme but as particular structure of discursivity. For example, the interrupted parataxis of “Teapot. Cup. Cup. Is that a cup?” (Churchill, 19) consists of blunt nominative phrases and the disrupting interrogative to historically indicate the ontological break of perceptual consistency; the repetition and pause in the syntax formally corresponds to the breakdown of gestalt integrity. Likewise, the anaphoric negations of “you’re not born, you’re not conceived of, this house was never built” (Churchill, 19) engage the same syntactic format to systematically reduce existential statements, grammatically realizing the ontological gap that unhorses the subject. The imperative “kill the baby” (Churchill, 19) represents the blasphemous act of speech whose directive perturbs the temporal axis, with the commanding act of the imperative linguistically negating continuity. Through the incorporation of the ontic-ontological distinction of Heidegger’s phenomenology, it will become clear that the subsequent concept of “essence” discursively occurs as the ‘fleshly appearance’ of meaning itself—meaning as the space of the negation, imperative command, and referential instability. Thus, the monologue’s phenomenological effects are produced not symbolically but through concrete operations of syntax, repetition, and illocutionary force.

Situating this reading within feminist critiques of embodiment, the article attends to a significant gap within scholarship: while Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology has been extensively brought to bear on those literary texts that dramatize existential indeterminacy, its intersection with feminist theatre—where the female body becomes the negotiated site of epistemic agency and ontological contestation, garnered scant critical attention (Olkowski & Weiss, 2006). Such an oversight fails to consider the ways in which plays such as Churchill’s dramatize the ethical imperatives of reclaimed cognition, one which contests stable ontologies through performative disruption via the female body (Aston 45-50). By bringing these philosophical perspectives to bear on a close textual analysis, this paper contributes a nuanced phenomenological reading that accentuates the existential and ethical dimensions of female subjectivity and, ultimately, advocates for theatre as a medium that not only reflects but actively negotiates the precarities of being embodied (Butler 530).

Yet, in linguistics terms, it is underexplored to what extent Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology might be brought to bear on feminist theater. While the existing literature often treats dramatic language as a thematic vessel for representations of the female body, which frowned upon analyzing specific discursive practices—fragmented syntax,

negations, or imperative speech acts, for instance-in terms of how they materially enact the "precarities of being embodied" (Butler 530). In contrast, this article argues that a purely thematic approach overlooks the constitutive role of linguistic form in staging ontological contestation. Coupling Merleau-Ponty's notions of the phenomenological field and horizon with discourse analysis, this paper assumes a methodologically distinct contribution in examining how grammatical structures, speech patterns, and turntaking in Churchill's text represent a strategy not simply to describe epistemic disruption but to perform it. This linguistic-phenomenological reading advances the applied linguistics perspective by demonstrating precisely how the negotiated agency of the female subject is procedurally generated through the play's formal speech fabric, moving beyond symbolic interpretation to analyze discourse itself as the site of ethical struggle that is at once irreducibly discursive and carnal.

Literature Review:

In relation to the current article, its literature review will critically interact with feminist interpretations of *A Mouthful of Birds*, compiling these findings for a wider conversation that illuminates an important gap in terms of the linguistic and discursive manifestations that correspond with its phenomenological approach. Early feminist critiques, as illustrated in works by Diamond (1989) and Aston (1995), fruitfully illuminate the representation of gendered violence and possession in plays like *A Mouthful of Birds* as a critical challenge towards patriarchal domination, centered upon notions of Dionysiac possession and maternal effacement as a fulcrum for ideology. More contemporary engagements, illustrated within Cousin (2005), Reinelt (2008), and others, further nuance these ideas within an ongoing exploration of whether Churchill and Lan's collaborational text functionally sutures these discourses back together through a reinscription or subversion of more essentialist traditions and representations of female hysteria, positing that these several female bodies on stage functionally reproduce rather than subvert domination. Though these analyses add layers towards theme and ideology, these continue to function within a relatively content-driven paradigm, addressing narrative themes and symbology without challenging towards a more symptomatic exploration of how paratactic fragmentation, negated act statements, or pragmatically disrupted communication serves as the enactment of the very phenomenological disarray they describe

This gap becomes evident when viewed through Merleau-Ponty's lens of embodied perception: prior scholarship attends to what the text represents (ontological rupture in gendered experience) but not how discourse patterns performatively generate perceptual instability and intersubjective breakdown in the theatrical encounter. By privileging ideological critique over analysis of communicative structures, these readings overlook how repetitive nominals, deictic shifts, and imperative intrusions linguistically fracture the horizon of expectation, thereby producing the embodied effects of ontological void and gendered erasure that the play stages. The present study addresses this lacuna, demonstrating how a linguistically attuned phenomenological approach reveals Churchill's text not merely as a feminist allegory but as a discursive enactment of fleshly dispossession, where patriarchal burdens emerge through the communicative failure of coherent speech acts themselves.

This article situates its analysis within the rich tradition of phenomenological performance studies since the 1990s, which has productively mobilized Merleau-Ponty's philosophy to illuminate the intercorporeal and perceptual dimensions of theatrical encounter, while identifying a critical gap that the present linguistically oriented approach seeks to address. Foundational texts such as Stanton B. Garner Jr.'s *Bodied Spaces* (1994) and Bert O. States's *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms* (1985) established the phenomenological body as the primary horizon of theatrical meaning-making, emphasizing embodied spatiality and perceptual reversibility. Later scholarship, including Maaïke Bleeker's *Visuality in the Theatre* (2008) and Rachel Fensham's *To Watch Theatre* (2009), extended concepts like flesh, chiasm, and intertwining to post-dramatic and dance-theatre forms, highlighting how performance disrupts habitual vision and enacts intersubjective entanglement. Yet, despite this corpus's focus on embodied perception, it has rarely intersected with Churchill's oeuvre, and existing phenomenological touches on *A Mouthful of Birds*—such as Susan Kozel's passing discussion of possession states (2007) or McDonnell's unpublished thesis (1995)—remain broadly descriptive, prioritizing thematic embodiment over precise analysis of how discursive structures mediate perceptual experience. This oversight is particularly limiting for an applied linguistics perspective, as these studies attend to what bodies do on stage but not how linguistic form—fragmented syntax, negated presuppositions, repetitive deictics, and pragmatically ruptured speech acts—performatively generates the phenomenological disarray of gendered perceptual faith that Merleau-Ponty's later ontology of flesh

articulates. By foregrounding the flesh not as abstract reversibility but as a linguistically mediated site where patriarchal impositions fracture intercorporeal trust, the present study innovates methodologically: it demonstrates how discourse patterns in Spirit's monologue enact an ontological rupture that prior phenomenological readings describe but do not linguistically substantiate, thereby bridging performance phenomenology with discourse analysis to reveal gendered erasure as a communicative and perceptual failure inherent to the text's linguistic architecture itself.

Heideggerian readings of theatre are even more rare and tend to cluster around Greek tragedy or post-dramatic aesthetics rather than contemporary British drama. Works such as Gerald Else (1957), Paul Gordon (2004) and more recent studies by Tanja Staehler (2016) and Robert Savage (2019) explore tragedy as an ontological event in which beings are disclosed in their Being-toward-death. In modern and contemporary theatre, Heideggerian concepts appear sporadically, often via the mediation of Gadamerian hermeneutics (Carnicke, 2009) or in analyses of presence and absence in post-dramatic work (Lehmann, 2006). This article further contextualizes its framework by noting the relative scarcity of Heideggerian engagements with theatre, which predominantly gravitate toward Greek tragedy or post-dramatic aesthetics, thereby underscoring a specific research gap that the present linguistically inflected analysis of *A Mouthful of Birds* addresses. Scholarship such as Gerald Else's *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* (1957), Paul Gordon's *Tragedy and the Tragic Impulse* (2004), and more recent contributions by Tanja Staehler (2016) and Robert Savage (2019) frames tragedy as an ontological disclosure of Being-toward-death, where beings emerge in their fundamental temporality and finitude. In modern and contemporary contexts, Heideggerian concepts surface intermittently—often mediated through Gadamerian hermeneutics in acting theory (Carnicke, 2009) or deployed to interrogate presence, absence, and the withdrawal of Being in post-dramatic forms (Lehmann, 2006)—yet rarely extend to politically charged British drama of the late twentieth century. This clustering leaves Churchill and Lan's collaborative text unexplored through a Heideggerian lens, particularly in terms of how its linguistic structures enact the ontic-ontological distinction central to the play's portrayal of possession and dispossession. While these studies illuminate ontological events at the level of thematic content or spectatorial encounter, they seldom examine how discourse itself—through fragmented parataxis, negated existentials, and

pragmatically unstable speech acts—performs the concealment and unconcealment (aletheia) of Being, or how patriarchal impositions manifest as linguistic withdrawals that fracture the ready-to-hand coherence of the lived world. For an applied linguistics perspective integrating Heidegger with Merleau-Ponty's later ontology of flesh, this constitutes a critical lacuna: prior readings describe ontological rupture but do not analyse how textual features linguistically stage the eclipse of essence in gendered existence, nor how imperative disruptions and deictic instabilities disclose the embodied self as both ontic burden and ontological possibility. The present study bridges this gap by demonstrating how Spirit's monologue discursively enacts Heidegger's distinction—revealing essence not as static ideal but as fleeting, fleshly appearance amid communicative breakdown—thus extending Heideggerian theatre analysis into the domain of discourse patterns and perceptual faith, where patriarchal erasure emerges precisely through the linguistic failure to sustain intersubjective disclosure.

Feminist phenomenologists, including Iris Marion Young (1980), Judith Butler (1988), and Gail Weiss (1999), have long chided Merleau-Ponty for his relative silence on sexual difference, while Sara Heinämaa (2003) and Dorothee Legrand (2011) have sought out reconstructive readings that foreground gendered styles of embodiment. In theatre and performance studies, these debates have influenced work on the gendered gaze (Diamond, 1997), bodily vulnerability (Ridout, 2009), and the ethics of intercorporeality (Al-Saji, 2014). Yet the specific intersection of gendered embodiment with ontological rupture—particularly the collapse of the phenomenological field under patriarchal imposition—remains undertheorized in dramatic literature.

The principal strength of existing scholarship lies in its rigorous historicization of Churchill's feminism and its attentiveness to the play's formal experimentation. Its chief limitation is a persistent reluctance to engage continental philosophy at the level of ontology and perceptual constitution. While poststructuralist and materialist-feminist approaches excel at mapping power relations, they often treat the body as a discursive construct rather than as the primordial site where meaning and being first emerge. A rigorously Merleau-Pontian reading, one that attends to the breakdown of perceptual faith, the collapse of gestalt unity, and the gendered stakes of the horizon, has the potential to illuminate how Churchill stages not just ideological oppression but an existential threat to the very possibility of female being-in-the-world. Integrating Heidegger's ontic-ontological distinction could further clarify how everyday ontic

violence road rage, domestic labor conceals and reveals deeper structures of possession and dispossession.

Methodology

This study employs a phenomenological methodology inspired by the philosophical frameworks of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Martin Heidegger, emphasizing the lived experience, perception, and structures of being as foundational to inquiry. The approach rejects traditional dualisms between subject and object, instead focusing on the intertwined nature of phenomena, essence, and ontological dimensions to explore human existence and the world. This phenomenal field is not an inner world, the 'phenomenon' is not a 'state of consciousness', or a 'mental fact', and the experience of phenomena is not an act of introspection or an intuition in Bergson's sense.

It has long been the practice to define the object of psychology by saying that it was "without extension" and "accessible to one person only", with the result that this peculiar object could be grasped only by means of a special kind of act, "internal perception" or introspection, in which subject and object were mingled and knowledge achieved by an act of coinciding (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 66). In philosophy, particularly in Martin Heidegger's philosophy, "ontic" and "ontological" are utilized as terms to refer to certain levels of inquiry concerning being and things. Ontic refers to things or beings as they exist in the world with their real properties, characteristics, behavior, and interrelations. It is about "what is." Sciences, for example, primarily engage in ontic investigations, describing and analyzing specific things or phenomena. As an Example, describing the physical properties of a tree (its height, type of wood, leaf structure) or the specific actions of a human being (walking, eating). (Heidegger, 1962)

On the other hand, Ontological refers to the nature of being itself, or the fundamental way in which entities are. It is about "what it means to be" or "the being of entities." Ontology is the philosophical study of being, not just individual beings, but the underlying structures and conditions that make their existence possible. For Example, asking what it means for a tree to "be" a living organism, or what it means for a human being to "exist" in a particular way, e.g., as Dasein, a term Heidegger used to describe human beings as concerned with their own being. Additionally, ontic deals with specific instances and their empirical qualities, while ontological deals with the general conditions and meaning of existence. (Heidegger, 1962)

In the other hand, ontic focuses on what something is, while ontological focuses on how something is or that it is. In Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, the concept of "essence" is complex and departs significantly from traditional philosophical understandings. He considerably notes: "Not only that meaning that is attached to words and belongs to the order of statements and of things said, to a circumscribed region of the world, to a certain type of Being, but universal meaning, which would be capable of sustaining logical operations and language and the unfolding of the world as well. It will be that without which there would be neither world nor language nor anything at all— it will be the essence." (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 107). While influenced by existentialism (where "existence precedes essence" is a key tenet), Merleau-Ponty revises this. For him, essences are not pre-given, abstract forms that things conform to. Instead, they are revealed and understood through our lived experience and perception. He's arguing that Essence is the appearance of the thing. So, in Merleau-Ponty, the essence of the thing isn't something out there independent of its appearance, but is the sheer existence of the thing appearing. It's not a static, abstract conception, but is something which appears in our lived, bodily life of the world. He critiques the idea that essence is a purely mental construct, asserting that it presents itself directly within our corporeal vision and experience.

To operationalize these philosophical frameworks for the analysis of *A Mouthful of Birds*, this study adopts a structured, text-analytical procedure. The primary corpus consists of the dramatic text itself, with specific focus on key monologues (notably Spirit's), stage directions, and the juxtaposition of speech and embodied action as prescribed by the playwrights. The methodological steps are as follows: First, a close reading will identify ontic descriptions—the concrete actions, dialogues, and physical states of characters. Second, these ontic instances will be analyzed for moments where the text points beyond itself to ontological conditions; for example, where a description of eating or bodily transformation prompts an interrogation of what it means to be consumed, possessed, or to lose one's gestalt unity. Concepts like "perceptual faith" and the "collapse of gestalt unity" will function as analytical lenses to code such motifs, tracing how the play stages a disintegration of the lived body's coherence. This approach is justified as phenomenology, uniquely focused on pre-reflective, embodied experience, provides the optimal framework for analyzing a play deeply concerned with possession, altered states, and the limits of subjective integrity. While acknowledging the interpretive nature of this analysis, its scope is delimited to the textual and prescribed performative elements of

the play, setting aside specific audience reception. The final synthesis will demonstrate how the play's linguistic and dramatic structures enact the very phenomenological crises theorized by Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, thereby fulfilling the applied linguistic expectation to concretely link discourse to embodied existence.

Results and Discussion

The passage delivered by spirit, "Teapot. Cup. Cup. Is that a cup? You don't know do you because you're useless, you're not born, you're not conceived of, this house was never built...", (Churchill & Lan, 1986, p. 19) is a powerful articulation of ontological precarity and existential liminality, resonating profoundly with Merleau-Ponty's notions of the phenomenological field and horizon.

Spirit's fragmented invocation of "Teapot. Cup. Cup. Is that a cup?" (Churchill & Lan, 1986, p. 19) destabilizes the gestalt unity of the perceptual field. The repetition and questioning of the cup's identity evoke a rupture in the coherence of the phenomenal field, signaling a loss of the tacit, pre-reflective trust (perceptual faith) that normally sustains the meaningfulness of objects. The cup, a mundane object, becomes an ambiguous signifier, emblematic of the subject's ontological disorientation.

Moreover, this disorientation is intensified by Spirit's assertion of non-being, "you're not born, you're not conceived of, this house was never built" (Churchill & Lan, 1986, p. 19), which gestures toward an ontological void within the phenomenological field. The "house," a metaphor for the embodied self or lived world, is rendered nonexistent, reflecting a collapse of the embodied horizon that normally grounds subjectivity and perception. The subject is cast into a liminal state of non-existence and non-coherence, where the field no longer offers a stable ground for identity or meaning. To further explicate the preceding concept, the disorienting effect evoked by Spirit's pronouncement, "you're not born, you're not conceived of, this house was never built", serves as a profound ontological rupture within the phenomenological field, intensifying the subject's experience of existential dislocation. This declaration gestures toward an ontological void, a radical negation of being that destabilizes the foundational structures underpinning embodied subjectivity. The metaphor of the "house" functions as a multifaceted symbol, signifying both the embodied self and the lived world as a coherent, inhabited horizon. By negating the existence of this "house," the text enacts a collapse of the embodied horizon that ordinarily provides

the tacit, pre-reflective grounding for perception, identity, and meaning-making. In this state, the usual certainties of selfhood and the continuity of the lived world dissolve, leaving the subject suspended in an abyssal space where identity is unmoored and meaning is radically destabilized.

This liminal condition foregrounds the fragility of the embodied self's anchorage within the phenomenological field, exposing the contingent and constructed nature of the horizons that ordinarily sustain subjectivity. The subject's displacement into these voids challenges conventional ontologies predicated on stable, coherent modes of existence, instead revealing a threshold experience marked by ambiguity, fragmentation, and existential indeterminacy. Consequently, Spirit's assertion not only dramatizes the collapse of the embodied horizon but also invites a critical reflection on the conditions of possibility for subject formation, perception, and meaning within the interstices of being and non-being.

SPIRIT. Teapot. Cup. Cup. Is that a cup? You don't know, do you, because you're useless, you're not born, you're not conceived of, this house was never built. The universe will go forward again when you kill the baby. Then he/she won't fill up all the space. Then you might get born. Then I'll stop talking and go away because then you'll have done what you should and you won't be useless (Churchill & Lan, 1986).

Spirit's pronouncement, "The universe will go forward again when you kill the baby. Then he / won't fill up all the space" (Churchill & Lan, 1986, p. 23), invokes a temporal horizon of potentiality and transformation. The "baby" symbolizes an existential obstacle or burden that saturates the perceptual horizon, constricting the possibility of becoming or emergence. The act of killing the baby metaphorically gestures toward a radical rupture and reconfiguration of the horizon, an attempt to clear the field for a new mode of being or perception. This projected future, where "you might get born" and "I'll stop talking and go away" (Churchill & Lan, 1986, p. 23), marks a dialectical movement between presence and absence, being and non-being, emblematic of the horizon's dual nature as both limit and opening.

From the other perspective, the repeated negations of birth and conception emphasize the precarity of embodied existence, while the imperative to "kill the baby" underscores the agency involved in navigating and transforming the field and horizon. This passage dramatizes the liminal condition of the subject, caught between non-being and the possibility of emergence, reflecting Merleau-Ponty's insight that embodiment is always situated within a mutable field and horizon that both constrain and enable subjectivity. The subject's identity

and meaningful engagement with the world depend on the ongoing negotiation of these phenomenological structures.

To furnish additional insight, the repetition and interrogative stance toward the cup's ontological status precipitate a disruption within the seamless continuity of the phenomenal horizon, thereby undermining the tacit, pre-reflective confidence that ordinarily undergirds the intelligibility and meaningfulness of objects. In this context, the ostensibly banal object of the cup is transmuted into an equivocal signifier, emblematic of the subject's profound ontological disarray and epistemic uncertainty. Furthermore, this disorientation is intensified by Spirit's assertion of non-being, "you're not born, you're not conceived of, this house was never built" (Churchill & Lan, 1986, p. 23), which gestures toward an ontological void within the phenomenological field. The "house," a metaphor for the embodied self or lived world, is rendered nonexistent, reflecting a collapse of the embodied horizon that normally grounds subjectivity and perception. The subject is cast into a liminal state of non-existence and non-coherence, where the field no longer offers a stable ground for identity or meaning.

Within the phenomenological schema articulated by Merleau-Ponty, the horizon functions as a constitutive yet elusive backdrop, both contextual and temporal, that circumscribes the conditions of perceptual disclosure and the constitution of meaning. It operates simultaneously as the structural limit and the ontological possibility of experience, an ever-receding and indeterminate boundary that delineates the scope of what can be apprehended or intelligibly known. This horizon remains inherently partial and open-ended, perpetually deferring complete closure and thereby sustaining the dynamism of perceptual and existential engagement.

Spirit's enigmatic pronouncement, "The universe will go forward again when you kill the baby. Then he / won't fill up all the space" (Churchill & Lan, 1986, p. 23), invokes a temporal horizon suffused with latent potentiality and transformative possibility. The "baby" emerges as a potent existential signifier, emblematic of an ontological encumbrance or impasse saturating the perceptual field, effectively occluding the conditions for emergence, growth, or becoming. The metaphorical injunction to "kill the baby" gestures toward a radical ontic rupture, a violent yet necessary reconfiguration of the horizon that seeks to evacuate the constrictive presence saturating the field, thereby clearing a provisional space for the genesis of a novel mode of being or perceptual openness.

This envisaged futurity, where “you might get born” and “I’ll stop talking and go away” (Churchill & Lan, 1986, p. 23), articulates a dialectical oscillation between presence and absence, being and non-being, encapsulating the horizon’s intrinsic duality as both a limit and an opening. Far from constituting a static or definitive boundary, the horizon is reframed here as a dynamic, liminal locus of existential negotiation and ontological contestation. It is within this interstitial space that subjectivity is constituted in its precarious emergence, contingent upon the capacity to transcend or dissolve entrenched ontological impasses. Thus, the horizon is not merely a spatial-temporal parameter but a profound existential arena wherein the dialectics of becoming unfold, mediated by the continual interplay of constraint and possibility, closure and openness.

Spirit’s fragmented utterance, characterized by the repetitive interrogation of the cup’s ontological status alongside the categorical negations of birth and conception, functions as a profound symbolic disruption within the embodied noematic field. The cup, ordinarily a mundane and unremarkable object, is transformed into an ambiguous and unstable noema, an object as it is intended and experienced, whose identity is rendered uncertain and contested due to the subject’s inability to recognize, affirm, or integrate it within their perceptual horizon. This destabilization signals a broader disintegration of the embodied horizon, the lived and relational context through which perception and meaning are constituted.

Within this disrupted horizon, the material substrate of embodiment, particularly the female body understood as matter, ceases to function as a coherent ground for intentional acts (noesis). The usual reciprocal interplay between the corporeal dimension and the intentional consciousness fails to synthesize into a stable, meaningful gestalt that would ordinarily anchor subjectivity and perceptual coherence. Instead, the fragmentation of these components reflects a rupture in the unity of embodied experience, wherein the embodied self is cast into a state of ontological uncertainty and perceptual disarray.

This rupture foregrounds the fragility of the embodied subject’s capacity to constitute a coherent phenomenological world, emphasizing how the failure to integrate bodily matter and intentionality undermines the tacit trust, perceptual faith, that sustains the meaningfulness of objects and the continuity of selfhood. Consequently, Spirit’s utterance not only dramatizes a moment of existential and perceptual crisis but also illuminates the complex interrelations between embodiment, intentionality, and the constitution of the noematic field, highlighting

how disruptions in this nexus can precipitate profound ontological and epistemic instability.

Furthermore, the repeated negations, “you’re not born, you’re not conceived of, this house was never built” (Churchill & Lan, 1986, p. 23), can be read as a phenomenological articulation of ontological erasure, where the female body’s epistemic presence is denied or rendered “useless.” The “house” metaphorically represents the embodied self or the lived body as a dwelling of subjectivity, which here is declared nonexistent, emphasizing the absence or foreclosure of female embodiment as a site of cognition and being.

To clarify in greater depth, our inquiry ought to concentrate on the dialectical interplay between absence and potentiality. Yet, the passage also gestures toward a dialectical horizon of potentiality: “The universe will go forward again when you kill the baby. Then he / won’t fill up all the space. Then you might get born.” (Churchill & Lan, 1986, p. 23). Here, the “baby” symbolizes an ontological burden or blockage, perhaps the weight of imposed identities, patriarchal expectations, or internalized negations, that saturates the phenomenal field and occludes the emergence of a coherent embodied subjectivity. The act of “killing the baby” metaphorically enacts a rupture in the noetic flow, an attempt to clear the field for a reconstitution of the embodied female subject. This reconstitution involves a reconciliation of noesis, noema, and matter, enabling the female body to reclaim its epistemic agency and ontological presence. The promise that “you might get born” signals the possibility of emergence from ontological liminality into a renewed embodied cognition. tension between absence and presence, negation and affirmation, non-being and becoming within the female embodied subject. The female body, as a synthesis of noesis, noema, and matter, is both a site of erasure and potential transcendence. The embodied cognition it enacts is not merely cognitive but profoundly ethical and existential, involving the negotiation of cultural inscriptions, bodily materiality, and intentional acts of meaning-making.

The “baby” symbolizes the burden of imposed identities, trauma, or internalized negations that saturate the embodied field, obstructing the emergence of autonomous female subjectivity. Thus, the imperative to “kill the baby” metaphorically enacts a rupture in the embodied noetic flow, a necessary destruction of limiting narratives or embodied constraints to enable the reconstitution of female embodied cognition. This act opens the possibility of a new birth—an emergence of

a reclaimed, coherent embodied subjectivity where noesis, noema, and matter are reconciled. Following is the extract from the text:

LENA *sets the table*. ROY *comes in*.

ROY. So at the light he gets level

again and I don't look at him but he knows and I know that one of us is going to be in trouble because over the crossing it's got to be single lane because there's cars parked. And I'm on the outside so I've every right but I

know / from what he's done already that he's going to cut in if he possibly can and he knows that I'm going to keep him out and with any luck he'll get smashed on the parked cars. I can see without looking the kind of person he is and it's a kind I don't like and will not put up with, the whole way he sat there with his elbow out the

SPIRIT. teapot teapot teapot teapot.

window, / I thought to myself I'll have that elbow off, I'll have that elbow right off. So the minute the lights change the other side – *and*

elbow out the window elbow out the window elbow out the window

there's a stupid bastard / crossing the other way only gets through on the red – and we're both off with a hell of a screech and he's got a slight edge because pure and simple it's a faster

stupid bastard stupid bastard stupid bastard

car, nothing to do with his driving, it's a new car, but I've got my foot hard down and I not only get ahead but I swing out a bit to my left before I swing in round the back of the (Churchill, 19)

The ontic level of the excerpt describes a mundane urban event, where two drivers-Roy and the unnamed other-are in a competitive traffic maneuver. The particular empirical factors stand out: a lane is narrower because there are parked cars, two cars accelerate from a traffic light, one vehicle is faster, and one driver is perceived to be arrogant (in this case, "elbow out the window"). Roy's goal is to "keep him out" and even fantasizes about the other's destruction "he'll get smashed on the parked cars".

But a phenomenological analysis would have to press beyond the ontical dimensions-to the structures of Being that make this encounter possible and meaningful. Roy is not a psychological subject having aggressive thoughts; his mode of being-in-the-world has changed. He typifies what Heidegger might call the "fallen" condition, where his existence is utterly consumed by the competitive, instrumental world of the "they" (das Man). The world discloses itself for him not as a space of cohabitation but as a battleground of rights and territorial claims "I've every right". The other driver is not encountered as another Dasein but as

an obstacle, a type "the kind of person he is", whose very way of Being "the whole way he sat there" is an affront to Roy's own.

Roy's experience exemplifies Merleau-Ponty's contention that perception is always already evaluative and meaningful. He says, "I can see without looking the kind of person he is." This is not a conclusion reached via inference; it is pre-reflective, corporeal understanding. The "essence" of the other driver, his arrogance, his threat, is not a result of induction but immediately lived and perceived by Roy through the other's embodied comportment (the elbow out the window). The essence of the situation, as a life-and-death struggle for dominance, is this very way it appears to him in his agitated, embodied state.

This is where the methodology reveals its novelty. A more traditional psychological analysis would consider Roy's rage as an internal state projected onto some neutral external event; a Merleau-Pontian analysis, on the other hand, argues that the rage and the event are co-constituted. The aggressive essence of this encounter is the phenomenal field itself; it is the intertwined reality of Roy's lived body and the world it perceives.

It is here, with the interjections of the SPIRIT, that the true thematic and methodological rigor of the piece emerges. The Spirit's fragmented, repetitive utterances ("teapot teapot," "elbow out the window," "stupid bastard" (Churchill, 19) are not part of the ontic narrative of the car chase but rather an ontological rupture. The Spirit disembodies the key ontic elements of Roy's story, stripping them of their narrative context and reducing them to pure, obsessive signifiers. The "elbow," which for Roy was a meaningful perceptual Gestalt revealing the other's essence, becomes for the Spirit a meaningless sonic repetition. This disruption shatters the coherent phenomenal field Roy is trying to maintain. It exposes the fragile, constructed nature of his aggressive world. The Spirit's voice works like a phenomenological reduction in real-time, bracketing the natural attitude of the road-rage narrative and showing the raw, frequently chaotic flow of embodied existence that underlies it. Thematically, this juxtaposition engages the tension between a controlled, instrumental mode of being-Roy's drive to dominate the road-and a disruptive, non-rational mode of being that the Spirit represents. It would appear from the play that the core of human being lies not only in purposeful projects like car race victory but indeed in these breakdowns, repetitions, and eruptions defying logical narrative.

In the excerpt, Roy's narrative unfolds as a visceral recounting of a traffic encounter, where perception and action intertwine to expose the phenomenal field as a site of embodied confrontation rather than

introspective isolation. As Merleau-Ponty (2012) articulates, the phenomenal field eschews the Cartesian dualism of an "inner world" accessible only through "internal perception," instead presenting phenomena as extended, intercorporeal engagements (p. 66). Roy's description—"I don't look at him but he knows and I know"—exemplifies this: his awareness of the other driver emerges not from mental introspection but from a shared perceptual horizon, where bodily postures (e.g., "elbow out the window") and vehicular movements signal mutual anticipation of conflict. The repetitive intrusions—"teapot teapot teapot teapot," "elbow out the window elbow out the window elbow out the window," "stupid bastard stupid bastard stupid bastard"—disrupt the narrative flow, evoking a phenomenological bracketing of ordinary perception. These repetitions function as perceptual echoes, akin to Merleau-Ponty's notion of the "flesh" of the world, where the visible and the invisible interlace in lived experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). Novelty arises here in interpreting these as ontological intrusions of possession, transforming the ontic details of driving (cars, lights, lanes) into an ontological revelation of being-as-aggression, where the essence of violence appears not as a mental construct but as the "sheer existence of the thing appearing" in bodily motility (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 107).

Thematically, the excerpt elaborates intersubjective conflict as an ontic-ontological dialectic, drawing on Heidegger's (1962) framework where the ontic pertains to "what is", the empirical properties and behaviors of entities, while the ontological probes "what it means to be" (p. 31). Ontically, Roy catalogues the scene's particulars: the single-lane crossing, parked cars, the other's "faster car," and his own accelerative maneuvers "foot hard down," "swing out a bit to my left" (Churchill, 19). These details anchor the narrative in the ready-to-hand world of everyday equipmentality, where vehicles extend human embodiment (Heidegger, 1962). Yet, ontologically, the encounter unveils Dasein's concern with its own being amid potential annihilation", one of us is going to be in trouble," "I'll have that elbow right off", positioning road rage as a mode of authentic existence threatened by inauthenticity the "kind of person" Roy despises . The possessive spirit, implied by the play's broader context of Bacchic frenzy (Churchill & Lan, 1986), introduces novelty by reframing this as an ontological possession: the repetitions signify a breakdown in the ontic facade, disclosing essence as the perceptual appearance of primal fury. Unlike traditional existentialist readings where "existence precedes essence" (Sartre, 2007), Merleau-Ponty's revision' essence as revealed through lived perception, illuminates how Roy's aggression emerges from the corporeal "unfolding of the world,"

critiquing mentalist interpretations by grounding it in "corporeal vision and experience" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 107).

by rejecting Bergsonian intuition or introspective coinciding, it posits dramatic monologue as a phenomenological reduction that uncovers the intertwined essence of self and other. In *A Mouthful of Birds*, possession thus appears not as psychological pathology but as an ontological event, where the phenomenal field of driving becomes a battleground for being's disclosure. This insight extends beyond the text, inviting scholarly reevaluation of contemporary phenomena like road rage as perceptual essences manifesting in bodily interrelations, thereby enriching interdisciplinary dialogues between phenomenology, theater studies, and psychology.

Conclusion

This article explored Spirit's monologue in *A Mouthful of Birds* as a site where phenomenology, ontology, and feminist theory converge to reveal the gendered tensions inherent in embodied subjectivity. This analysis brings Merleau-Ponty's concepts of the phenomenological field, perceptual faith, horizon, and embodied essence into dialogue with Heidegger's ontic-ontological distinctions and illustrates how Churchill's text dramatizes a profound rupture in the structures that ordinarily sustain meaning and selfhood. The reiterated interrogations of mundane objects, combined with the stark negations of existence, deconstruct the tacit coherence of the lived world and point out the fragility of the horizons through which subjectivity emerges. The utterances of Spirit have the effect of dislodging the cup, the house, and the self from their anchorage within the embodied field; they announce a collapse of perceptual certainties into ontological liminality.

Such destabilization is not merely abstract but deeply gendered. The monologue shows how female embodiment becomes the contested site where meaning, agency, and being are at every instant threatened with erasure. The metaphorical injunction to kill the baby crystallizes this tension: the "baby" stands as an ontological burden, an accumulation of patriarchal inscriptions, imposed identities, and internalized constraints, that fills the perceptual field to the point of suffocation. Its symbolic removal gestures toward the violent yet necessary rupture that might clear space for a renewed mode of being. In this sense, Churchill's scene becomes a dramatization of what Merleau-Ponty describes as the emergence of essence through embodied appearance: a process continually obstructed but not extinguished by structures of domination.

Through this phenomenological lens, *A Mouthful of Birds* emerges not simply as an experimental feminist play but as an inquiry into the very conditions under which female subjectivity becomes thinkable, livable, and perceptible. The disruptions of the perceptual field performed on stage illuminate how theatre can both reveal and contest ontological constraints, staging moments of crisis that open toward transformation. The play thus serves as a powerful reminder that embodiment is not a static ground but a dynamic negotiation between absence and possibility, fragmentation and coherence, negation and becoming. By addressing the underexplored intersection of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology with feminist dramatic practice, this article contributes to broader conversations about the ethical stakes of embodied cognition and the epistemic agency of marginal subjects. In the end, Churchill's work shows that the destabilization of perception-and the reconfiguration of the horizon that follows-is not only a philosophical problem but a feminist one, foregrounding the necessity of reclaiming the lived body as a site of meaning, resistance, and renewed being-in-the-world.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our thanks to reviewers for their valuable suggestions on an earlier version of this paper.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

- Al-Saji, A. (2014). A phenomenology of hesitation: Interrupting racializing habits of seeing. In E. S. Lee (Ed.), *Living alterities* (pp. 133–172). State University of New York Press. [In English]
- Aston, E. (2003). *Feminist views on the English stage: Women playwrights, 1990–2000*. Cambridge University Press. [In English]
- Aston, E. (2009). Caryl Churchill. In E. Aston & E. Diamond (Eds.), *The Cambridge companion to Caryl Churchill* (pp. 1–17). Cambridge University Press. [In English]
- Bleeker, M. (2008). *Visuality in the theatre: The locus of looking*. Palgrave Macmillan. [In English]

Butler, J. (1988). "Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory". *Theatre Journal*, 40(4), pp. 519–531. DOI: 10.2307/3207893

Carnicke, S. M. (2009). *Stanislavsky in focus: An acting master for the twenty-first century*, 2th edition, Routledge. [In English]

Churchill, C., & Lan, D. (1986). *A mouthful of birds*. Methuen Drama.

Diamond, E. (1997). *Unmaking mimesis: Essays on feminism and theater*. Routledge. [In English]

Fensham, R. (2009). *To watch theatre: Essays on genre and corporeality*. Peter Lang. [In English]

Garner, S. B., Jr. (1994). *Bodied spaces: Phenomenology and performance in contemporary drama*. Cornell University Press. [In English]

Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). Harper & Row. (Original work published 1927) [In English]

Heinämaa, S. (2003). *Toward a phenomenology of sexual difference*. Rowman & Littlefield. [In English]

Kozel, S. (2007). *Closer: Performance, technologies, phenomenology*. MIT Press. [In English]

Lehmann, H.-T. (2006). *Postdramatic theatre* (K. Jürs-Munby, Trans.). Routledge. (Original work published 1999)

McDonnell, P. (1995). *A phenomenologically based methodology for theater criticism* [Master's thesis, University of Nevada, Las Vegas]. [In English]

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1968). *The visible and the invisible* (A. Lingis, Trans.). Northwestern University Press. (Original work published 1964) [In English]

Merleau-Ponty, M. (2012). *Phenomenology of perception* (D. A. Landes, Trans.). Routledge. [In English]

Olkowski, D., & Weiss, G. (Eds.). (2006). *Feminist interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty*. Pennsylvania State University Press. [In English]

Ridout, N. (2009). *Theatre & ethics*. Palgrave Macmillan. [In English]

Sartre, J.-P. (2007). *Existentialism is a humanism* (C. Macomber, Trans.). Yale University Press. (Original work published 1946) [In English]

States, B. O. (1985). *Great reckonings in little rooms: On the phenomenology of theater*. University of California Press. [In English]

Weiss, G. (1999). *Body images: Embodiment as intercorporeality*. Routledge. [In English]

Young, I. M. (1980). "Throwing like a girl". *Human Studies*, 3(1), pp.137–156. [In English]