

Violence and the Ontological question—fatal dynamics and aggression in Sarah Kane.

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The thesis of this paper is as follows:

Violence on the British stage has a long legacy that has been over the years highly contested, debated and roused innumerable complex responses. Theatre has been the most decisive and holistic art form to depict or report aggression thereby creating a theatrical idiom that involves other complex strategies of representation not only overtly, but also through association, long-lasting involvement, disorientation, concepts of existentialism, post-modern dilemma, an ontological awareness of a problem and an almost epistemological enquiry as to the very nature of violence itself. Right from the days of the classical theatre to the Elizabethan times and after, depiction of violence on stage has offered quite a spectacular perspective, either through reportage or through the depiction of a gruesome and violent episode. The Elizabethan audiences were enamored of melodramatic scenes and plots and the creation of graphic acts of torture on stage were albeit subtle and nuanced. This was because declamatory speeches or metaphorically couched language could dispel the need for showing the violence that was otherwise already stated. Nevertheless, an involvement with anything that tests the limits of human decency and ethics could be called amoral. What about violence that involves one of man's most primitive and radical mental and physical responses to a problem? This is a question that needs to be answered in the larger context of the referential world where any object or idea can provoke or trigger a set of reactionary responses that leads to violence. It is highly interesting to try to locate a common vantage point to understand how violence in all its manifestations both physical and psychological can exert its influence on society and individuals, that either directly or indirectly perpetrate torture? In this regard it is also important to understand how terror is linked to the concept of violence and how much the two can be interdisciplinary? Terror or fear in the language of the theatre can mean anything that traumatizes the audience or shocks them out of their complacency. British theatre which has often been traditionally insular to wider global concerns, changes and ideologies has without doubt, never failed to show the English man's preoccupation with deeper human dilemmas and problems. Here in lies its appeal.

In the first quarter of the 20th Century *The Worker's Theatre Movement* in Britain and the Soviet Union as elsewhere, dramatized worker's problems and hardships with accuracy that politically and socially befitted the temper of the times. The proletariat theatre emerged with a commitment to mirror the torture of the deprived by the so called Bourgeoisie, and confined itself to a naturalistic model on stage. Later, after the onslaught of the War torn era was felt, a depressing series of problems beset the common man in Britain and we have the very popular *Angry Young Man* plays. Such plays questioned the vestiges of a war ravaged Britain trying to promulgate fair play but unable to effect any notion of progress. Such plays aimed once again at the middleclass who had sufficient talent though not sufficient monopoly to garner their way up the social ladder to financial progress and prosperity. The *Angry Young Man* plays created quite a stir in British society because they gave vent to the anger, protest, unemployment, the loss of belief and the turmoil of a society that had nothing to fall back on. The violence in these plays was consciously engineered through the medium of language which was a major dramatic idiom for change. The characters indulged in vituperative attacks of language against the dominant status quo and the message of the plays would be conveyed. With the post-modern era setting in, the *Theatre of the Absurd* created an experimentally avant-garde theatrical idiom which for the first time questioned the function of the human mind with reference to the manifold workings of the conscious and unconscious states of existence. This indulgence with the human psyche reflected in theatre, and linked with the theories of Existentialism, Abstract Expressionism, Surrealism and the Dadaists, was of a kind that was never felt before. Its purport was both radical and elusive as it broke all restrictions of language, form, dramatic structure, the three unities, character portrayal and negated the concept of meaning while totally deconstructing it. Artaud, Beckett, Bond and Pinter are the linear descendants of this tradition of the *Theatre of the Absurd* that enacts on stage a semi-conscious plane of existence and defies regular and standard interpretations in favour of polymorphic multidimensional narrative strategies. In these kind of plays meaning, that has to do with language, is sparse, often minimal, reversed, inverted, negated, complicated and problematized beyond comprehension, so that a heterogeneous plane of reference to varied responses may emerge. Beckett's plays of inaction and Pinter's *Plays of Menace* and later his *Memory Plays* bear direct testimony to this kind of a framework in the theatre. Violence here is more often than not psychological and moral, rather than being physical, though the physical plane of existence is very much affected.

The focal point of this paper is trying to locate the meaning and function of violence in the larger context of British plays of the 1990s, with specific reference to Sarah Kane's play *Blasted*. The *New Brutalism* that marked the 1990s British drama was a return to the domestic arena where power struggles are enacted within an entirely private space, but where the greater public concerns of the world are irrevocably and inevitably foreshadowed. Political theatre that had its heyday from the 70s and continued till mid 80s, basically thrived on state-of-the-nation plays. The 1990s were characterized by New Brutalist themes and the In-Yer-Face drama, by the end of the 1990s, political theatre saw the emergence of the Verbatim Theatre (a kind of drama usually giving complete evidence and account of a true case history, including public enquiries, court records or statements by witnesses) or the theatre of Faction and Satire, that continued well into the later part of the decade.

It is interesting to note that the Labour Government in Britain came to power in 1997 under Tony Blair, and the Arts scene was greatly revitalized, funded and bolstered with an almost self-conscious importance. Though Sarah Kane, one of Britain's most talented artists, committed suicide in 1999, her legacy of violence bestowed to the British stage reached international dimensions, and continued to provoke meaning full responses in the world theatre scenario. Matt Wolf referred to the 1990s dramatists as propagating a kind of nihilism that was in part a reaction to Post-modern fragmentation and partly also a reaction to consumerist and capitalist greed and corruption. In quite an unassuming way Sarah Kane's *Blasted* might also be said to belong to the transgressive tradition of theatre, in line with David Cronenberg's film *Crash* (based on J.G. Ballard's novel) which created a flurry as did Holmes' novel *The End of Alice*, which has at its core the act of Peadophile mania, as also Marcus Harvey's *Myra*, which is a study in the character of the murderer, Myra Hindley. The liberating status of transgressional drama allowed it to explore possibilities ignoring public reception; while this may be true on its own grounds, it must also be noted that Transgressive art was recognized unanimously by many critics as a modern cliché or at best an inconclusive art form. Within these larger concerns, how and by what parameters do we classify Kane's *Blasted* as a path breaking play; highly condemnable and commendable at the same time?

Sarah Kane properly belongs to the category of playwrights who wrote, what theatre critic Aleks Sierz calls "In-Yer-Face" plays, which can and whose main objective is "any drama that takes the audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes it until it gets the message"¹. In other words the play while making a parade of shocking activities on stage innately questions the validity of the status quo and confronts the audience with a horrific picture of a world; this not only remains confined to the auditorium but seems to impinge and assault the audience's own private space as well. The movement, according to Sierz, seeks to "question current ideas of what is normal, what it means to be human, what is natural or what is real. In other words, the use of shock is part of a search for deeper meaning . . ."². These group of young writers like Mark Ravenhill, Jez Butterworth and Joe Penhall, not to mention Sarah Kane, had a defining approach to theatre, which Aleks Sierz feels has the following features:

"Characterised by a rawness of tone... [it] uses explicit scenes of sex and violence to explore the depths of human emotion...it is aggressive, confrontational and provocative...it can be so intense audiences may feel they have lived through the events shown on stage."³

Sierz even mentioned that 'in-yer-face' theatre perhaps also saved British theatre from a slow decline that had started taking place ever since the 1980s. In fact terminal downfall and failure of a long-popular ideology that was well reflected in many plays of the 70s, say for instance David Hare's *Plenty* (1978) and David Edgar's *Maydays* (1983) paved the way for a typical political and social milieu, which can be best defined by reference to a passage from Mark Ravenhill's 1996 play *Shopping and Fucking*:

"I think...I think we all need stories, we make up stories so that we can get by. And I think a long time ago there were big stories. Stories so big you could live your whole life in them. The Powerful Hands of the Gods and Fate. The Journey to Enlightenment. The March to Socialism. But they all died or the world grew up or grew senile or forgot them, so now we're all making up our own stories. Little stories."⁴

Finally coming to the subject of Sarah Kane's plays we would see that unmitigated acts of sexual torture, crude heterosexual and homosexual indulgence, cannibalism, bodily mutilation, rape, pedophile, atrocious hacking down the body to pieces shown with utmost graphic realism and unsurpassed mental trauma, along with minimalistic stage props and language can have a profound effect on the human psyche, and herein Kane's plays shock us with its stunning spectacle of heightened physical and emotional violence. *Blasted*, her first play staged at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in London in 1995, set ablaze a whole generation of theatre goers and critics who were shocked and left feeling nauseated after seeing its performance; they branded it as some kind of bohemian sadism with unbridled horrifying climaxes. When Kane's first play *Blasted* was performed, The Daily Mail, described it as 'This disgusting feast of filth' and the Guardian derided it as 'scenes of masturbation, fellatio, frottage, micturition, defecation - ah, those old familiar faeces - homosexual rape, eye gouging and cannibalism', but in spite of this there is an afterthought to the play's message: the rupture of sudden external violence, manifested by war, which invades the space of the posh hotel room in *Blasted* may have been a reference to the Bosnian war of the 90s. Kane said, "The logical conclusion of the attitude that

produces an isolated rape in England is the rape camps in Bosnia and the logical conclusion to the way society expects men to behave is war."5. All the metaphors that culminate in the play's images thus recalls the horrors of a war ravaged terrain, burning with the intensity of hell, and hence viewed from this stance, the play's progression in five scenes of increasing violence may be somewhat justified.

In the first scene of *Blasted*, a poor epileptic girl is made the victim of sexual pleasure by Ian, a middle aged foul-mouthed bigoted Welsh Journalist who tries to seduce and attempts rape on her at a posh hotel in Leeds, where they have put up for the night. Ian proudly exhibits his racism, misogyny and homophobia. The scene ends with the sound of spring rain, a recurrent motif throughout the play, at the end of each scene. In scene 2 the next morning, Ian rapes Cate while she is having an epileptic fit, she attacks him, escapes through the bathroom window and a soldier enters forcibly through the door. The room is struck by a mortar bomb and a wall is split open with debris and fumes all over. The soldier, a direct manifestation of the war torn country outside the hotel, rapes Ian and gouges out his eyes in an act of extreme domination and torture. He speaks of his sadistic pleasure and emotional debacle in murdering, torturing and raping as strategies, to get over the emotional loss for the murder of his girlfriend. The soldier commits suicide. Scenes two and three both end with the sound of summer rain and autumn rain respectively. In scene four, Cate enters the hotel room with a baby she has been able to rescue in the war, the room is in a terrible mess and Ian lies blinded next to the dead soldier. The baby dies and Cate buries it in a hole in the floorboards and leaves. She however argues with Ian over the necessity of praying for the dead, before they are buried, in this case for the baby. This scene too ends with the sound of heavy winter rain. In the last scene, Ian left alone and subdued, starves, cries, masturbates and at one point of time hugs the dead soldier for comfort. Then he crawls into the ground with the dead baby and finally eats it up. It starts raining and Ian though he is disgusted sees Cate enter. She has brought in food, in exchange of her body to soldiers and now hand- feeds Ian who thanks her. It is at this point that the play ends.

The story is a micro narrative in that it traces the events in two characters lives, suspended in time and through them, portrays the larger world outside and around them. David Eldridge, one notable playwright of the new generation, with meaningful works like *Serving it up* (1996), *Under the Blue Sky* (2000) and *Incomplete and Random Acts of Kindness* (2005) provides a knowledge of how domestic and world events were reflected rather dispassionately in the new drama of the 1990s, often there was the sense of an ennui, a total disregard and dismissal of political optimism, and he puts this wonderfully when he says:

"Clearly, a generation had grown up in the UK fearing the five-minute warning, watching the Berlin Wall come down, that experimented with E and club culture, was finding a voice. This generation had had its youthful optimism pickled by the new horrors that visited their imaginations in the shape of atrocities in the Balkans and by a sense of outrage at the erosion of the UK's notion of community and society by the mean-spirited Thatcher and Major malaise. We responded to that shifting culture with dismay and anger."6

These lines wonderfully sum up the mental frame of mind with which people were writing and reviewing plays and as such little could be done in the way of making grand narratives(as mentioned earlier in the quote by Mark Ravenhill, from one of his plays). Rather these feelings were expressed in plays through personalized sufferings and individual narratives—narratives of personal pain and tragedy rather than public politics.

Kane's other four plays namely *Phaedra's Love* (1996), *Crave* (1998), *Cleansed* (1998) and *4.48 Psychosis* are all personalized dramas, where the dislocation caused by war is shown through the dislocation and disorientation of plot and character. Kane's fellow playwright Mark Ravenhill pointed out that Kane's plays were tempered with a mature level of classical sensibility, a theatre of great moments—both cruel and beautiful, and to such a theatre we can respond only with a sense of awe. Kane was interested in violence not for its own sake but for all that it meant to contemporary society. She was very concerned at the same time with the need for love and once said at an interview 'To create something beautiful about despair, or out of a feeling of despair, is for me the most hopeful, life-affirming thing a person can do.' (The Short Life of Sarah Kane, the Daily Telegraph, 27 May 2000) Kane also felt that the emotional content of her work had been misinterpreted, in an interview she pointed out that *Blasted* was about hope, *Phaedra's Love* about faith while on the other hand *Cleansed* she believed was about profound and unending love. The fact remains that each of these plays, specially *Cleansed* like *Blasted*, has some sort of a message to convey and is not merely a play of gross physical abuse. One of the most profound messages of *Cleansed* is the manner in which love can be felt and made possible, even in extreme circumstances; what remains to be answered is the price, that is attendant on it in such occasions. In an interview Kane stated "All good art is subversive, either in form or content. And the best art is subversive in form and content", "form and content attempt to be one—the form is the meaning"7. In this case the form embodies the meaning and by doing away with conventionalized setup this feature can be well achieved. In *Cleansed*, the couples Grace and Graham are siblings involved in an incestuous relationship, but what is to be seen is not this fact, but the intensity of love and physical union even when they are violently separated and mutilated. Tinker who runs a university is a sadist; he savagely beats up and rapes Grace and Graham's body parts (tongue, hands, legs and finally the male genitals) one after the other is cut off. These are

those very parts by which he could have expressed love to Grace. When Grace's modesty is violated in scene 10, she stands before Graham, he touches her, and her clothes turn red, at all such places where he touches blood oozes out and we can feel the intensity of their love when he himself starts to bleed in those very places. The siblings are as Kane projects one and the same, their bodies though different become one; because they feel each other's pain so accurately. The notion of the oneness of love is brought out wonderfully in this episode. In scene 18, Grace has had the genitals of Graham transplanted onto herself, she wears his clothes, and tries to be him. The union or oneness is now complete. Rod and Carl the homosexual couple are also tortured, but in the end Tinker the perpetrator of violence becomes vulnerable, he craves for love from a woman and tries to impose the identity of Grace on her. Tinker has formerly raped and tortured Grace, but this change in him at the concluding moments of the play perhaps show Kane's notion that every individual needs love. According to a critic Saunders, Tinker "seems to undergo a process of moral redemption through the mutilation of Grace, and through it comes to accept love from the Woman in the booth, who he had previously also abused and kept captive" **8**. Consequently, "[t]he supreme irony regarding Tinker, is that someone who so systematically attempts to destroy love in others is in fact yearning to express and reciprocate love himself" **9**. In fact Tinker crosses all limits to check the fortitude of the lovers, sometimes to disastrous consequences. Saunders convincingly argues:

"Integral to the theme of love in *Cleansed* are the ways in which love is tested. Often this is brought about in the most brutal and violent ways by the figure of Tinker. . . . Tinker is certainly a meddler in the fates of his charges, testing their desires, their delusions and professions of love; often to savagely logical conclusions." **10**

Thus, even the Mephistophelian figure of Tinker is not presented as being completely devilish. He, as well as other male protagonists in Kane's plays such as Ian in *Blasted* and Hippolytus in *Phaedra's Love* "have an underlying fragility, a desire to be loved and an almost pathetic tenderness that often lurks beneath their cruelty" **11**. In most of Kane's plays violence is associated with sex: sex as a commodity to be sold and sex as a plane of domination and sabotage. Sex (and the body in particular) is also the battle ground where all transactions are meted out, and personal grievances are given voice. In this regard *Blasted*, Kane's first play is not only about violence; through an enactment of violence on the most primitive level, it is also a vigorous critique on the evil propensities in man, let loose at war time. The horror in this regard is only an extension of man's psyche when he descends to the beast in himself. Love and sex which are allied themes linked with violence are also problematized and complicated. Love is always tinged with rape, torture or necrophiliac pendants. The critic Ken Urban says that "for Kane, hell is not metaphysical: it is hyperreal, reality magnified." **12**. Another feature of Kane's play is humour; in almost every play the humour fails to register, perhaps because her vision of a normal world is otherwise so perversely bleak and sensational, that even moments of genuine pity and hope fail to make an impact.

Kane's play *Crave* where four unnamed characters (single alphabets stand for names) talk with each other as if in a void has no stage direction, and no physical action. The characters seated in chairs are at once, lyrical, sometimes humorous and often profoundly distressful. On a multidimensional plane this could very well be compared with Pinter's *Memory plays* where characters suffer the gradual dissolution of personality, and vacillate between conscious and unconscious states of existence. The dramatic voices that emerge are non-specific, often overlapping, and defy the conventional notion of a character. The violence in this play *Crave*, is the violence of memory or emotion where concepts, loyalties, and all ruling passions of the mind are put to test. The intensely multidimensional nature of the dialogue gives an impression of a monologic text in the making. Similarly in *4.48 Psychosis*, snippets of conversation between a supposedly ill patient and a therapist or doctor reveal conscious and unconscious states. The dialogue is albeit fragmented, like a textual collage, incoherent and fluid, sometimes there is little or no connection between what is asked and spoken, but the play as a whole is a profound revelation of a mentally deranged psyche that still desperately wants to hold on to sanity and normalcy. Much like Pinter's *Comedies of Menace* violence in some of Kane's plays is strictly psychological and emotional, but it is mostly on the physical plane of existence that its effect is felt and recognized. Viewed from this perspective some of her plays become metaphors for the mind.

Graham Saunders speaking in the Introduction to his book, *Cool Britannia British Political Drama in the 1990s* makes an interesting comment when he says—"Whereas an earlier dramatist like Edward Bond carefully structured violence in works such as *Saved* (1965) and *Lear* (1971) employing a neo-Brechtian methodology, 1990s writers such as Jez Butterworth in *Mozo* (1995) and Martin McDonagh in the *Leenane Trilogy* (1996-97) seemed to fetishize violence, often by referencing it within a framework derived from films such as *The Long Good Friday* (1980) and *Reservoir Dogs* (1992)." **13**. It should be remembered that the legacy of the In-Yer-Face dramatists though linked with the political climate of the 1990s had set up new trends and tendencies that were entirely different from David Hare and David Edgar's message in their plays. The new dramatists were not keen on writing State-of-the-Nation plays but personalized dramas of far more meaningful consequences than playwrights before them in the 70s and 80s had ever thought about.

Thus violence, whether mental or physical is always the source domain. Kane's *Phaedra's love* takes us into extreme dimensions of physical crudity and excruciating physical torture, but here too, the mental and the psychological are inseparably intertwined. The plot of the play is loosely based on Seneca's version of the Phaedra myth, but inverts the paradigm by showing Hippolytus' sacrifice rather than Phaedra's. Hippolytus atones for his wrongs in an albeit gruesome manner. The gross physical violation of the body receives a hideous depiction in Kane's play as also the idea of self-immolation. Derisive Lust, perverse desire, obscene sex, brutal or ambivalent love and the desire for autonomy along with gross abuse of the physical body again and again recur as themes and images in Kane's work. In fact had it not been for *Blasted*, the In-Yer-Face theatre could never have received the hue and outcry it did after the appearance of Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* and Jez Butterworth's *Mozo*. Whatever their individual merit may have been, Kane's *Blasted* definitely paved the way for a breakthrough drama, in which these later ones were just successors. Kane once said "theatre has no memory, which makes it the most existential of the arts...I keep coming back in the hope that someone in a darkened room somewhere will show me an image that burns itself into my mind." (Article, Guardian, 13 August 1998.) Commentators and critics like Vera Gottlieb felt that the In-Yer-Face plays, with special reference to *Blasted* (1995) demonstrate the absence of plot or at best portray the abstraction, characteristic of Beckett's plays. Even Aleks Sierz, who believed that many of the new playwrights of the 90s were politically committed, discerned in works like Patrick Marber's *Closer* and Phyllis Nagy's *Neverland* (1998), a tendency towards a strategy wherein direct political engagement with society is evaded, in favour of an implied, veiled, and solipsistic stance. Drama and for that instance any art should not only be a dry record of events or even a series of historical collages, fixed at a particular time frame, but an aesthetically modeled thought-provoking and meaning full perspective on facets of life that we live every moment. If a piece of a play becomes enormously documentary in its impact then it ceases to lose importance, without that pointed reference to a time bound milieu. Human preoccupations with sex and violence do have a level of universal signification and reference. In this regard, violence and sexual explicitness was only a medium through which playwrights of the In-Yer-Face were trying to hint at graver issues that had been upsetting and unsettling the British society from within. For example, Mark Ravenhill, in two plays like *Shopping and Fucking* and *Some Explicit Polaroids*, portrays characters who comment on the morals of British society which thrives on and gratifies itself through indulgence in sex and consumerism. In *Shopping and Fucking*, Robbie after taking Ecstasy is transplanted to a different world and sees his position as if from the eyes of a philosopher; he says—' I see this kid in Rwanda, crying but he doesn't know why. And this granny in Kiev, selling everything she's ever owned'—he ends his reflection by saying 'Fuck the bitching world and let's be beautiful. Beautiful. And happy.' Similarly in *Some Explicit Polaroids*, Tim tells Nick that ever since his imprisonment in 1984, British society has changed inevitably, from the grave ideological concerns to a love for cheap shopping, hedonism, sex and wild pleasures; he speaks almost like a sage: ' Nothing's connected...with anything and you're not fighting anymore'; later Tim while referring once more to the same indifferent hedonist society, also speaks about his own impending death—'one day I might get bored with being in the happy world.' These lines are wonderfully evocative in picturing the temper of the times and in the same vein Kane too creates plays, ridden with contemporary obsession with sex, pleasure and dominance. Thus while young In-Yer-Face dramatists such as Jez Butterworth, Martin McDonagh and Anthony Neilson faced accusations for using deliberately caustic and violent sexual imagery in their writings, new theatre during the period of the 1990s needed a new kind of critical analysis and interpretation quite different from the kind that Brit Art or Britpop which had been looking at Labour policies patronizingly, received. What proved to be the most spectacular successes in Kane's reception was the fact that her plays like those of Ravenhill's and Harry Gibson (his adaptation of Irvine Welsh's novel *Trainspotting*) created a generation of youngsters who flocked the theatre for its depiction of the zeitgeist, this at best sums up the importance of Kane and other practitioners of the In-Yer-Face. Through Kane's brutal imagery and Ravenhill's exploration of consumerism and club culture, their plays urge us into a far more serious domain of thought-processes than the immediate spectacle on stage, and explore the crude, unromantic bleakness of British success, the hidden cruelty and mask of deception that lurks and accidentally spills out at the slightest provocation; offering a picture of life, more truer than one can possibly imagine. In this attempt, violence assumes a far greater role than the immediate context in question.

(Words: 4,819)

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