

Gendered Violence and Psychological Breakdown in Sarah Kane's *Blasted*

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Abstract

This paper investigates the theme of gendered violence and psychological breakdown in Sarah Kane's *Blasted*. In her work, the seasoned playwright Sarah Kane underscores the grotesque nature of sexual violence and rape, both in times of war and peace, drawing attention to their devastating consequences—ranging from psychological and mental illness to the loss of the joy of life and suicide. Throughout the play, Kane seeks to raise human awareness and confront the audience with the brutal realities that shatter the dignity and inner world of the victim, urging a rejection of such inhumane acts within both personal and societal contexts.

Key Words: Gendered, seasoned, devastating, suicide, rejection and inhuman acts.

Introduction

One of the most talented young playwrights now active in the theater is Sarah Ruhl. Even though her career is still in its early stages, theaters all across the (UK) country have performed her work, which has received a lot of critical acclaim. Ruhl received a MacArthur "genius" grant (2006), the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize in 2004 for *The Clean House*, and two Pulitzer Prize finalist statuses for *The Clean House* in 2005 and *In the Next Room, or the vibrator play* in 2010 (Schmidt, 2010, p 1). Despite the short life of the young British playwright Sarah Kane (1971-1999), she managed to leave a powerful and indelible mark on British theatre with her five plays. Born in the 1970s and shaped by the turmoil of the 1990s, Kane portrayed a bleak and harrowing reality through her explosive theatrical work. Her plays addressed the forces that diminish the human spirit—particularly those she witnessed in Bosnia, a tragedy she referenced repeatedly in her writing. Through her dramatic voice, she carved out a path and issued a warning to women, urging awareness of the grim realities they face—realities of sexual, physical, taboo, and psychological exploitation. She "is considered to be the most important British playwright of the 1990s, definitely the most radical" (Saunders, 2002, p.134). Kane accepted her parents' evangelical Christianity during her early and teenage years, but she began to doubt and even reject it before enrolling in a university program to study play. Kane could not completely grow out of the kid she was since she retained vivid recollections of her early years. She asserted that her early exposure to the Bible was the primary source of her preference for graphic images. The author of a Catholic parish weekly endorsed her viewpoint in a section published after she committed herself. According to him, reading the Bible unattended is dangerous because it "can cause wars, and as we can see in Sarah Kane's sad case, it can take individual lives." (Parry, 2003, p. 147). Kane is considered an outstanding example of In-Yer-Face theater and is acknowledged as the most inventive British dramatist of the 1990s. With its emphasis on sexual and physical pain, Kane's avant-garde theatrics engage audiences with a wide range of issues while serving as a mirror to the violence that defines postmodern life. Studying theatrical violence requires looking at play texts, performativity choices, and audience reactions (Mohamed et al, AISJ). In her work, Kane embraced a raw and brutal realism, stripping away emotion and modesty—elements most writers tend to avoid—to reveal her bold stance against poverty, brutality, rape, exploitation, betrayal, and humiliation. In an interview, Kane stated: "There isn't

anything you can't represent on stage. If you are saying that you can't represent something, you are saying you can't talk about it, you are denying its existence. My responsibility is to the truth, however difficult that truth happens to be" (quoted in Urban, 2001: 39). Kane's idea of theater is very different from the conventional method since it includes all facets of performance, including speech, action, and presentation, and it aims to subvert the audience's understanding of reality. To properly understand, assess, and contextualize Kane's plays without going overboard, it is essential to have some prior knowledge about her life story as a playwright and her ultimate aim. It's crucial to take into account her history, possible inspirations, and how her life and passing impacted how other people interpreted her plays. This succinct biography should help readers understand that, despite its allure, Kane's general propensity to incorporate her personal experiences into her work—particularly in "Blasted"—is unnecessary for evaluating her work and that, in order to maintain objectivity, it would be more appropriate for her to refrain from doing so.

Gendered violence in Sarah Kane's *Blasted*

One of the most unsettling and groundbreaking pieces in modern British theater is Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995), which presents the audience with a factual and unadulterated depiction of sexual assault and psychological breakdown. *Blasted* is a theatrical work that crossed all red lines in performance, with Kane stripping away the restraint from scenes that previous playwrights had avoided on stage. The play is a vivid outcry representing the state's weakness in controlling its people against the ailments of sexual humiliation, racism, and the dominance of the powerful. Through her work, Kane made it clear that brutal rape affected both genders under the authority of power and the vulnerability of its victims such as (Kate and Ian). Additionally, the playwright demonstrated that acts of brutality, rape, and psychological breakdown are not limited to war zones but also occur in places far removed from conflict. Kane exposes the harsh undercurrents of human experience by tearing down conventional theatrical limits with gruesome images and a purposefully fractured plot. Sexual assault is not just a physical act but also a symbol of societal control and dehumanization in *Blasted*, which is a terrifying examination of power, dominance, and trauma. The drama follows the psychological disintegration of its protagonists, particularly Ian and Cate, whose identities fall apart due to rape, war, and mental deterioration. The unsettling truth that violence, particularly against women, is pervasive not only in conflict areas but also in private settings is brought to the audience's attention by Kane's radical dramaturgy. *Blasted* becomes a visceral protest against the institutionalized cycles of abuse and the vulnerability of the human mind in the face of unrelenting aggression by fusing the personal and the political, the sexual and the psychological. One example of the "In-Yer-Face" dramatic genre is the theatrical production of *Blasted*. The ultimate aim of this genre is to question accepted moral standards by evoking strong emotions in viewers through harsh and likable characters, language, and images. As one of the primary forerunners of this theater, Kane's *Blasted*, an in-your-face theater, is comparable to Artaud's theater of cruelty in that both types strive to shock the audience by depicting violence, nudity, and taboo subjects, forcing them to confront the cruelty and futility they are surrounded by. According to Kane, the play is an important factor to take into account because it "is a direct parallel to the truth of the war it portrays." (Stephenson and Langridge, 1997, 130). Kane frequently examines the verbal, sexual, and physical aspects of violence in her plays. However, Kane uses violence simply as a means of pointing out the inequities in the world. Violence for its own sake does not appeal to her. "The violent imagery in Kane's writings sucks both the actors and spectators into a deadly loop of life and death. Kane asks them to participate in order to really explore the absence of compassion in the human experience, not to shock them with the brutality of violence for its own purpose (Moshy, 2008: 30). Her goal in portraying violence on stage is to highlight its actual causes and detrimental impacts on the human body and soul. She stated in her interview with Rodolfo di Giammarco that she has a very clear attitude about violence: [...] Violence is the most urgent problem we have as species, and the most urgent thing we need to confront. Personally, I say there is nothing better to write about. I don't like violent films, that's true, and I don't like violent scenes; and the reason I don't like violence is when I happen to see *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction* or the other films of that type I feel like using violence. When I wrote *Blasted* I tried to discuss what it means to be violent and to suffer violence, and it's like the music that's played when you're cutting off an ear. You are in a state of extreme suffering; it's not possible you can like it for the music. (1997) Violence is what must be firmly confronted everywhere, as the human soul is sacred and must be protected. This is what encouraged Kane to delve into the depths of the subject. Kane is essentially making the case that art should be serious about violence. She claims that *Blasted* was her method of addressing violence honestly—without prettification or avoidance—and criticizes media that minimize or stylize cruelty. Her intention was to have the audience feel the pain rather than just watch the show, exposing the truth of violence rather than shocking them for its own purpose. In-ye-face theater, which first appeared in Britain in

the 1990s, is well-known for its overt and visible depictions of sexuality and violence. Many plays including assault, war, robbery, suicide, repression, domestic violence, insanity, verbal and psychological aggression, physical violence, rape, and gay interactions were written and performed as part of the in-er-face theater that arose in the 1990s. Aleks Sierz, the most profound in-er-face scholar, points out that: In-er-face takes the audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes it until it gets the message. It is a theatre of sensation: it jolts both actors and spectators out of conventional responses, touching nerves, provoking alarm and making the audience take notice. (2000, p. 4) This type of theatre brings out the hidden depths of the heart and what secretly dwells within the human mind. The use of foul language that agitates the audience is one of the components of in-er-face theater. These plays also contain dialogue about the characters that is taboo. An excellent illustration of this kind of conversation may be found in the 1998 novel *Snatch*, when two protagonists gloat about mistreating a helpless lady. Another aspect of in-er-face theater is when characters are humiliated by the authorities. Tinker, who stands in for the authority, disparages Rod and punishes him for lying about his love in Kane's 1998 novel *Cleansed*. Furthermore, sex is performed on stage to illustrate how society violates people's privacy. The usage of sudden violence serves as an example of how violence may infiltrate people's lives without warning. The characters in the plays are typically from lower social classes, such as prostitutes, thieves, beggars, the insane, the traumatized, the oppressed, the elderly, LGBT individuals, those without families or relationships, and so on. In *Mojo*, published in 1995, J. Butterworth describes nightclub cultures through black comedy and violence. Violence, commercial culture, and young people's drive to make money in a capitalist society are all combined in M. Ravenhill's 1996 play, *Shopping and Fucking*. Sexual and public violence themes may also be found in M. McDonough's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (Whybrow, 2001). When Kane's *Blasted* debuted in 1995, it was regarded as a landmark in the history of modern British theater; it was designated as the piece that shared the same representation as Howard Breton's *Romans in Britain* (1980) and Bond's *Saved* (1965). *Blasted* is a drama that allows for actual violence on stage, which is why it attracts passionate opinions from the public. This time, a Roman Centurion is the one who is committing sexual abuse against her. As a result, these two problems are absurd in the eyes of the public and viewers. Saunders assumes that "Sarah Kane's debut, *Blasted* on 12th January 1995 provides a fortuitous nexus for theatre historians" (Saunders, 2002, p. 1) In the film *Saved*, a gang of young people from the working class perform a horrific deed by stoning a small kid to death, with the child's father actively taking part in the heinous murder. As a result, Roman in Britain depicts a young Celtic seer who experiences sexual assault on stage; this time, a Roman Centurion is the one who commits the sexual attack. As a result, these two problems are absurd in the eyes of the public and viewers. Through the crime against the theater itself, this is dissected and made public as a means of understanding play. However, the deconstructed content of the evil in *Blasted* is comparable to that of the English press. Even though these three plays are compared, *Blasted* is quickly reexamined because of the severe criticism it got at its premiere. This occurred particularly as a result of her suicide in February 1999, when she was sadly just twenty-eight years old. As a result, Kane gained a lot of admirers in the theater, including Edward Bond. He really applauds the caliber and diligence of her job. The majority of theater reviewers who once harshly criticized her play now welcome and commend her, as her play *Blasted* has gained widespread recognition as one of the major theatrical productions. For many years, sexual misbehavior has been a difficult and complex topic that society has long been concerned about. Although a small percentage of men are also victims of sexual assault, women have historically been the ones who suffer the most. However, despite the fact that this topic has been the subject of several studies, no rational solution has been found. It is surprising that so many chroniclers have attempted to write on the historical context of the rape case in Sarah Kane's *Blasted*. Instead of discussing rape as a topic, these academics want to write about ways to end it. In addition to reflecting the theme of rape, Sarah Kane's *Blasted* also addresses other important concerns. The author wants to explain the themes of gender, sexual misbehavior, war, and societal degradation. The way she depicts rape metaphorically in rape scenes is a significant aspect of the play. Ablett notes that "The postulated movement from a symbolic to a semiotic state in *Blasted* is illustrated through an analysis of the changing manifestation of defilement and rape in the play" (Ablett, 2014, p. 1). To illustrate the kind of rape she is portraying in the play, the author reflects in many ways. The male character, Ian, reflects the most unfavorable rape as the drama progresses step-by-step. At this point, the audience may believe that because the most horrific history of rape has been pushed into the public eye, the rapist has been retaliated by being a victim of rape as well. This makes up for all the bad deeds and rapes he has done to women throughout the years. The long-standing silence surrounding the problem of rape against women has been shattered in this way. One may wonder if there is anything that makes one feel less sorry for Ian because he was raped, or they may see it as a symbolic method

to get even with all guys who regularly violate women. Rape is portrayed by the author as an activity that exposes gender inequality. In this way, Zurbah asserts that “Kane represents how incidents of rape highlight, exacerbate and solidify the unevenness of power distribution between men and women in the modern world and provides a new perspective at what we might call “rape in general” (Zhurba, 2008, p. 2) It is crucial to remember that rape in this context is linked to societal norms around sexual assault and that both men and women are symbolic representations of it in order to analyze the problem of sexual assault on women. Additionally, based on her ideological intentions, it is presumed that Sarah Kane does not strongly endorse feminist viewpoints, which is shown in the manner in which she introduces her play to the audience. Notwithstanding the fact that *Blasted* reflects a gender motif, Kane's uncaring attitude toward women necessitates a critical analysis in which she pays little regard to her own gender uniqueness. Ian's sexual abuse was the subject of the first ten years of *Blasted*'s preliminary research, which was widely praised since it was thought to be a means of ending sexual assault in society. However, many academics have declined to acknowledge that the section where Cate's sexual assault is not accurately shown has not received scholarly attention. In this instance, the play portrays a woman being raped as a typical sexual encounter from both a domestic and combat viewpoint. The significance of Cate's absence from Ian's rape and the play's last scene, in which he may be sexually assaulted once more, has not been noted clearly by academics. Although Ian's rape of Cate is purposefully understated by Kane, she makes it obvious that Ian has raped her and that the soldier has committed evil before raping him. From the bathroom window after the bombing, Kane attempts to show the audience that not even Cate has ever managed to leave the scene of rape. From the start of the play until its conclusion, she is continuously portrayed as the victim of sexual abuse. This illustrates how sexual assault is a widespread issue that has been affecting society for many years and has to be addressed right now. It is amazing to see how the author uses a lyrical metaphor—the broken flower that has been strewn all over the room—to purposefully divert the audience's focus from the sexual assault that Cate endures. The author just provides a symbolic depiction of Cate's experience. Does the audience not feel sorry for Cate? Is it necessary to portray her as a woman who has experienced sexual assault without making any remarks on the cruelty? Does that imply that woman should be treated in this way without having a voice? Future research may need to provide more useful responses to these rhetorical inquiries. Even though Solga (2007) didn't address gender issues in her work, this study finds them to be an eye-opening component. Therefore, Rebecca explains that ‘Sarah Kane uses cruelty in her plays *Blasted* and *Cleansed* to shock the audience out of their indifference, which will then allow Kane to subvert gender norms, through performed acts on stage’ (Rebecca, 2008, p. 3).

Psychological Breakdown in Sarah Kane's *Blasted*

The phrase "psychological breakdown," sometimes known as "mental breakdown," refers to a state in which a person becomes emotionally and psychologically distressed due to an excessive incapacity to handle stress. This phrase is used informally to refer to a variety of psychological conditions, such as anxiety disorders, depression, sexual abuse, and post-traumatic stress disorder, rather than being a recognized mental health diagnosis. The characters Ian and Cate, to a lesser degree, clearly depict the psychological breakdown in *Blasted* as they experience severe psychic fragmentation as a result of war, brutality, and interpersonal abuse. In Kane's play, psychological collapse is not only depicted but also realized on stage in grotesque and surreal form, serving as a dramatic representation of suffering. A psychological breakdown can present with a wide range of symptoms, which reflects the unique character of mental health. Feelings of melancholy, despair, and irritation are common emotional symptoms. Cognitive symptoms might include racing thoughts, trouble focusing, or trouble making judgments (Kessler, 2000). Chronic exhaustion, sleep problems, and unexplained aches or pains are common physical complaints (Mayo Clinic, 2022). During this period, behavioral changes are also common, such as ignoring obligations or withdrawing from social engagements. It is usually treated with a mix of support networks and therapy techniques. People can learn coping mechanisms and comprehend the underlying reasons of their discomfort with the use of psychotherapy, especially cognitive-behavioral therapy (Hofmann et al., 2012). In order to provide the required balance for recovery, medication may occasionally be administered to treat anxiety or depression symptoms (Kahn et al., 2017). Since social ties are essential to emotional resilience, it is equally crucial to have a strong support system of friends, family, or support groups (Taylor, 2011). Regular exercise, a balanced diet, and mindfulness exercises are examples of self-care activities that may greatly enhance mental health and promote healing. Self-care improves general resilience and aids in stress management (Rogers et al., 2018). Furthermore, in order to guarantee safety and stability, severe instances may require crisis intervention, which may entail hospitalization or intense outpatient programs (NAMI, 2020). Rape is what destroys the psychological state, shatters it, and causes it to lose its passion and vitality — and this is exactly

what happened to Cate at the hands of Ian and the Soldier. It occupies a main place in the events of the play and it is defined as any sexual contact with a person without that person's knowledge or consent. Bogart, a specialist in sexual offenses and harassment, notes that rape is "as forced or otherwise coerced penetration— even if slight – of the vulva or anus using a penis, other body parts or an object" (In Cowling, 2001, p. 3). According to Kane (2001, p. 48), Ian, the journalist in *Blasted*, reports on "rapes and kids getting fiddled by queer priests and schoolteachers." He wants to convince his ex-girlfriend Cate to have sex with him at a luxurious hotel in Leeds, so he tries to woo her. Cate refuses since she no longer loves Ian and views him as a nightmare. Cate experiences epileptic episodes and begins to suck her thumb whenever she is upset. Ian pushes himself against her as she faints. This episode clearly demonstrates Ian's filthy nature as a lecher who seeks to satiate his cravings even when Cate is unconscious. Ian gets to Cate, forces her to fall, and then rapes her. In actuality, Kane wants to highlight the reality that even those we trust may abuse us. In this sense, Ian is actually a family friend of Cate's and was her lover at one point, but he betrays Cate's confidence. In essence, a lot of individuals believe that victims are held accountable for experiencing rape for a variety of reasons, such as their attire or actions. To be honest, because Cate agreed to stay at the hotel and spend the night with Ian, who had lung cancer, she shouldn't be held responsible for the mistreatment. Cate wants to listen to her ex-boyfriend, but her goal is just to get emotional support. According to Kane, Cate is really "naive and very stupid . . . what's she doing in a hotel room in the first place? Of course, she's going to get raped" (Sierz, 2000, p.103). During the performance, Cate flees via a bathroom window as a soldier unexpectedly enters the hotel room. Later, there is a bombing at the hotel. Armed with a rifle, the soldier begins to discuss the horrors of war and the death of his lover. He rapes Ian and warns him to stay put. Indeed, according to Kane, "masculinity is concrete rather than ideological" (Sierz, 2000, p.103). Because he is in charge, Ian rapes Cate. Later, when the soldier gains control and authority, he mistreats Ian. Furthermore, all forms of violence, including rape of women, men, children, and even infants, are visible during times of conflict. Another crucial point is that Ian's rape by a man might be seen as a kind of retribution and punishment for Cate's rape, as well as a broader response to the historical rapes and crimes committed against women. In addition to exacting revenge on Ian, Kane ultimately fortifies Cate. She feels responsible for the infant whose family perishes in the battle, feeds the defenseless Ian, and keeps him from killing himself. Regretfully, things will not be this way in practice. "People like [Cate] never win," as Kane puts it (Sierz, 2000, p.103). Because their personal boundaries have been crossed, rape victims will be distrustful and afraid; their trust will be eroded in subsequent relationships. Additionally, till the rest of his life, the rape and violent memories will linger and burn in their heads. Thus, we reach from the topic of rape that everything becomes permissible according to the lustful desires of the one who holds power by force. Kane illustrates the shocking impact that her characters experience as victims of violence by depicting its effect in her plays. All of her characters are victims of this pointless cycle of violence, and as a result of the shock they endure, they either physically or psychologically return to the scene of violence and commit acts of violence. As a result, many victims replay the primary act that traumatizes them after visiting the scene of violence. Judith Herman points on the impact of shocking as Psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless. At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force . . . Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they rarely occur, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary adaptations to life. Unlike commonplace misfortunes, traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death. (33) It is possible that viewing representational events that might be stressful in and of themselves could set up traumatic memories. Although the exact trauma may not be able to be represented on an individual basis, it may be accessible through certain actions, words, or pictures that can then be referred to as generically traumatic. Kane was able to convey a clear image of psychological breakdown on stage through two aspects: the impact of war on the soldiers' evil behavior, and on the civilian side, through the characters of Ian and Cate. To sum up, psychological breakdown is a complicated phenomenon that is impacted by a number of variables, such as trauma, ongoing stress, and underlying mental health issues. For persons going through a breakdown and those helping them, it is crucial to comprehend its causes, symptoms, and available treatments. Regaining one's mental health and general well-being requires early intervention and all-encompassing treatment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, with its profane language, nudity, sexuality, and many forms of violence—most notably sexual violence and war—Kane's *Blasted* is a blazing example of in-your-face theater from start to finish. The audience is forced to consider the boundaries between "normal" and "abnormal" as the performance blurs them. As so, it violates all taboos and subverts all traditional theatrical frameworks. It causes people to reevaluate these ideas

as they see and experience them across the globe. In this regard, the play takes the audience to a battle of traumas by presenting them the whole evil face of the world in a hotel room where the past, the present and the future of humanity are interpenetrated. By uttering and performing every 'unmentionable' thing in front of people, the play holds a bitter realist mirror up to human beings to shake their senses and alert them for action so as not to gr

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