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## SARAH KANE'S POSTDRAMATIC STRATEGIES IN BLASTED, CLEANSED AND CRAVE

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### Abstract

After her unexpected death in 1999 there have been scholarly and theatrical interests in Kaneian drama. In this process Sarah Kane's texts have been performed all over the world. Many articles, books and book chapters have been published about her texts which handle the issues such as violence, trauma, depression, repression, torture, madness, death, love, and apocalypse in the light of Artaudian, Bondian, Beckettian, Pinteresque readings and her experiential theatre. But there is one crucial point missing: Kane's theatre is totally a postdramatic one as Hans-Thies Lehmann characterizes. The aim of this paper is to discuss postdramatic theatricality of Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, *Cleansed* and *Crave*.

**Key Words:** British Theatre, *Blasted*, *Cleansed*, *Crave*, Postdramatic Theatre, Sarah Kane.

*Increasingly, I'm finding performance much more than acting; theatre more compelling than plays. Unusually for me, I'm encouraging my friends to see my play Crave before reading it, because I think of it more as text for performance than as a play.\*\**

*Sarah Kane*

1990s has been generally regarded as one of the most exciting decades for English theatre since the first performance of John Osborne's masterpiece *Look Back in Anger* (1956). Thanks to the plays of a handful of playwrights such as Martin Crimp, Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, Martin McDonagh and Anthony Neilson, the course of British theatre heralded the beginning of a new theatrical renaissance. In the wake of new plays of those writers, British theatre of the 1990s has witnessed the rise of a new angry young generation whose works have been labelled provocative, speculative, confrontational, sensational, shocking, taboo-breaking, brutal, bleak, gloomy and dark. These writers have a contemporary voice that speaks to young people which portrays a composite picture of British society and market culture. Of those writers, contributing

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\*\* Sarah Kane, "Drama with Balls", *Guardian*, 20 August 1998.

to (a)political drama in the 1990s, Sarah Kane emerged as one of the most influential figures, purveying an experiential theatre with deeply shocking images. Born in Brentwood in 1971 and commit suicide on 20 February 1999 at the age of 28, Sarah Kane made innovative and important contributions to British theatre flavoured with her philosophical background.

Since her emergence in 1995 with *Blasted*, Sarah Kane has become a leading figure in the British new writing scene of the new millennium. Between 1995 and 1999 Kane wrote five plays and a short film for BBC. Her texts deal with themes of destructive love, sexual craving, pain, physical and psychological dimensions of cruelty, issues of distress, melancholia and death. By examining these specific topics she questions and breaks down the established notions of audiences. In these texts Kane attempts to explore the possibility of change acknowledging that the world is violent. While handling these issues in the light of In-Yer-Face theatre sensibility she uses the techniques of postdramatic theatre which was established by German theatre researcher Hans-Thies Lehmann. In his book of *Postdramatic Theatre* Lehmann methodically explores the tradition of drama from Aristotle's *Poetics* to current experiential drama of contemporary playwrights. Postdramatic theatre is for Lehmann beyond the boundaries of traditional drama. It rejects dramatic notions such as illusion, mimesis and mimetic representation, catharsis, characterization and primacy of character, a plot with a beginning, a middle, and an end of well made plays.

In theatre, Sarah Kane uses postdramatic aspects as a form of representation to challenge audiences. Cleansing and breaking down the traditional dramatic methods of classical dramaturgy such as linear sequence of time, creating definitive characters whose names, genders are stated, and recognizable plot; three unities of time, place and action, cause and effect connection; using media images on stage, musicalization, playing with the density of signs, non-hierarchy, physicality, interruption of the real Kane's texts demonstrates how the postdramatic aesthetics can be experimented with onstage. Using Lehmann's book as a guide this paper analyzes how Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, *Cleansed*, and *Crave* exercise the postdramatic theatrical signs to shape their contents by using the aspects of text, time, media images, and postdramatic pain and catharsis.

Kane is a true explorer, who breaks form and content. With her five different plays in style and content, she clearly draws a picture of the contemporary societies by portraying x rays of their violent and violated souls. Sarah Kane's plays thrive in a theatrical climate which is conducive to 'post-dramatic' theatrical forms and theories" and "her work is 'anathematic' to the notion of dramatic theatre" (Voigts-Virchow, 2010: 196-167). Kane's first text *Blasted* that rocked the stages and sparked legendary controversy is first performed at Royal Court Theatre in 1995. In *Blasted* Sarah Kane self consciously tries to depict the traumas of war, rape, domestic violence and loss. Using the Bosnian war of the early 1990s as a central motivation, she tried to show the catastrophic images of bombings, pain, torture, hunger and mutilation, inhumanity, sexual violence, abuse, and rape that define war.

As Saunders summarizes, the play begins with the exploration of an abusive relationship between Ian, a middle aged tabloid journalist who has brought Cate, a much younger former girlfriend to a Leeds hotel room. Ian has organised the meeting for the purposes of seduction, yet despite Cate's protestations their night together culminates in Ian subjecting her to a sexual assault. After Cate escapes through the

bathroom window, *Blasted* changes radically in style with the entrance of a nameless Soldier. The room is hit by a mortar bomb and, as both men recover, the Soldier tells Ian of the atrocities he has committed in a civil war that have broken out. We are now no longer sure whether the location is Leeds or elsewhere in the world. The encounter between the pair culminates in the Soldier raping and blinding Ian after which he kills himself. Cate, later returns with a baby that has been entrusted to her care. Although the child passes away Cate buries it and prays for its safe keeping in the afterlife. Ian is left alone again and time itself breaks down. While whole season pass, Ian carries out an increasingly bizarre series of acts that culminates in him eating the buried baby and occupying its makeshift grave. The play ends with Cate returning and feeding Ian with bread, sausage and gin with his final words 'thank you' (Saunders, 2009: 16-17).

*Blasted* shows one of its postdramatic theatrical signs with the bombing scene. Because after the bomb blasted the hotel wall the place of the play changes into a civil war and rape camps in Bosnia. Breaking down the traditional theatrical methods of classical dramaturgy such as linear sequence of time and three unities of time, place and action this scene represents the postdramatic aesthetics of time. Sarah Kane emphasizes these postdramatic stylistic traits of *Blasted* in an interview with Dan Rebellato as follows:

Formally, I'm trying to collapse a few boundaries as well. To carry on with making the form and content one. That's proving extremely difficult...What I have to do is keep the same place but alter the time and action. Or you can actually reverse it and look at it the other way around: that the time and place stay the same, no the time and the action stay the same, but the place changes. I depends actually how you look at the play... For me the form did exactly mirror the content. And for me the form is the meaning of the play, which is that people's lives are thrown into complete chaos with absolutely no warning whatsoever. (Rebellato, 1998)

In postdramatic theatre it becomes a rule to scrap the conventionalized perception of time which is essential to dramatic theatre. For Lehmann drama brings logic and structure into the confusing plethora and chaos of being – this is why, for Aristotle, it has a higher status than historiography, which only reports the chaotic events. It is basically the unity of time that has to support the unity of this logic that is meant to manage without confusion, digression and rupture. One aspect of this notion of the unity of time, that remains only implicit in Aristotle, is this: to the same degree as time and action attain an internal coherence, seamless continuity and totality of surveyability, this same unity draws a distinct line between drama and the external world. It safeguards the closed structure of tragedy (Lehmann, 2006: 160).

Another postdramatic stylistic trait of *Blasted* is its rape scenes as a means of staging postdramatic pain and catharsis. Addressing the issue of rape in *Blasted* Sarah Kane shows violated women bodies in pain dialectically. In the first scene of the play the rape was, as usual, male to female. Here Ian has raped Cate during the night. But the second rape was, unusually, male to male. The Soldier raped Ian, sucked out his eyes because the soldiers in the war raped her girlfriend Col. *Blasted* inserts radical tones to the traditional image of rape, searching the question of rape's representability, linking verbal and visual representation, as well as pushing the boundaries by visually staging a male on male rape. In *Blasted*, almost certainly for the first time in the history of theatre, the spectators have to deal with the rapes of both man and woman at the same time in the same story. It is also worth to note here that Sarah Kane in *Blasted*, like

in her other texts, rejects creating traditional heroes and characters. She deconstructs the dramatic text in the light of creating a postdramatic character which can be read as a posthuman.

Sarah Kane's third text *Cleansed* in which we encounter the postdramatic aesthetics more clearly is first staged at Royal Court Downstairs in April 1998. It is about a group of people living in a university campus, an institution, or a concentration camp who try to protect themselves through love. In *Cleansed* between these people there are four radical stories:

The main one is about Grace's search for Graham, her brother, an addict who's been murdered by Tinker, a sadistic guard or a doctor at the institution. Grace wears Graham's clothes, dances with his spirit, makes love to him, and finally after receiving a penis transplant becomes him. Juxtaposed with this story of incest and sibling bonding is the romance of two men, Carl and Rod, who discuss love and betrayal. Carl, who promises eternal love, betrays his lover; Rod, who lives for the moment, dies for love. In a subplot, Robin, a disturbed nineteen-year-old, falls for Grace when she tries to teach him to read. After learning to use abacus, he realizes how long his sentence is and hang himself. The last story is Tinker's: he visits a peepshow and imposes Grace's identity onto that of the erotic dancer. He seduces her, then turns nasty. At the end, Tinker has his own 'Grace', Grace looks identical to Graham, Carl is dressed in Grace's clothes. But despite the punctuation of Grace's final speech by the word 'pointless', the play ends in a blaze of sunlight. (Sierz, 2000: 112)

*Cleansed* is the crucial turning-point in Kane's theatrical style. In her first two plays, *Blasted* and *Phaedra's Love*, it is possible to see scenes, plot, an action, stage directions, and protagonists whose names and gender are obvious. As *Blasted* and *Phaedra's Love* which include five and eight scenes, *Cleansed* is not subdivided into acts. As a postdramatic piece *Cleansed*, which also marks a transition from play to text for performance, doesn't have a beginning that would resemble well made plays of traditional theatre. The play contains a series of twenty scenes. The scenes are not continuous, the play is not really joined, and there is no linear chronological order or a rational development. The text is full of very short sentences and lines often consist of a single word. "She uses the smallest amount of words possible to achieve coherence and completeness. All exposition is stripped away; we are given just the most basic of details" (Urban, 2001: 42). In the text Sarah Kane plays with language and reduced it because she doesn't want to waste it. As she declares she doesn't "like writing things you really don't need" and her "favourite exercise is cutting: cut, cut, cut..." (Rebellato, 1998).

With *Cleansed* Kane took the first step into the direction of dissolving dramatic boundaries. In the text, like Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, characters change their identities by exchanging their clothes and even bodies. It stages the limits of love, the extremes of human endurance in the light of postdramatic pain. Because in the text which depicts the graphic violence Carl's betrayal is extracted by a beating and his tongue is then cut out so that he can no longer lie again. As he continues in stating his love by writing with his feet this time his foot is cut and his genitals are removed.

In Sarah Kane's world, it seems that love is the torture endured by the living, both craved and impossible, and death is the only way out. Hence *Cleansed* closes with a satire of hope: the two dismembered bodies of the characters denied even death

watch the rain stop and the sun gets “brighter and brighter, the squeaking of rats louder and louder, until the light is blinding and the sound deafening” (Kane, 2001: 44). This touches a nihilism that goes beyond Kane’s earlier work. The characters in *Cleansed* can bear no responsibility for their tortured lives as they are victims of a cruel and inescapable institution. As Tomlin notes Rob’s claim that “death isn’t the worst thing they can do to you” (Kane, 2001: 30) “resonates beyond the asylum, turning it into a metaphor for a human existence that promises, at best, death as a release, at worst, unspeakable and never-ending torture” (Tomlin, 2008: 505).

Gutcher remarks that *Cleansed* is the crucial turning-point between Kane’s different theatre techniques. In her first two plays, *Blasted* and *Phaedra’s Love*, the formal dramatic categories are still ensured. Both plays are divided into scenes, have a recognizable plot, an action, indicated by abundant stage directions, and distinguishable characters whose names and gender are clearly stated. With *Cleansed* Kane took the first step into the direction of dissolving boundaries. Characters change their identities by adopting each others’ names, by exchanging clothes and even bodies so that the distinctions between the individuals slowly disappear.

In *Cleansed* language still has the task of an interpersonal means of communication; it is rather a means to express thoughts and feelings, to get rid of all the burdens which weight on the characters’ minds (Gutscher, 2008: 15). In the text words are used as a theatrical element. And they are positioned beyond language which is an important sign of postdramatic panorama. Kane plays and experiments with the language. She constructs a pared dialogue. Therefore she shows the meaning of the play not with words but with the images. In this regard Sarah Kane creates theatre of images in *Cleansed*; she doesn’t misuse any words and gives the message only through imagery.

Playing with the density of signs in *Cleansed* Sarah Kane goes further with her fourth text *Crave* that is premiered at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh on 13 August 1998. It is about cravings, love, misuse, incest, rejection, rape, inner conflict, memory, trauma, pain, sexual desire, craving, and loss. This time violence in the text is not shown graphically but in the minds and memories of four characters. The violent imagery becomes a textual imagery. The poetry of the text is violent.

*Crave* is the culmination of Kane’s quest to marry form and content. The text indicates where the speech begins, but doesn’t show where it ends, and doesn’t assign them to clearly named characters. In *Crave* Sarah Kane doesn’t create specific characters that have clear names. She gives them only letters A, B, C and M. Breaking down the traditional boundaries of dramatic theatre in which characters and characterization are very important Sarah Kane creates non-dramatic characters. Four people in the text talk about strange events which refer to each other, and crave something in an unknown place. But they have no normal and meaningful interaction with each other. There are no stage directions for their roles, no real information about their age, gender, and individual traits. There is no chronological plot, specific place or linear time. Despite the use of a disconnected language, repeated dialogues, contradictory speeches, explicit events define the text’s soul. Like *Cleansed* in *Crave* Sarah Kane uses language economically. By the economic use of language she expresses desires, cravings, and pains of speakers. Four characters in the text speak shortly, sentences with very limited words, lines with unfinished sentences to attempt to communicate. *Crave* also demonstrates the experience of pain, torture, and traumatic experience

postdramatically. It exemplifies Lehmann's concept of postdramatic pain and catharsis by making a transition between the "represented pain" and the "pain experienced in representation" (Lehmann, 2006: 166). *Crave* is Sarah Kane's the most despairing text and first one in which people go, characters all give up and say 'fuck this, I am out of here' (Tabert, 1998). With a few words characters tell their hopelessness such as "the heart is going out of me", "I feel nothing" (Kane, 2001: 156) and "nothing to be done" (Kane, 2001: 182). Their solution to the bleakness situation which symbolizes postdramatic catharsis is shown with the words "kill me...Free falling...World without end, you're dead to me" (Kane, 2001: 200). As a product of long history of theatre from dramatic to postdramatic convention it is no coincidence that these concepts characterize *Crave's* postdramatic traits.

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