Sarah Kane’s Concern for Humanity: *Blasted* as an Antiwar Play

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**Abstract.** Although Sarah Kane’s debut play, *Blasted*, was castigated by so many critics because of its onstage performance of violence, it can be reconsidered as an antiwar play which shows its author’s concern for humanity and her hope for a better world where wars must be avoided. This paper discusses *Blasted* as an antiwar play which addresses the audience’s indifference toward war as a threat for humanity.

**Keywords:** Sara Kane, Antiwar Drama, Violence.

1. Introduction

1.1. Sarah Kane and Her Oeuvre

Sarah Kane, the renowned British playwright, was born in 1971 in Essex. She graduated in Drama with first class honours from Bristol University and then did an M.A in Creative Writing at Birmingham University. Kane suffered from depression and had spells in hospital. After an unsuccessful suicide attempt with sleeping pills, she finally hung herself in the hospital where she was under treatment. Limited to years 1995 to 1999, Kane’s oeuvre comprises five plays and a short television script.

After the performance of her debut play, *Blasted*, in 1995 she wrote *Phaedra’s Love* in 1996. While *Phaedra’s Love* contained violent content and language, it did not cause much controversy over its representation of violence and the reception of the play was not as hostile and intense as the reception of her debut play. In 1998 Kane wrote *Cleansed*, a play with themes of imprisonment, punishment, torture and love. Kane’s fourth play, *Crave*, was performed the same year. It is a play with four characters named A, B, C and M. *Crave* marked a radical shift in Kane’s dramaturgy.

*Kane’s* last play, *4:48 Psychosis*, was the only play which was performed after the author’s death by the Royale Court theatre in 2000. In *4:48 Psychosis*, Kane abandoned conventional theatrical form as the play has no specific theatrical divisions, stage directions or even characters. The play is a poetical piece of writing which explores mental illness and suicide.

Kane’s plays were considered as the epitome of the In-yer-face theatre and were influential on theatre communities both inside and outside Britain. Aleks Sierz refers to in-yer-face theatre as “any drama that 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 and provoking alarm.” Sierz believes this kind of drama is shocking because “it is new in tone or structure, or because it is bolder or more experimental than what audiences are used to.” In-yer-face theatre challenges the conventions that dictate “what can or what should be shown onstage.” Sierz notes that The *New Oxford English Dictionary* (1998) defines in-yer-face as “blatantly aggressive or provocative, impossible to ignore or avoid”. *Collins English Dictionary*, according to Sierz, adds the word “confrontational” to describe the term in-yer-face. [1] In yer-face theatre tries to disturb the audiences through extreme language and events. The audiences, in this kind of theatre, cannot feel safe in their detached positions as they are constantly exposed to extreme emotions shown on the stage.

1.2. The Play

The play begins with the arrival of forty five-year-old Ian and twenty one-year-old Cate to a hotel room in Leeds. Ian belittles Cate in various ways and his sexual advances toward Cate are resisted and refused by her. At the end of scene one it is implied that Ian has raped Cate. A soldier enters the room and then the room is exploded by a bomb. The Soldier tries to re-enact the crimes performed on his girlfriend in the course of

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war and narrates his experiences of the violent war. At the end of the play, Cate, who had escaped before the Soldier’s arrival, returns to Ian who is alone, blinded and hungry. She shares her food with Ian. The play ends when it rains and Ian grateful to Cate says “Thank you”.

2. The Reception of Kane’s Debut Play

*Blasted*, Kane’s debut play, was performed for the first time at the Royale Court Theatre in London in 1995 and only a few days of performance was enough to bring the play and its author from anonymity to the center of media attention and controversy. Theater critics condemned and attacked the play for its extreme use of explicit violence. Jack Tinker for *The Daily Mail* in London referred to *Blasted* as “a disgusting feast of filth”[2] and John Gross for *The Sunday Telegraph* described it as “a gratuitous welter of carnage, cannibalism, male rape, eye gouging and other atrocities”[3]. The play was condemned and castigated because of excessive onstage portrayal of various forms of atrocities and consequently lack of what was called moral framework. In spite of all attacks from critics, some playwrights such as Harold Pinter and Mark Ravenhill praised the play.

2.1. Kane’s Reaction to Being Labeled as Immoral

In response to the condemnation of her play by the press and critics, Kane in an interview said: “Personally, I think it is a shocking play, but only in the sense that falling down the stairs is shocking—it’s painful and makes you aware of your own fragility, but one doesn’t tend to be morally outraged about falling down the stairs” [4]. Kane criticised the hostile reception of her play by the media which were indifferent to numerous types of violence in real life. In an interview she said when the play was performed “there was an earthquake in Japan in which thousands of people died, and in this country a fifteen-year-old girl was raped and murdered in a wood, but *Blasted* got more media coverage in some newspapers than either of these events”[5]. Confronted with the severe disapproval of her play Kane stated that “the thing that shocks me most is that the media seems to have been more upset by the representation of violence than by the violence itself” [6].

3. Kane’s Concern for Humanity

3.1. *Blasted* as a Response to the Bosnian War

The Bosnian war took place between 1992 and 1995. The war was a consequence of the breakup of Former Yugoslavia. After the secession of Slovenians and Croatians from former Yugoslavia, The Bosnian Serbs rejected the declaration of independence by Bosnians. To be able to protect the Serbian territory and population, the Bosnian Serbs moved their forces into the republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina and war broke out. Bosnian Serbs were trying to create their Bosnian Serb through a war which was characterized by genocide, ethnic cleansing and rape.

In 1993, when Kane was in process of writing *Blasted*, she saw a report covering the Bosnian war:

*At some point during the first couple of weeks of writing I switched on the television. Srebrenica was under siege. An old woman was looking into the camera, crying. She said, “please, please, somebody help us. Somebody do something.” I knew nobody was going to do a thing. Suddenly, I was completely uninterested in the play I was writing. What I wanted to write about was what I’d just seen on television. So, dilemma was: Do I abandon my play (even though I’d written one scene I thought was really good) in order to move onto a subject I thought was more pressing? Slowly, it occurred to me that the play I was writing was about this. It was about violence, about rape, and it was about these things happening between people who know each other and ostensibly love each other [7]. Kane, who was writing a play about the private relationship between two people in a room, responded to the crisis in Bosnia by turning the play into something about the war.*

3.2. *Blasted* as a Vivid Picture of Violence

In spite of the fact that Sara Kane’s debut play was referred to as immoral by critics due to the extreme representation of violence and hence castigated by them, in this paper, I contend the play is moral in the sense that while it portrays a vivid picture of violence, it shows its author’s concern for humanity by warning
the proximity and possibility of a destructive war situation in Britain or anywhere else all around the world. As a war play, I believe, *Blasted* demonstrates violence as an inevitable consequence of war and critiques the indifference of humanity in confrontation with the war in Bosnia and in a broader sense in the whole world. Even though the stage directions mention British Leeds as the setting, Kane referred to the war in Bosnia as the source that inspired her for the second part of *Blasted*. Nowhere in *Blasted* the word Bosnia can be found and the author does not provide any information related to the location of the war while the war in Bosnia is often mentioned as the external reference of the war in the play. This caused confusion among critics and audiences whereas helped them obtain meaning from the play. The simultaneity of writing *Blasted* and the war in Bosnia and also the author’s commentary that the Bosnian war was her source of inspiration has positioned *Blasted* as a play about war and rape in Bosnia, where Sarajevo was heavily attacked by Serbs and many Croatian and Muslim women were raped at Serbian rape camps. Kane once said: “My intention was to be absolutely truthful about abuse and violence. All of the violence in the play has been carefully plotted and dramatically structured to say what I want about war. 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 in war.” [8].

3.3. Bridging the Distance between Bosnia and Britain

Kane’s portrayal of war is not limited to war in Bosnia. She is trying to convince the viewers to consider the possible danger of war in Britain while they consider the crisis in Balkan. In fact, Kane is blending the reality of the crisis in Bosnia with the power relation between Ian and Cate to warn the possibility of a war in Britain or any other countries. I think it would not be difficult to find counterparts for the various moments of horror in *Blasted* and the events in a war-torn nation in reality.

In spite of her insistence on the British setting of the play, Kane tries to minimize the distance which Sierz believes exists due to “geography and indifference” between Britain and Bosnia [9]. I believe in choosing a hotel room as the setting of the play, Kane intends to invite the audience to see beyond geography. A hotel by itself conveys the idea of universality and multiculturalism. Moreover, the play directions also remind us that the hotel room is “so expensive it could be anywhere in the world”[10]. In this way, Kane reminds the audience that while Bosnia is far away regarding its geographical distance, Britain must learn not to be indifferent to what happens in Balkans because the same public conditions may come up in Britain due to internal problems such as racial conflicts. Steve Waters is of the idea that 1990s was a period of indifference for Britain in confrontation with war and terrorism because violence, war and terror were far away without any threats for Britain: “The dominant mode of violence in the 1990s was in fact internecine war – conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, inter-ethnic conflicts in the former Soviet Union, the first invasion of Chechnya and the horror of the Rwandan genocide. Violence, for the West at least, was elsewhere, done to others by others”[11]. It is this spectator position of Britain upon war that Kane attacks in her play.

Kane manages to bridge the distance between Britain and Bosnia by making the viewers follow the parallels of war in Bosnia and the violent actions of the play and then encourages them to notice the possibility of the same violent conditions in Britain. In this regard, an issue as private as the disputes between the sexes, may turn into violence, riot and even war. Kane describes the conditions of war as: “What this needs is what happens in war – suddenly violently, without any warning, people’s lives are completely ripped to pieces.”[12]. In this way, in *Blasted*, Kane through representation of onstage violence makes an attempt to shock the indifferent audience with the hope of reawakening them.

3.4. The Journey from Private to Political

To do so, Sarah Kane has a journey from private to public in her play. The hotel room in Leeds which is a private setting of the power relation between Ian and Cate before the Soldier’s arrival is first marked as a war zone by the Soldier’s arrival and then is literally turned into a war zone as the stage directions of the play announce that “The hotel has been blasted by a mortar bomb. There is a large hole in one of the walls, and everything is covered in dust which is still falling.”[13]. In fact, by making a transition from the personal and private power relations in scene one to the public issue of the war in the rest of the play, Kane reminds her audience that private affairs are not isolated and are part of public issues. Kane reminds her audience to remember the connection between the rape in the private hotel room in Leeds and the Bosnian war she
mentions as the external reference of her play. Kane believes that “One is the seed and the other is the tree. I
do think that the seeds of full-scale war can always be found in peace-time civilisation” [14]. In fact, Kane
begins with a relation which seems to be personal and private in the peace-time and then shifts to a broader,
impersonal and political scale of war and destruction. From another point of view, we may say that Kane has
been able to bring an issue from a universal and political level to a private and personal level so that it would
be more tangible to the audiences who have turned into indifferent individuals in confrontation with the
social issues of the contemporary life.

4. Conclusion

Kane’s Blasted can be interpreted as her concern for humanity and hope for making changes in a world
in which the wall between war and peace is as thin as the wall that is blasted in the hotel room of the play.
By representing violence at its most shocking form in her play, Kane purposefully attempts to dramatise our
violent world and invite us to see and think differently. Using theatre as her medium, Kane provides a
critique of people’s indifference toward violence and its damaging consequences in our contemporary world.
Although Kane’s Blasted is horrible and violent, it seeks change and in this regard it manifests its author’s
hope for a better world. So, the complaint that Kane’s play is immoral is responded that her theatre is highly
moral because her objective is to shock her audience so that they will open their eyes to the horror and
violence of the world.

5. References