

32. Violence as a vehicle for interrogating the male-dominated order in Sarah Kane's *Blasted* and *Cleansed*

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Abstract

Sarah Kane, who is a very prominent representative of in-her-face theatre, raises her rebellious voice against social problems in an unprecedented way through her plays, and the subordination of women in society is one of the fundamental issues that the playwright ponders on. She masterfully draws the attention of the audience to patriarchal subjugation by employing violence in her plays. The present study examines the plays, *Blasted* (1995) and *Cleansed* (1998), in the light of feminist theories and discusses how Kane criticises the victimization of women in the patriarchal system. Following concise background information pertaining to in-her-face theatre and the conditions of women playwrights, this article scrutinizes the function of binary oppositions in order to reveal the subordination of women in *Blasted*. In addition, it discusses how the playwright employs violence to interrogate constructed gender roles by examining the interactions among the main characters in the play. Furthermore, it analyses the normative force of the patriarchal system that feeds on violence and the objectification of women by focusing on the deeds of the merciless character, Tinker, in *Cleansed*. Above all, this study aims to highlight that violence in Kane's plays enables the playwright to challenge the nullification of women in the male-dominated order.

Keywords: Patriarchal oppression, violence, Sarah Kane, *Blasted*, *Cleansed*

Sarah Kane'in *Blasted* ve *Cleansed* oyunlarında erkek egemen düzeni sorgulayan bir araç olarak şiddet

Yüzevrumcu tiyatronun önemli temsilcilerinden Sarah Kane, teatral oyunları vasıtasıyla toplumsal sorunlara karşı eşi görülmemiş bir şekilde sesini yükseltmektedir ve kadınların toplumda ikinci plana atılması yazarın üzerinde durduğu temel sorunlardan biridir. Kane oyunlarında şiddet öğeleri kullanarak ataerkil baskıya seyircilerin dikkatini çekmektedir. Mevcut çalışma, *Blasted* ve *Cleansed* oyunlarını feminist teoriler ışığında incelenmekte ve yazarın ataerkil sistemde kadınların değersizleştirilmesine getirdiği eleştirileri tartışmaktadır. Bu makale yüzevrumcu tiyatro ve kadın yazarların durumu ile ilgili artalan bilgisi verdikten sonra *Blasted* oyunundaki ikili karşıtlıkların, kadınlara uygulanan zulmün ortaya konulmasındaki işlevini irdelemektedir. Ayrıca çalışma, oyunun ana karakterleri arasındaki etkileşimlere odaklanarak yazarın inşa edilmiş toplumsal cinsiyet rollerini şiddet vasıtasıyla nasıl sorguladığını tartışmaktadır. Bunun yanı sıra mevcut makale *Cleansed* oyunundaki Tinker karakterinin eylemlerini analiz ederek ataerkil sistemin şiddetten beslenen normatif gücünü ve kadınların nesneleştirilmesini incelemektedir. Her şeyden önemlisi bu çalışma, Kane'in kullandığı şiddet öğeleri aracılığıyla erkek egemen düzende kadınların değersizleştirilmesine meydan okuduğunu vurgulamaktadır.

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Anahtar kelimeler: Ataerkil baskı, şiddet, Sarah Kane, *Blasted*, *Cleansed*

Introduction

Sarah Kane, who can shock the audience through her plays, is regarded as the backbone of in-her-face theatre. Accordingly, the reflections of this dramatic movement can be observed throughout the plays, *Blasted* (1995) and *Cleansed* (1998). Sierz (2001) defines the movement as “any drama that takes the audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes it until it gets the message” (p. 4). He points out that the playwrights of in-her-face theatre use various shock tactics to shake the audience such as filthy language, humiliation, sexual intercourse on stage, nudity, and disturbing violence (Sierz, 2001, p. 5). All these indicated strategies are employed in Kane’s plays as well. They become functional not only to interrogate the male-dominated order but also to make the audience acknowledge patriarchal oppression. In this article, how violence is employed to question constructed gender roles, the victimization of women, the fierce normative force of the patriarchal system, and the objectification of women will be discussed by focusing on *Blasted* and *Cleansed*.

Before the age of Kane, women playwrights had already achieved to be visible thanks to their plays in British drama despite the dominance of male playwrights and patronage in the 1970s. As Wandor (2000) notes, the appearance of theatrical groups composed of women and various groups’ cooperation with feminist playwrights enabled women to be heard in public within this period, and several women playwrights such as Timberlake Wertenbaker and Caryl Churchill could anchor to British stage despite the negative attitude towards them (pp. 60-61). In the following years, the women playwrights continued to experience restrictions due to “Thatcherism and the long rule of the Conservative government” (Wandor, 2000, p. 63). On the other hand, as David Edgar (1999) highlights, the increasing number of women playwrights was observed in the 1980s (p. 8). Thus, it could be argued that the production of plays by women playwrights gradually became immune to all possible obstacles, and women had already started to raise their voices on stage long before Sarah Kane did.

The 1990s, when Sarah Kane started to appear on stage through her plays, were considered a prolific period in terms of theatrical productions. Aston (2003) argues that “the British stage claimed its renaissance in the mid-1990s” (p. 2). However, she underlines that a wave of angry playwrights similar to Osborne’s generation was prevalent, and Sarah Kane was one of the rare women playwrights in this wave. These angry playwrights were occupied with shocking the reader with the violence they created on stage, but the dominance of male playwrights was still the case. The period was a “context in which feminism retains an academic centrality,” but it lacked “women’s cultural activity” (Aston and Reinelt, 2000, p. 17). Accordingly, Sarah Kane could be described as a playwright who survived as an exceptional angry young woman within British drama.

Sarah Kane proved herself as a very promising playwright in British drama despite her anomalous plays. As Saunders (2002) underlines, she could be viewed as the most successful and radical playwright of the 1990s (p. 134). Nevertheless, she rejects being limited by definitions and does not desire to be a spokesperson of a specific group. Therefore, Kane points out in one of her interviews that “I don’t want to be representative of any biological or social group of which I happen to be a member of any. I am what I am. Not other people want me to be” (Stephenson and Langridge, 1997, p. 135). No matter how she endeavours to disassociate herself from being a woman playwright, Kane is conscious of the victimization of the women within the male-biased order. Thus, she subtly interrogates the patriarchal violence against women in her plays.

Violence in Kane's plays is not a goal to be accomplished. In fact, violence helps the playwright constitute the background to convey her messages in an influential way. Thus, as Biçer (2011) notes, "violence is only a tool for Kane through which she criticizes the injustices of the world. She is not interested in violence for the sake of violence" (p. 82). Furthermore, Kane values the constructive impact of theatre on individuals and thereby on society (Stephenson and Langridge, 1997, p. 133). Therefore, the playwright employs violence to arouse social conscience by enabling the audience to sympathize with the victims of violence. In addition, it could be argued that Kane, as a woman in the male-dominated order, employs violence in her plays to mirror and interrogate patriarchal oppression. Undoubtedly, Kane's *Blasted* and *Cleansed* include various shocking examples of violence, and how violence functions to question the victimization of women needs to be pondered on.

1. Interrogating the Function of Violence in *Blasted*

Blasted which includes various elements of in-her-face theatre ranging from humiliation to sexual coercion focuses on the interactions of a couple, Cate and Ian. A hotel room that serves to represent a safe and comfortable sphere is employed as the setting of the play. Nevertheless, the isolationist mentality that disregards the ones who suffer from the troubles of the world is challenged through the outbreak of a civil war in that hotel towards the end of the play (Aston, 2003, p. 81). Thus, it is possible to argue that the playwright is determined to discomfort the audience from the beginning to the end of the play. She conveys the message that nobody is isolated and safe similar to the message shared by the metaphysical poet, John Donne (1959), who underlined long before Kane that "no man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main" (p. 108).

Binary oppositions are valuable tools for interrogating established norms in society, and as Sierz (2001) states, in-her-face theatre challenges the binary opposed distinctions that define individuals' current identities (p. 7). As a member of this wave, Kane also prefers to employ and disrupt binary oppositions in the play to display the victimization of women. The constructed binary oppositions have degraded women throughout patriarchal history. As Irigaray (1998) highlights, while men are associated with the sun and rationality, women are associated with the moon, irrationality, and enigma (p. 120). Thus, the playwright employs such oppositions while depicting her characters in order to create a mirror of the patriarchal order.

Sarah Kane describes Cate as a naïve and deceivable lower-class woman who is both economically and emotionally dependent on her mother. She cannot liberate herself as a woman without economic independence and self-confidence. Moreover, Cate is a character who has no child which could help her to have a saying in a patriarchal society. Contrary to Cate, Ian is displayed as a dominant character that can prove his superiority through his economic power, age, experience, knowledge, class, race, and weapon. Thanks to these created oppositions, the playwright finds a chance not only to display the current conditions of the women in the patriarchal order but also to provide background for the violence that will occur in the following scenes.

At the very beginning of the play, Kane reveals the victimization of women through the humiliating attitude of Ian towards Cate. Although Cate is amazed when she sees the hotel room for the first time, Ian's reaction is starkly the opposite. He says that "I have shat in better places than this" (Kane, 2021, p. 3), and the sentence he constructs is a deliberate attack on Cate to prove his superiority as a man. Furthermore, Ian considers Cate to be incapable of accomplishing anything as he clarifies it by saying "Cate. You're stupid. You're never going to get a job" (Kane, 2001, p. 8). He humiliates her whenever he finds a chance, and this verbal violence is followed by sexual and psychological violence as well. Cate's ignorance, innocence, and

weakness make Ian view Cate as a useful doll to be abused. Therefore, he desires to have sexual intercourse with her, wants her to masturbate, and forces her to have oral sex. Although Cate tries to stop him by saying "you hurt me" (Kane, 2001, p. 19), he continues to harass her. Ian claims to love her, but he physically and sexually abuses her as the representative of the masculine power. Next, Cate is threatened with a revolver on her head when she replies negatively to Ian's oral sex suggestion. Accordingly, Cate is incessantly victimized in the hotel room by Ian, and the level of violence increases towards the end of the second scene.

Kane draws a portrait of the patriarchal mentality that renders women the other through Ian's humiliation, arrogant attitudes, and abuse of Cate. Similarly, Cate is depicted as a victim of the patriarchal society. She is not allowed to prove herself as an independent individual like a great number of women who are subordinated by patriarchal tools. Thus, it could be deduced that the playwright employs violence to illustrate the oppressive force of male-caused violence until the hotel is "blasted by a mortar bomb" (Kane, 2001, p. 39).

The hotel room which was described as peaceful, untroubled, and far from danger at the beginning of the play becomes a battlefield after the explosion. There is no doubt that the playwright attempts to make the audience feel the destructive and horrific force of the Bosnian War that broke out in the early 1990s through disturbing civil war scenes (Aston, 2003, p. 81). Nonetheless, it is possible to argue that the war scenes in the play are also employed to traverse the assigned gender roles.

The roles that individuals perform are artificially constructed by the male-dominated order. Feminist philosophers also clarify such artificiality. For instance, Simone de Beauvoir (1973) underlines this acute fact through her well-known statement "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (p. 301). The distinction between biologically determined sex and socially constructed gender is more vividly pointed out in the following years as well. For example, Judith Butler (1989) considers gender to be "a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, comes to believe and to perform in the mode of belief" (p. 520). Accordingly, rather than a pre-text like human nature, social norms are understood to be quite influential in shaping the identities of the individuals in society.

Kane first displays typical roles assigned to males and females by the patriarchal order thanks to the interactions of Cate and Ian. However, everything is turned upside down when an explosion occurs in the hotel room. Contrary to her role as a male figure and a victimizer who abuses Cate, Ian is obliged to adopt a feminine role and becomes a victim when Soldier comes into the hotel room. Soldier firstly gets his weapon, food, and all the power he had before. Next, Ian becomes a captive of Soldier as Cate used to be at the beginning of the play. He is raped by Soldier, and his eyes are violently sucked. Furthermore, Ian insistently asks Cate to touch him in order to feel safer and loses all his masculine power as a blind and helpless individual fed by a woman quite similar to a baby towards the end of the play. As could be observed, the subject of the patriarchal order becomes an object, and Kane manages to subvert prevalent gender roles by employing these violent scenes. Above all, the playwright both displays the fact that social identities are constructed and enables the audience to sympathize with the objectified women in the patriarchal order. Therefore, it could be underlined that these scenes in the play primarily serve to show the oppression of women in society. In this way, the playwright endeavours to break the indifference of modern individuals regarding patriarchal oppression.

2. Interrogating the Function of Violence in *Cleansed*

The traces of in-yer-face theatre become more vivid and striking in *Cleansed* despite its central focus on “the possibility of love as a means of salvation” (Aston, 2003, p.89). Kane aims to shock the audience through violence, and she masterfully achieves her purpose by displaying inconceivable forms of violence onstage such as excruciation, rape, and murder. One may argue that Sarah Kane does not merely focus on the violence or the sufferings experienced by the female characters in *Cleansed*. For example, the physical violence² against Grace's brother, Graham, could not be viewed as male-centred violence towards women. Nevertheless, as a woman, Sarah Kane is a member of the patriarchal system and can clearly reflect the violence of patriarchs that pervades in the male-dominated order thanks to her play.

In order to display that extreme physical, sexual, and psychological violence, the playwright sets the play in a university which could be viewed as one of the significant establishments of the patriarchal order that strengthens male superiority through male-biased education. As Aston (2003) states, a university image which is repressing and regulating is adopted in the play (p. 89), and Kane (2006) hints at the normative force of education by depicting the setting “just inside the perimeter fence of a university” (p. 1). Furthermore, Tinker is addressed as a doctor and displayed as a patriarch who triggers all forms of violence and torture in the play. Thus, it could also be argued that Kane implies the destructive force of modern medicine and science through which doctors endeavour to force all individuals to obey the standards of the patriarchal order. When the marginalizing treatments of numerous individuals, particularly of women in asylums since the Victorian era are considered, Tinker's title can be interpreted as a symbolic tool to criticize the male-biased medical system.

In the patriarchal order, the constructed binary oppositions which are designed for the sake of constructing male superiority are maintained. As Judith Butler (1999) underlines, power regimes of heterosexism and phallogocentrism rerun their mentality steadily (p. 44). In the long run, the identity of an individual occurs as “a performance with clearly punitive consequences” (Butler, 1999, p. 190). In other words, heterosexual identities as male and female become functional to consolidate the patriarchal order, and the ones who violate the limits of heterosexism are severely chastised as the playwright displays in *Cleansed*.

In the play, a homosexual love affair between the characters, Carl and Rod, is first observed by Tinker who “takes on the surveillance role” (Aston, 2003, p. 91). Next, Carl is “methodically” (Kane, 2006, p. 10) beaten until he is unconscious by a group of unseen men who represent the normative force of the patriarchal system. In addition, Tinker appears on stage as the leader of that group and starts to torture Carl. He pushes a pole into Carl's anus, cuts off his tongue, and crams the ring³ down his throat. Carl, one of the violators of heterosexism, is mercilessly punished and standardized as Butler indicates. In fact, Carl desires to express what he feels, but “no sounds come out” (Kane, 2006, p. 23). He is mutilated and forced to survive under the phallogocentric mentality. The surveillance on these marginal characters is so strict that even Carl's arm is amputated by Tinker to silence him completely. His ability to write is terminated, and he is censored like various ex-centric authors who constitute a threat to the dominant order. Consequently, the playwright makes the audience feel unease with the norms of the patriarchal order and allows them to interrogate the righteousness of these heteronormative standards through such violent scenes.

The only female character with a name in the play is the sister of Graham, Grace. Unfortunately, she is killed by Tinker in the play, and she also faces violence in this institution when she comes to fetch her dead

² Tinker's damaging Graham's eye by injecting a drug

³ It was given to Rod as a present by Carl.

brother's clothes. When Grace declines to leave after reaching her brother's clothes, a dispute occurs between her and Tinker:

Grace: I'm not leaving

Tinker: You are. You won't find him here.

Grace: I want to stay

Tinker: It's not right

Grace: I'm staying

Tinker: You'll be moved

Grace: I look like him. Say you thought I was a man.

Tinker: I can't protect you.

Grace: I don't want you to. (Kane, 2006, p. 8)

The playwright displays Grace as a powerful female character who can resist even Tinker. As a woman, she does not ask for protection, yet Tinker's statement is worth pondering on. Although the source of the danger in this institution is Tinker himself, he assumes a role as a protector. Thus, the playwright accomplishes to imply that the need for the protection of women by men occurs not because of the so-called weakness of women. On the contrary, the men who have internalized the patriarchal mentality and the punitive force of it are likely to be a real threat to women.

The punitive forces of the male-dominated system are activated following an incestuous love affair between Grace and seemingly dead Graham. Some unseen men whom Kane calls Voices beat Grace with baseball bats until she cannot move or say anything. Similar to Carl, she is also attempted to be subdued and moulded by the patriarchal order. Next, a member of Voices rapes her, which functions to display another normative force in the patriarchal order since as Henderson (2007) underlines, "rape is not simply a matter of violence. Rather, it is a concrete example of gendered violence that reinforces social structuring and gender oppression" (p. 249). After the long-lasting gunfire at the siblings, Tinker reappears on the stage and claims to save Grace by stating "I'm here to save you" (Kane, 2006: p. 27). Nevertheless, Voices and Tinker continue to torture her by using an electric current. Towards the end of the play, Grace becomes completely indifferent and does not react to anything. After observing such haunting experiences of a woman, one can argue that the playwright employs these violent scenes of torture not only to question the fierce standardizing tools of the patriarchal order but also to display the contradictory function of men as saviours and tortures in society.

Women are desired to be submissive and powerless individuals in the patriarchal system so that they do not constitute a sort of threat to constructed superiority. Therefore, they are mostly viewed as gorgeous objects of contemplation (Irigaray, 1985, p. 26). In addition, as Dworkin (1989) puts forward, erotic dances and pornographic contents function to provide a submissive female image, and women are disgraced while male superiority is exercised (p. 25). Similarly, a nameless woman character, starting to dance when Tinker pays for it, becomes an object of the male gaze in the play and functions to reinforce the male power of Tinker who masturbates during her erotic dance. Tinker employs all his power, including his title as a doctor, to influence and obtain that nameless woman. In the end, she is sexually abused and raped like Grace. Although the woman is exposed to sexual violence, the playwright does not provide a name for this female figure. Kane, then, both implies her insignificance in the eyes of society and shows her being an ordinary victim among many others. Despite leading to the feeling of discomfort among the audience as a result of the use of violence, the playwright reveals another dimension of the patriarchal subjugation that is fuelled

by pornographic contents, and she questions the heteronormative force of patriarchy by displaying the terrible experiences of Grace and Carl.

Conclusion

All in all, Sarah Kane sheds light on the subordination of women from different perspectives by employing excessive violence in her plays. In *Blasted*, Kane displays the victimization of women through the interactions of the couple in the hotel room. Moreover, she questions constructed gender roles by subverting the victimizer role of Ian following the intervention of another victimizer, Soldier. In the end, the audience is enabled to witness these violent deeds of the characters and acknowledge patriarchal violence. In *Cleansed*, the playwright displays the fierce normative force of the patriarchal system by focusing on the pathetic experiences of Carl and Grace. Furthermore, she questions the contradictory role of men as protectors and aggressors by examining the attitudes and violent deeds of the barbarous character, Tinker. The playwright also interrogates the objectification of the female body through the interaction between Tinker and the nameless woman.

There is no doubt that the playwright employs various inconceivable forms of violence in *Blasted* and *Cleansed*. Nevertheless, violence in these plays becomes a vehicle for displaying the oppressive aspects of the male-dominated order. More importantly, it enables the audience not only to sympathize with the victims of this order but also to interrogate repressing, subordinating, and inhumane instruments of patriarchy. Therefore, it could be concluded that although *Blasted* and *Cleansed* make the audience feel a great degree of discomfort due to the prevalent violence, they serve to embrace a better future which could be achieved once individuals are aware of the violence that they exert or suffer from within the male-dominated world.

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