

A Semiotic Reading of Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis*

Rusul Sami Jabbar Al-Hasnawi

Receipt date: 15/12/2022

Acceptance date: 28/12/2022

Abstract

The present study aims at analyzing Sarah Kane's *4.48 psychosis* from a semiotic point of view. Sarah Kane is a significant English playwright whose play, *4.48 psychosis*, constitutes a huge turn in her dramatic creation. Kane's *psychosis* is rich with signs that reflect the mental collapse and social isolation of the main character. The process of delivering a meaningful message involves the use of different items or 'codes' that correlate with each other. In the drama this 'code system' involves many aspects like language, body movement, costume, décor, and sound effects, but *Psychosis* neglects the traditional use of these items and relies only on the spoken word. Semiotic analysis, then, seeks to deconstruct the play to its essential parts and see how a play that dispenses with most dramatic aspects can be understood as a play and consequently be performed. *Psychosis* takes the spoken word to be the central element of its construction. However, the language of the play is very powerful, it provides alternative signs to the absence of scenic directions concerning character's movement, stage appearance and inarticulate sounds. Thus, the analysis of the play aims at finding the different theatrical aspects within the language of the text and what type of message they are used to deliver.

Key Words: Semiotic analysis, sign-systems, Sarah Kane, cruelty, *4.48 Psychosis*.

قراءة سيميائية لكتاب سارة كين ٤.٤٨ الذهان

رسل سامي جبار الحسناوي

تاريخ الاستلام: ٢٠٢٢/١٢/١٥

تاريخ القبول: ٢٠٢٢/١٢/٢٨

الخلاصة :

تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى تحليل ذهان سارة كين ٤.٤٨ من وجهة نظر سيميائية. سارة كين كاتبة مسرحية إنجليزية بارزة، تمثل مسرحيتها "٤.٤٨ الذهان" تحولاً كبيراً في إبداعها الدرامي. ذهان كين غني بالعلامات التي تعكس الانهيار العقلي والعزلة الاجتماعية للشخصية الرئيسية. تتضمن عملية إيصال رسالة ذات معنى استخدام عناصر أو "رموز" مختلفة ترتبط ببعضها البعض. في الدراما، يتضمن "نظام الكود" هذا العديد من الجوانب مثل اللغة، وحركة الجسم، والأزياء، والديكور، والمؤثرات الصوتية، لكن الذهان يهمل الاستخدام التقليدي لهذه العناصر ويعتمد فقط على الكلمة المنطوقة. يسعى التحليل السيميائي إذن إلى تفكيك المسرحية إلى أجزائها الأساسية ورؤية كيف يمكن فهم المسرحية التي تستغني عن معظم الجوانب الدرامية على أنها مسرحية وبالتالي يتم تأديتها. يأخذ الذهان الكلمة المنطوقة لتكون العنصر المركزي في بنائها. إلا أن لغة المسرحية قوية جداً، فهي توفر إشارات بديلة لغياب التوجيهات المشهدة المتعلقة بحركة الشخصية، والظهور المسرحي، والأصوات غير المفصلة. ومن ثم فإن تحليل المسرحية يهدف إلى معرفة الجوانب المسرحية المختلفة داخل لغة النص ونوع الرسالة التي تستخدم في إيصالها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التحليل السيميائي، أنظمة الإشارة، سارة كين، القسوة، ٤.٤٨ الذهان.

1. Introduction

Semiotics can be defined as "a science dedicated to the study of the production of meaning in society. As such it is equally concerned with processes of signification and with those of communication, i.e. the means whereby meanings are both generated and exchanged" (Elam, 1980, p. 1). The core idea of semiotics is that while the different systems of meaning are generated in society, the actual messages and texts produced in life and art are subject to these systems of meanings. The field of semiotics is very wide and complex that it cannot be considered a discipline. At the same time, it is difficult to regard it as a method because it is quite heterogeneous. Semiotics then, as Keir Elam claims, is a "multidisciplinary science" that is not identified with exact characteristics, rather, its method and characteristics will change according to the field that semiotics studies. Yet, the changeable features of semiotics are brought together by one decisive aspect, that is "a better understanding of our own meaning-bearing behaviour" (Elam, 1980, p. 1).

The science of Semiotics started first with the publication of De Saussure's book *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), the generations that appeared after his book focused on the linguistic sign of the text. De Saussure's ideas were developed by scholars and linguists such as C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, C. S. Pierce, and significantly, the Prague school. Jan Mukařovský of Prague school is especially noted for using Semiotics to understand artistic creation of the theatre.

In the three or four decades following the Prague school, Semiotics saw great advances, especially in the 1970s and 1980s. That came as a result for the consistent efforts given for the understanding and theorizing of the concept of *the sign* by thinkers like Umberto Eco's *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976), Julia Kristeva's *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (1980), Patrice Pavis's *Languages of the stage: essays in the semiology of the theatre* (1982), Thomas Sebeok's *The sign & its masters* (1989), and Marco de Marinis's *The Semiotics of Performance* (1993).

Theatre semiotics formed an attraction to scholarly works during the 1980s and after. The interest in semiotics went hand in hand with the progress in recent writing and theorizing on literary criticism. The extensive study on semiotics resulted in studies that created 'models' for the analysis of the dramatic text, theatre performance, or both. Like *The Semiotics of Theater and Drama* by Keir Elam (1980), *The Semiotics of Performance* by Marco De Marinis (1982), *The*

Semiotics of Theater by Erika Fischer-Lichte (1983), *Theater Semiotics* by Marvin Carlson (1990), *A Semiotics of the Dramatic Text* by Susan Melrose (1994), and *Theater as a Sign System* by Elaine Aston and George Savona (1991). Only a few of the models set in those books is suitable and applicable to semiotic analysis of drama. They either narrow the analysis too much and focus on comparatively fewer elements, such as the focus on language in Melrose's *A Semiotics of the Dramatic Text*, or they took the analysis on quite broad level like what Keir Elam did in his *The Semiotics of Theater and Drama*. However, the model that is chosen for this study is the one set by Tadeusz Kowzan (1968).

1.2. Sarah Kane's Drama and Kowzan's Model

Sarah Kane's drama is especially crafted to communicate ideas beyond itself, and when it comes to cruelty in her plays, she presents it in multiple ways ranging from the most overtly visual and physical in *Blasted*, *Cleansed*, and *Phaedra's Love* to the most covert and linguistically described in *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis*. In each play, action and dialogue along with other means cooperate to transfer the horror in her writing. She produces a theatre that engages spectators and makes them experience different emotions and attitudes while watching. A theatre like this has to shock in order to influence. Thus, in all her plays, characters exhibit shocking cruelty against themselves and against each other.

Cruelty, then, appears in actions, in language, in body appearance, it is everywhere on the stage reflected and manifested in almost everything that constitutes the play. The semiotic analysis of a play is directed to the elements which construct the dramatic work. Brick by brick, it deconstructs the play to what it is made of and what each element of these means in the work as a whole. Therefore, semiotic analysis is inseparable from the notion of cruelty in Kane's drama.

Sarah Kane's drama is to be analyzed according to the model proposed by Kowzan for semiotic analysis. Despite the similarities between his model and that by Fischer-Lichte, his model is more fitting for Kane's drama. On one hand, the elements according to which he analyses the play are precisely found in Kane's work, and on the other hand, his model does not direct the analysis mainly to performance. Rather, his model is applicable to both of the text and the performance.

Kowzan distinguishes thirteen systems of signs that he reduces to four or five for "more detailed classification". These systems of sign include word, tone, facial mime, gesture, body movement, make-up, hair-style, costume, accessory, décor, lighting, music, and sound effects. These thirteen systems could be, according to Kowzan, reduced into four or five systems that include the spoken text, the expression of body, the external appearance, the aspect of scenic place (appearance of the stage), and the inarticulate sounds. He also notes that when considering the performance of the play, the director is the other almighty master, right next to the author (Kowzan, 1968, p. 72).

Kowzan writes that among all arts, the theatre is rich field for semiotic study. For example, the way word is pronounced by the actor, it could refer to an object, person, feeling, etc. or it expresses a point that the author wants. In all cases, what determines how the word is perceived is the actor's intonation and his way of manipulating the pronunciation. "How many ways of pronouncing the words 'I love you' can mean passion as well as indifference, irony as well as pity" (Kowzan, 1968, p. 56). Not just that, but also the body language, mime, gesture, the attitude, and everything used in the play can change the meaning of received words.

The languages employed for dramatic communication vary from one text to another, it might be expanded to include all theatrical systems of communication that Kowzan referred to, or it might be reduced to the use of linguistic items alone. Dramatic information can be conveyed by any or all of the systems involved, it is simply translatable from one kind of message into another. This communication between the sign and its interpretation is not necessarily respective to the physical qualities of the signs involved: for instance, the information 'night falls' can be demonstrated by changing the light, a verbal explanation or, gesturally in oriental performance. The theatre has traditionally been founded on this flexibility of informational presentation (Elam, 1980, p. 35).

The model begins with examining the spoken text. On this level, it analyzes the use of word in relation to other sign systems, how the language is used in the play and for what purpose, and what each linguistic unit indicates about the speaker or the play as a whole. The word or spoken text can sometimes be analyzed according to purely linguistic theories such as speech acts, cooperation maxims, and deixis considering that the linguistic sign is more scholarly studied than any of the other sign systems (Kowzan, 1968, p. 62).

The second level of Kowzan's model is concerned with the expression of body i.e. the movement of the actor/character on stage or in the text. This level analyzes the physical actions of character rather than speaking. It examines the gestural as well as the proxemics signs. While gesture refers to the movement of body, proxemics stands for the movement in relation to other bodies on stage, the interaction of bodies, and the distance between them. Body expression is not considered solely for its own sake, rather it is studied in relation to other signs to construct the features of characters and understand their personalities and the relations that bind them (Kowzan, 1968, p. 63-65).

The third level of analysis is concerned with the external appearance of character or actor, this level focuses on whatever relevant to the body appearance, especially hair, costume, make-up, and accessories. Kowzan mentions accessories as elements in the body appearance that can also be classified as part of stage appearance. These are everything that completes the costume or the decoration, like flower, cigarette, watch, handkerchief, bottle of champagne, etc. the term 'props' is usually used to describe this category.

The fourth level is the appearance of the stage, it focuses on those items that constitute the set of the stage; this level analyzes the décor, the prop, and the lighting. The decoration represents "the geographical place (landscape with pagodas, the sea, mountains), the social place (a public square, laboratory, kitchen, cafe) or both at once" (Kowzan, 1968, p. 69). The appearance can be detailed and richly described and constructed or it can be reduced to very few elements.

The fifth level of analysis is concerned with the inarticulate sounds, this part consists of music and sound effects. For Kowzan, music should be analyzed according to musical methods of analysis, since every type of music indicates different message and creates different mode than the other. Some genres of music can signify certain atmosphere or a specific place or action, such as the military march:

[a]mong the numerous uses that stage-directors make of music, let us take the example of the musical theme that accompanies the entry of every character and becomes a sign (at the second degree) of each of them, or that of the musical motif that, when added to the retrospective scenes, signifies the present-past contrast (Kowzan, 1968, p. 71).

Sound effects lie between music and words, some sounds are produced naturally during the performance or in the text such as the noise of accessories or the sound of footsteps, like any

other sign these should not be focused on unless they signify something beyond themselves: Sounds produced in the theatre can indicate the time (the chime of a clock), the weather (rain), the place (noises of a big city, bird-cries, noises of pet-animals), the movement (sound of a car approaching or drawing away), a solemn or worried atmosphere (heavy bell, sirens), they can be the sign of the most varied phenomena and circumstances (Kowzan, 1968, p. 72).

Significantly, Kowzan divides signs first into thirteen categories. Then he divides them into five main categories that are spoken text and body expression, external appearance, stage appearance, and inarticulate sounds. However, the third division that he goes with is the one depended on in this study, which is dividing signs into auditive signs and visual signs. Kowzan offers different divisions of signs in drama, because the sign systems change accordingly from one play to another (Kowzan, 1968, p. 73).

These different sign systems are not set to work independently from each other. every sign system collaborates with the others in one piece of work. The sign systems are unified with the theme, plot, character, and other literary elements that may rely on more than one of them. For instance, the theme of cruelty is a dominant one in Kane's writing, which brings the fact that different sign systems reflect this theme and contribute to it in the play. The nature of cruelty and its forceful control over the human world influenced Sarah Kane to occupy herself with it. For that, a reader can give her work its due only after understanding the notions of cruelty that formed it, as this notion is reflected by almost all sign systems in Kane's plays.

1.3. Experimenting with Form in *4.48 Psychosis*

Sarah Kane suffered from long intervals of depression. During 1998, the intensity of her depression maximized enough to take her to the mental hospital. Instead of being cured, however, she ultimately gave up to depression and hanged herself inside the hospital in February 1999. *4.48 Psychosis* is her last play, it was written during the time she was receiving treatment in the hospital. *4.48 Psychosis* was received by her agent, Mel Kenyon, shortly before her death, and it was performed posthumously in the Royal Court's Theatre Upstairs in June 2000 (Aston, 2003, p. 78).

After Kane's death, the theatre critics were divided into two parties: one examined her entire work in the light of her suicide, the other lamented her death, but refused to even consider the connection between her death and her work (Singer, 2004, p. 160). Among those who joined

the first group is Kane's agent who commented "I don't think she was depressed, I think it was deeper than that. I think she felt something more like existential despair which is what makes many artists tick" (as cited in Gentleman, 1999). The second group insists on discussing Kane's work outside of the limitation imposed by her suicide or a long journey with depression, the critic Alex Sierz belongs to this group as he states: "the central problem with Kane's work is that when she was alive, the power with her stage images tended to detract from the depth of her writing; now that she's dead, the fact that she killed herself threatens once more to obscure her achievement" (Sierz, 2001, p. 90).

Kane's last play is a daring and deep step towards the experimental and absurdist theatre. 4.48 *Psychosis* alters the dramatic structure; there is no setting, no identification of who speaks, and almost no stage directions except few lines that mostly refer to silence, even the number of speakers is not given. The text begins with "a very long silence," and several minutes pass before a speaker says "I had a night in which everything was revealed to me. How can I speak again?" (Kane, 2001, p. 205). But the voice does speak for about an hour later, yet, the speech is written without mentioning who or how many speakers are there. Thus, the director of such play is obliged to decide on the décor, appearance, gender and age of speakers, and combines with that the decision of how many actors, and who should speak which words to whom (Cohn, 2008). As concerning the plot or progression of events, it is safe to say that these are not to be found in 4.48 *Psychosis* in the traditional sense. In fact, the text itself consists of fragmentary speeches about different subjects:

4.48 *Psychosis* is a collage of monologues, pieces of dialogues, medicine subscriptions, suicide plans, thoughts, feelings, psychiatric tests, symptoms, and diagnoses. As for the dialogues we are left in the dark to whom they are directed, whether it be to a clinical doctor or herself. The central persona, anyway, is a suicidal patient taking leave of this life (De Vos, 2011).

When 4.48 *Psychosis* was performed at the Royal Court, it was James Macdonald that directed it, the same director of the original performance of *Blasted* and *Cleansed*. "Macdonald split the play's voice into three: two women and one man. The three voices, in part, representing the division of a person into victim/ perpetrator/ bystander" (Greig, 2001, p. xvii). Yet, this decision is completely personal one since there is no definite clue in the text of how many participants there are, or about the manner in which the exchange is carried out. "The script is composed of free-floating text divided into a series of fragments. Only six of them are introduced by hyphens,

but no information is provided regarding the interlocutors in these apparent dialogues” (Delgado-García, 2012, 238-39). In order to uncover and artistically describe the human experience of suffering, sadness, self-harm, and suicide, the play develops several undefined personae:

For a period of her depression, she found herself waking up every day at 4:48 a.m. she chose this moment, the hour of pain and darkness, and made it the title of *4.48 Psychosis*. In fact, the material of this play had arisen from Sarah's experience with depression during 1998, which continued and grew worse in the hospital she committed suicide in (Greig, 2001, pp. xiii, xv).

Kane manages to produce *4.48 Psychosis* while dispensing with most semiotic systems that constitutes integral part in her former plays. Instead of assigning roles, creating a setting, and giving stage directions, she only gives one continuous speech that (a monologue) that describes several subject matters. Thus, in order to decipher the theatrical elements that are found in the play, the analysis is focused on the speech itself and the different signs it signifies.

Therefore, the nature of the text makes one wonder how could a play like this be performed? Or could it really be considered as dramatic text? Questions that must be answered in relation to semiotic theory that deconstruct the play to its constituents. The first sign system (the spoken text) is present in the play, but character's body movement, appearance, stage appearance and inarticulate sounds or sound effects are all absent. Yet, their absence is covered and substituted by the intense and detailed construction of language. By language, the speaker can describe any form of stage and make it seen by the audience's imagination, and this is what Kane does in *Psychosis*.

1.3.1. The Linguistic Signs

Kane's anonymous character uses the linguistic sign to expose the suffering of depression, the death-wish and suicidal thoughts as well as the cruelty of the psychiatric establishment. The speaker is apparently a patient that speaks of fragmentary ideas and emotions to explain how disappointed and neglected s/he is. Cruelty, here, is directed to oneself, it appears in self-mutilation and self-harm by suicidal and oppressive thinking. Kane provides the effects of cruelty in existential manners, i.e. without providing enough details to house it. The audience members find themselves face to face with a damaged person without knowing who damaged him/her or how.

Readers and viewers are subjected to a disjointed dialogue between a therapist, psychiatrist, or doctor and a reportedly unwell patient in *4.48 Psychosis*. Levels of consciousness and non-consciousness are shown in the speech. The drama as a whole is a compelling exploration and exaggeration of a wounded and disordered mental condition where the patient desperately clings to rationality and normalcy. The speaker's words and the doctor's treatment of the speaker both vocally illustrate the play's brutality and show the helplessness of the patient. However, the play is only violent on an emotional and psychological level. The speech mentions cruel behaviors and circumstances that the audience is most likely familiar with, which heightens the psychological impact of the play.

The feelings and memories are communicated by words in the play, but these human experiences are not given coherently. The viewer or reader would face a challenge in interpreting the linguistic sign of *4.48 Psychosis* since "the self is no longer a direct agent of meaning, but is constituted as an effect of language, space and movement" (Gritzner, 2008, p. 336). The play combines a collapse of language with a breakdown in the speaker's reality. Meaning is blurred, intention stays ambiguous, and the message is sent in fragments. However, "when people put fragments of information together, the appropriateness of a result often depends on the ability to focus attention toward one aspect of the information" (Tindemans, 1984, p. 128). That is why Kane's experimental play presents a true challenge to grasp linguistic meaning, because *4.48 Psychosis* is a play of voices rather than characters, its language is a complex set of messages that reveal multiple feelings and attitudes of its speaker/s (Gritzner, 2008, p. 336).

The only stage directions in *4.48 Psychosis* – only four directions repeated– involve the use of silence like "(Silence.)", "(A long silence.)" or "(A very long silence.)" which are used a lot and in different places, and the direction "(Looks.)" used only once (p. 217). The play opens with "a very long silence" followed by a voice repeating the words "But you have friends," then followed by another silence. The silence in the play functions mostly as an indicator of delay in delivering the following lines. Kane does not leave any commands or designations for her characters and the manner with which they speak (Chramosilová, 2013, p. 23) . Thus, the silence is interpreted and used freely by the readers and the directors like the other elements in the play:

when readers and audience members experience silences within such a detailed passage, they become inclined to include their own personal details...identifications become possible when readers and audience members participate in the provocative pauses and silences that Kane

spreads liberally throughout her text. Although the play does not clearly specify a setting, stage directions, or character names, there are approximately fifty "silences," "long silences," or "very long silences," which have added weight within a theatrical performance (Tycker, 2008, p. 26).

Here, the employment of silence brings to the mind the method of Harold Pinter and his use of silence on stage. Like Kane, Pinter succeeds in fusing the imaginative with real psychological experiences. The end of a spoken exchange is frequently followed by silence, which is not necessarily a mark for a failure in communication. Silence is part of any exchange and it is, according to Pinter, a necessary part that reveals the true nature that we cannot fully express: "We communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid, and what takes place is continual evasion, desperate rear-guard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves" (Pinter as cited in Leslie Kane, 1984, p. 132).

The voice of *psychosis* has a lot to communicate and no amount of words or subjects can sum up the agony and fury s/he has experienced. This explains the repeated use of silence that cut through the speaker's monologue. The voice is entirely objecting the imposed authority of family, religion, and institutions of psychiatric treatment, s/he blames the depression on these forms of system and reveals the hatred against people at different times. "There is verbal violence in the play even if it is addressed to one of the character's own voices" (kutluk, 2008, pp. 5-6). The speaker or the voice of the play uses the vulgar language to show their disgust and agony of every participant in the creation of this psychological suffering, "Fuck you for rejecting me by never being there [...] for bleeding the fucking love and life out of me" (p. 13).

The play reveals a form of cruelty that is perceived from the suffering of voice and elicited from his/her memories. The significance of artistic elaboration and exposition appears here. The writer draws on her own experience, passion, memories, psychological trauma and disorders, negative and positive views, etc. She shatters all that and rearranges it within a dramatic experience of agony and torture. She offers a play about pain and cruelty with an ambiguous speaker, by that she makes the viewer capture the theatrical experience as something to identify with and not only to witness. This resembles Artaud's concept of theatre when he wants to create "a language beyond thought and gesture by means of cruelty" (Baraniecka, 2013, p. 12). The voice uses language to express the deep pain that s/he feels and that they identify with every painful experience felt by others:

- I gassed the Jews, I killed the Kurds, I bombed the Arabs, I fucked small children while they begged for mercy, the killing fields are mine, everyone left the party because of me, I'll suck your fucking eyes out send them to your mother in a box and when I die I'm going to be reincarnated as your child only fifty times worse and as mad as all fuck I'm going to make your life a living fucking hell I REFUSE I REFUSE I REFUSE LOOK AWAY FROM ME
- It's all right
- LOOK AWAY FROM ME
- It's all right. I'm here.
- Look away from me. (p. 272)

It is significant how the use of personal pronoun 'I' is not anymore a direct reference to the speaker. The voice mixes his/her own actions with that of political and military crimes of gassing and murdering people. Whether the speaker in the play is Kane's own voice or a dramatic take on her own life; it has to be considered, as much as possible, an independent existence from its author. The voice in the play claims "I write for the / dead the unborn" (p. 213), yet, the voice identifies itself with those aggressors and murderers who commit atrocities: "I gassed the Jews, I killed the Kurds, I bombed the Arabs" (p. 272). The "I" that the voice presumes clearly extends over the speaker's self, it takes the role of "victim, perpetrator, and bystander" (p. 231). Whether it grows out of a feeling of survivor's guilt or an exaggerated imagination, the claim of the voice is identified with different inhuman atrocities in history. Thus, "The 'I' to whom Kane refers has been depicted as a spectator who [has been] exposed to inconceivable violence, [and] has transferred culpability to him/herself" (Tycer, 2008, p. 31).

Guilt is understood as a result of the transgression of social norms which are deeply rooted within the self (Ovaska, 2016, p. 16). The experiences of guilt in the quote above extends from feeling responsible for killing people with gas and bombing them to feeling responsible for guests leaving a party. The self-accusations then change into serious threats with a direct order "look away from me" (p. 227). On one hand, this clarifies that the dialogue could be between patient and therapist because the other speaker says "it's all right" (p. 227), and on the other, it shows a contradiction between the speech acts performed here, since the act of speaking (usually demands a listener) but the order wants this listener to turn away.

Significantly, the exchange is not identified with any names, identification is something essential for dialogue in drama, because "It functions as a sign of the underlying turn-taking system and informs the reader of the mutually actual speaker" (Fischer-Lichte, 1992, p. 138).

These lines are among few exchanges in the play that are identified with hyphens, the rest of the play gave the speech without any sign for turn-taking. "[T]he alternation of names indicates the simulation of a situation of direct communication" (Fischer-Lichte, 1992, p. 138). This simulation, however, is missing from the play as signs of turn-taking are missing. Thus, when the writer abandons this formal way for labeling speech, she creates a text that could be comprehended and performed in any way that readers or directors understand and find possible. This fact shows that the only possible stage that could comprehend *Psychosis* exactly as the writer wrote it is one in listeners' or readers' minds. The play is filled with empty slots that could only be filled by viewers' or readers' imagination.

Language is used here to show that self-harm enables him/her to secure their existence and creates their connection to reality; "beautiful pain that says I exist" (p. 232). The voice in 4.48 *Psychosis* is overwhelmed with pain and self-mutilation. Yet, only extreme measures of violence can stop them from perusing more physical damage, but s/he barely succeeds in stopping the urge for pain. The voice does not believe in any benefits from stopping it and asks: "How do I stop?" (p. 226). Laurens De Vos suggests that "The life-affirming quality of cruelty and pain had been widely overlooked by critics" (2011). Cruelty and suffering do confirm for the person that they are alive and are going through human experience (pain), that they are still alive.

The violence in this play is communicated by emphasizing the inescapable reality and the hopelessness of the speaker's situation. The fragmentation of language reflects the fragmentation of the ideas and feelings of the speaker. The speaker suffers an emotional loss, as a depressed person, the loss of lover emerges as an unbearable grief. Kane says "When you love obsessively, you lose the sense of self-identity and if you lose the object of your love, you have no resources to fall back on; It can completely destroy you" (as cited in Sierz, 2001, p. 116). The character seems to undergo huge pain because of that loss and wants to be liberated from it in any way, even if it is torture:

Cut out my tongue
tear out my hair
cut off my limbs
but leave me my love
I would rather have lost my legs
pulled out my teeth
gougued out my eyes
than lost my love (p. 230).

Apparently, the speaker is tormented by him/herself. Moreover, the speaker explains that the loss of love was as damaging as having lost one's own limbs. The speaker's urge for self-mutilation is something repeated throughout the play. This is the only way out of the psychological pain; it is the only way the internal torment of thoughts could be broken only to be replaced by bigger torment. The play does not offer boundaries because it resembles a narrated inner speech or stream of consciousness. Thus, the audience is given an image of suffering that mixes both the external image with the inner impressions: "In this respect, there is artistry in the reflection of brutality in *4.48*" (Kutluk, 2008, p. 6). The shattered form of the play reflects its meaning of suffering and hopelessness. The language is carefully constructed by Kane to show that the character of *4.48 Psychosis* is on the edge of collapse:

- Have you made any plans?
- Take an overdose, slash my wrists then hang myself.
- All those things together?
- It couldn't possibly be misconstrued as a cry for help.
(Silence.)
- It wouldn't work.
- Of course it would.
(Silence.)
- It wouldn't work.
- Of course it would. (p. 210)

Self-harming is a consistent aspect in Kane's drama, it is a form of cruelty directed to one's self. In *4.48 Psychosis*, it appears as a way for linking the separated and disconnected mind and body (Saunders, 2002a, p. 114). In a different exchange, the speaker says that s/he has cuts their own arm and when asked about the reason the voice answers "because it feels fucking great. Because it feels fucking amazing" (p. 217). Moments of physical suffering, then, give such a short span of union between the character's mind and body, this moment is also achieved by Hippolytus at the end of *Phaedra's Love* (Kim, 2013, p. 72). Before Hippolytus dies, he pronounces his last wish "if there could have been more moments like this" (Kane, 2001, p. 103). Suffering has pulled him out of the hypnotizing life he had before. Thus, these characters do not look at pain as normal physical agony. In fact, they need to create great amount of pain to create a distraction from anxiety, stress, or fear even if they do not feel relieved by such action:

The physical pains that Kane's characters pursue are a way of giving expression to what they actually feel emotionally, seeking a momentary

unification. Rather than separating the role of the body and corporeality outside of the subject, Kane's plays position the self within the space of its body through the masochistic fantasy that manifests the characters' yearning for a cohesive identity (Kim, 2013, p. 72).

Kane attacks and criticizes the way mentally ill people are treated. She raises questions on the adequacy of the psychiatric establishment by portraying the speaker as a patient. Many utterances in the play refer to mental houses and psychiatrists. These so-called cures provide pain and increase in anxiety instead of healing. The speaker mentions those medications saying "Fluoxetine hydrochloride, trade name Prozac, 20mg, increased to 40mg. Insomnia, erratic appetite, (weight loss 14kgs,) severe anxiety, unable to reach orgasm, homicidal thoughts towards several doctors and drug manufacturers. Discontinued" (p. 224). The list goes on and the monologue keeps mentioning the harsh treatment and anxiety they have experienced in the mental house with a clear rejection of all; "Refused all further treatment" (p. 225):

- I don't understand why you did that. [cut his/her arm]
- Then ask.
- Did it relieve the tension?
(A long silence)
- Can I look?
- No.
- I'd like to look, to see if it's infected.
- No.
(Silence)
- I thought you might do this. Lots of people do. It relieves the tension.
- Have you ever done it?
- ...
- No. Far too fucking sane and sensible. I don't know where you read that, but it does not relieve the tension.
(Silence)
-
- Why did you cut your arm?
- Because it feels great, because it feels fucking amazing.
(p. 216-217)

It appears that the doctor has no clue about the nature of his patient's suffering. The number of silences and his wrong theories about her action indicate this failure of treatment. Psychiatric establishment fails to cure the patient because they deal with depression as a mental disease that is cured by medication. The voice of the patient in *4.48 Psychosis* is a direct criticism to the doctors and the way they have dealt with him/her: "Inscrutable doctors, sensible doctors, way-out doctors, doctors you'd think were fucking patients if you weren't shown proof otherwise, ask the

same questions, put words in my mouth, offer chemical cures for congenital anguish and cover each other's arses" (p. 209). Doctors treat the mentally ill person as someone similar to a regular patient whose problem can be solved by doses of medication. In fact, the mentally ill cannot be treated this way due to their excessive need for emotional attention and not only physical cures.

Kane manages to add an air of comedy even to a dark play like *4.48 Psychosis*. The voice of patient narrates a comic dream: "I went to the doctor's and she gave me eight minutes to live. I'd been sitting in the fucking waiting room half an hour" (p. 221). This dark comedy rises from the difference between what is expected by the audience after hearing 'eight minutes', and what the joke makes them remember concerning doctors and waiting rooms (Urban, 2008, p. 151-152).

Kane's joke serves to unite the audience at the expense of a commonly experienced, incompetent medical bureaucracy. Ironically, life crawls along despite the very institution that is meant to prolong it. Even though Kane's sense of humour emerges from agony, she expresses herself in terms of disarmingly everyday frustrations (Tyser, 2008, p. 34).

Sarah Kane brings her audience to focus on suffering instead of concentrating on the story around it by presenting the speech alone, without anything to contextualize it. What she does in *4.48 Psychosis* is "stripping cruelties from their contexts so that they seem pitiable, sensational, or inevitable, rather than contingent, avoidable, or explicable" (Krasner, 2016, p. 497). The patient explains his/her pain in their death wishes and self-mutilating, as well as the cruelty of the psychiatric establishment. The character gives spectators a very detailed description of the pain of depression and how inescapable it is:

I am sad/ I feel that the future is hopeless and that things cannot improve/ I am bored and dissatisfied with everything/... I used to be able to cry but now I am beyond tears/ I have lost interest in other people/ I can't make decisions/ I can't eat/ I can't sleep/ I can't think/ I cannot overcome my loneliness, my fear, my disgust/...I am terrified of medication.../ I cannot be alone/ I cannot be with others (pp. 206-207).

The pain of depression escalates until the character decides to commit suicide. S/he chooses a particular moment for that which is 4:48 because it is the moment when the speaker restores the sense of self, and witnesses an awareness of the cruelty of the world and people. The clarity at this moment culminates in the character's knowledge that this world is no place for him/her and that its cruelty is simply unbearable:

At 4.48/ when sanity visits/ for one hour and twelve minutes I am in my right mind./ When it has passed I shall be gone again,/ a fragmented puppet, a grotesque fool./ Now I am here I can see myself/ but when I am charmed by vile delusions of happiness,/ the foul magic of this engine of sorcery,/ I cannot touch my essential self. (p. 229)

The personal and impersonal references are mixed as the speaker goes back and forth between the depression and the psychiatric oppression. The character is overwhelmed by shame and shaming, stopping and being stopped. Much of the discourse in the play is about deprivation and stoppage in vital activities such as: "I can't eat/ I can't sleep / I can't think / I cannot love" (pp. 206-7). Thus, language is used to reveal great pain and difficult experiences with the psychiatric institution that takes the life out of this character, as it took the life of its author.

1.3.1. Visual and Musical Signs

The play mixes the sense of depression with a description of the place. The voice speaks about having friends then suddenly shifts to a psycho-spatial description:

a consolidated consciousness resides in a darkened banqueting hall near the ceiling of a mind whose floor shifts as ten thousand cockroaches when a shaft of light enters as all thoughts unite in an instant of accord body no longer expellant as the cockroaches comprise a truth which no one ever utters (p. 205).

4.48 *Psychosis* creates a fear of aggressive environment that can be in itself a reason behind depression and anxiety, like the oppressive mental hospital the speaker attacks. It mixes the emotional anguish with the environment surrounding it (Krasner, 2016, p. 495). Kane commented on mixing between setting and psychological state:

I'm writing a play called 4.48 *Psychosis* and it's got similarities with *Crave*, but it's different. It's about psychotic breakdown and what happens to a person's mind when the barriers which distinguish between reality and different forms of imagination completely disappear. So that you no longer know the difference between your waking life and your dream life. And also you no longer know where you stop, and the world starts (as cited in Sierz, 2012, p. 208).

Thus, the mind of the speaker lives in a realm different from the body, this results in a self-split and chaotic state of thinking and hallucination. The aspect of self-split is represented in the text differently from how performance would represent it. In the text, there are no description of character's appearance, race, gender, or anything that the eye depends on to distinguish somebody. There is voice that speaks ideas and trigger certain emotion in the reader. When it

comes to performance, the body becomes a must. After all, "the actor is an icon of the character being performed: the actor's body is, or pretends to be, the body of [...] character" (De toro, 1995, p. 77). Thus, the split represented by words and an anonymous speaker. On theatre, audience will perceive the monologue as something that torments the actual specific figure in the live performance in front of them. The focus will be on the figure other than the word itself. This also implies that performance will deviate from the text in providing something that the text overlooks: *the character's body and the gestural sign*.

4.48 *Psychosis* is a play written for performance, but there are many parts in it where the play appears to work typographically but not theatrically. As the play progresses, the words grow lesser and the whiteness of the paper grows bigger. Also, the spacing of lines changes every time the speech is altered or the subject differed, this could be seen as an indicator of different speakers, but it also can refer to a fragmentary monologue of one speaker. While this is left to the reader's interpretation, in performance this has to be determined by the choice of actors.

On page (208) of *Psychosis*, there are different numbers broken on the paper with wide spaces between them vertically and horizontally with no comment on what this means, and the last page has only two short lines on the top and the bottom of the page. The page has "twenty-one words in all (rather than the three hundred words that cram themselves onto a crowded page). This is a powerful image, but one for which there is no obvious visual equivalent in performance" (Parry, 2003, p. 160).

Kane's 4.48 *Psychosis* does not refer to setting, but the speech could be interpreted as to refer to a mental hospital. Yet, there is narrowness in directions as concerning the set and appearance as well as speaker identification because the play is more like "a collage of poetic fragments concerning suicide" (Kutluk, 2008, p. 5). However, these fragments are not put together randomly, since there is in the speech some strong visual qualities that make up for the absence of stage directions, especially the stage appearance. "[T]he places which [...] *Psychosis* inhabit more closely resemble mindscapes which the director and / or designer are free to conjure with" (Saunders, 2002a, p. 115). Also, some of the lines in the play could be interpreted as stage directions other than speech. Such as "hatch open/ stark light", (p. 240) and "black snow falls" (p. 244).

When 4.48 *Psychosis* was staged for the first time the stage appearance consisted of the white floor, a table with a white top, two chairs, three actors and a mirror that goes up on the

entire back wall of the stage. In this way, the audience could see the actors as they lie down or turn their backs without missing anything. The director, James Macdonald, wrote the list of scattered numbers on the table so they would be seen through the mirrors (Chadderton as cited in Singer, 2004, p. 159). The set, then, was different from the mental scape created by the text, the text of *4.48 Psychosis* encourages a mental stage created by imagination:

if the stage is an empty space that the actor states a forest and subsequently refers to a palace, a room, or a dungeon, then this empty space becomes the palace, the room, or the dungeon in the eyes of audience ... whatever can be perceived by the actor's words can thus be perceived by the audience (Fischer-Lichte, 1992, p. 21).

This mental stage does not disappear when the stage is decorated, rather, they both come to life since the character speaks of memories and events or wishes that can only be imagined and not performed, like "I gassed the Jews, I killed the Kurds ... when I die I'm going to be reincarnated as your child only fifty times worse and as mad as all fuck I'm going to make your life a living fucking hell" (p. 272).

Kane makes no restrictions upon the freedom of interpretation of the reader, performer, or director. She wrote a text that could be staged in a variety of ways. One can't see two similar performances of *4.48 Psychosis*. When James Macdonald directed the premiere of the play on 23 June 2000, he chose three actors one man and two women, but this decision is personal and not obligatory, another director could select a different number of actors. "The point is that we do the choosing; at a very fundamental level Kane's text of *4.48 Psychosis* keeps our interpretative options open" (Parry, 2003, p. 159). The disparity between the text and the performance leads to the creation of different characterization and interpretation of the same speaking voice:

Kane's work, *4.48 Psychosis* appears in print as a series of poetic explorations, abandoning the more traditional use of language in dramatic literature to determine how a playtext ought to be staged. As a result, *4.48 Psychosis* invites its performers to use whatever aesthetic means they might want in order to realize the piece theatrically, so that it ultimately becomes a paradigmatic example of post-dramatic theatre (Roberts, 2015, p. 94).

Like Kane's *Crave*, *4.48 Psychosis* has poetic qualities. The text "is acutely dependent on rhythm, verbal repetition and cyclic thematic patterning, but also innately musical" (Ashly, 2016). The text in many parts has the typographical form of free verse poem:

I have no desire for death

No suicide ever had
Watch me vanish
Watch me
Vanish
Watch me
Watch me
Watch (p. 244)

Kane mixes the verse with prose in this play, she manipulates the pattern of writing to create the form of a poem, thus the shape of construction is as important as the meaning of words (Worthen, 2005, p. 190-191). Constructing the play in the form of free-verse helps to draw attention to the rhythm of thoughts and feelings that the voice expresses:

I dread the loss of her I've never touched
love keeps me a slave in a cage of tears
I gnaw my tongue with which to her I can never speak
I miss a woman who was never born
I kiss a woman across the years that say we shall never meet

Everything passes
Everything perishes
Everything palls

my thought walks away with a killing smile
leaving discordant anxiety which roars in my soul

No hope No hope No hope No hope No hope No hope No hope

A song for my loved one, touching her absence
the flux of her heart, the splash of her smile (p. 218)

The language here is tuned with Kane's emotions: 'perishes, palls, killing, discordant, anxiety, roars, absence, flux, splash'. Repetition is dominant; words run again and again in her speech that repeat themselves in endless loop. The voice states "I dread.../I gnaw.../I miss.../I kiss... Everything passes/Everything perishes/Everything palls". However, these extracts balance between sounds and silences, long and short utterances, and regular and irregular beats. "Alongside the constant repetitions of sound, word and phrase, it confronts the ear on so many different levels" (Weate, 2012).

It is true that the text does not provide descriptions of character's movement, yet the texts give us spoken language which requires an actor and adjusted body and face expression to suit the language and perform it, at the same time the action and appearance of actors are all found in their narrative. However, the texts also contain highly visual descriptions of places, colors, and

decoration that help to transfer the real staging to people's imagination. While the sound effects usually found in Kane's drama and that help to send immensely important message in the play, they are substituted here by appealingly musical utterances.

Thus, *4.48 Psychosis* has very disturbing content and a depressive aura of hopelessness and suicide, but the writer manages to put that in an appealing rhythm that the listener would keep following the lines for, and in a very rich emotional description that captures the imagination of its receivers. The character's body movement, appearance, stage appearance and inarticulate sounds or sound effects are all absent. Yet, their absence is covered and substituted by the intense and powerful use of language. By using the language, the speaker can describe any form of stage and make it seen by the audience's imagination, and this is what Kane does. *4.48 Psychosis* is a unique play in its construction and manipulation of sign systems. Analyzing it according to theatre semiotics brings attention to a different type of drama that depends on the theatre to create the character and the story for the text and not the other way around.

Note: This paper is a part of the researcher's M.A. thesis entitled "A semiotic Analysis of cruelty in Sarah Kane's Drama" written at the University of Al-Qadisiyah, College of Education, Department of English.

References

- Ashly, T. (2016). "4.48 *Psychosis* review – Venables brings Sarah Kane's savage text to musical life". *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/may/25/448-psychosis-review-sarah-kane-philip-venables-opera>. Accessed 5/June/2020
- Aston, E. (2003). *Feminist views on the English stage: Women playwrights, 1990–2000*. Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo: Cambridge University Press.
- Baraniecka, E. (2013). "Words that 'Matter': Between Materiality and Immateriality of Language in Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis*". *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, 1(1), 161-172.

- Chramosilová, M. (2013). Beyond the Suicidal Despair: An Analysis of Sarah Kane's 4.48 *Psychosis* (Doctoral dissertation, Masarykova university).
- Cohn, R. (2008) Sarah Kane, an Architect of Drama. *Paru Dans Cynos*, 18 (1). <http://revel.unice.fr/cynos/index.html?id=1668>.
- De Saussure, F. (2011). *Course in general linguistics*. Columbia University Press.
- De Toro, F. (1995). *Theatre Semiotic: Text and Staging in Modern Theatre*. J. Lewis, (Trans.). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- De Vos, L. (2011). *Cruelty and desire in the modern theater: Antonin Artaud, Sarah Kane, and Samuel Beckett*. United Kingdom: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
- Delgado-García, C. (2012). Subversion, Refusal, and Contingency: The Transgression of Liberal-Humanist Subjectivity and Characterization in Sarah Kane's *Cleansed*, *Crave*, and 4.48 *Psychosis*. *Modern Drama*, 55(2), 230-250.
- Elam, K. (1980). *Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Fischer-Lichte, E. (1992). The semiotics of theater, (J. Gaines & DL Jones trans.). Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Gentleman, A. (1999). "Playwright Kane Kills Herself." *Guardian*. retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/1999/feb/23/ameliagentleman>. Accessed at 5/ May/ 2020.
- Greig, D. (2001). "Introduction". In Kane, S. (2001). *Complete Plays: Blasted; Phaedra's Love; Cleansed; Crave; 4.48 Psychosis; Skin*. London: Bloomsbury publishing.
- Gritzner, K. (2008). "(Post) Modern Subjectivity and the New Expressionism: Howard Barker, Sarah Kane, and Forced Entertainment". *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 18(3), 328-340.
- Kane, L. (1984). *The language of silence: On the unspoken and the unspeakable in modern drama*. Fairleigh Dickinson Univ Press.
- Kane, S. (2001). *Sarah Kane: Complete Plays: Blasted; Phaedra's Love; Cleansed; Crave; 4.48 Psychosis; Skin*. London: Bloomsbury publishing.
- Kim, R. (2013). "The Abject Body in Sarah Kane's Mise-en-Scène of Desire". in C. Nally & A. Smith. *Naked Exhibitionism: Gendered Performance and Public Exposure*. London, New York: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd.

- Kowzan, T. (1968) "The Sign in the Theater: An Introduction to the Semiology of the Art of the Spectacle". Pleasance, S. (trans.). *Diogenes*, 16 (61), 52-80.
- Krasner, D. (2016). *A History of Modern Drama, Volume II: 1960-2000* (Vol. 2). John Wiley & Sons.
- Kutluk, A. (2008, May). "Images of violence in Sarah Kane's *4.48 psychosis* and Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and fucking*". In *Proceedings of the 8th International Language, Literature and Stylistics Symposium. İzmir: University of Economics* (Vol. 2, pp. 254-63).
- Ovaska, A. (2016). "Sarah Kane's World of Depression. The Emergence and Experience of Mental Illness in *4.48 Psychosis*". *On Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture*, 1. URL. <http://geb.uniigiessen.de/geb/volltexte/2016/12057/>
- Parry, P. (2003). Sarah Kane. In J. Parini (ed). *British Writers: Supplement VIII*. Farmington: The Gale Group. (pp. 147-162)
- Roberts, M. (2015). "Vanishing Acts: Sarah Kane's Texts for Performance and Postdramatic Theatre". *Modern Drama*, 58(1), 94-111.
- Saunders, G. (2002a). *'Love Me or Kill Me' Sarah Kane and The Theatre Of Extremes*. Manchester. New York, NY: Manchester University Press.
- Sierz, A. (2001). *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*. London: Faber and Faber Limited.
- Sierz, A. (2012). *Modern British playwriting: The 1990s: Voices, documents, new interpretations*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Singer, A. (2004). "Don't Want to Be This: The elusive Sarah Kane". *TDR/The Drama Review*, 48(2), 139-171.
- Tindemans, C. (1985). Coherence and Focability. A Contribution to the Analysability of Theatre Discourse. In H. Schmid & A. Van Kesteren. (Eds.) *Semiotics of drama and theatre: new perspectives in the theory of drama and theatre* (Vol. 10). John Benjamins Publishing. (pp. 127-137)
- Tycer, A. (2008). "Victim. Perpetrator. Bystander: Melancholic Witnessing of Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis*". *Theatre Journal*, 23-36.

- Urban, K. (2008). "The Body's Cruel Joke: The comic theatre of Sarah Kane". In N. Holdsworth & M. Luckhurst (Eds.). *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British and Irish Drama*. (pp. 49-170). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Weate, C. (2012). *Modern Voice: Working with Actors on Contemporary Text: Working with Actors on Contemporary Text*. London: Oberon Books.
- Worthen, W. B. (2005). *Print and the Poetics of Modern Drama*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.