

Cleansed by Sarah Kane as a Typical Model for Oppression in the Modern Age

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Abstract

Sarah Kane is one of the important playwrights in the modern theatre. She has been criticized severely due to the scenes in her plays. *Cleansed* is distinguished by the shocking actions done by the characters. The senses of oppression and violence are dominating the behavior of characters leading to scenes that are against the human nature.

Keywords: Sarah Kane, Cleansed, Oppression, Violence

مسرحية ساره كين (التطهير) انموذجا للأضطهاد في العصر الحديث

لينا محسن عبد الله

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الخلاصة:

تعد الكاتبة المسرحية ساره كين واحدة من اهم كتّاب المسرح الحديث حيث انتقدت مسرحياتها بشدة بسبب احتوائها على مشاهد العنف. حيث تميزت مسرحيتها (التطهير) بالعديد من المشاهد الصادمة والتي تكون فيها مشاعر الظلم والغضب هي المسيطرة على سلوك الشخص مما يؤدي الى مشاهد مناقضة للطبيعة البشرية.

الكلمات الدالة: ساره كين، مسرحية (التطهير)، الأضطهاد، العنف

1. Introduction

One of the important issues in modern society is oppression resulting from wars and other circumstances affecting people. Sarah Kane tries her best to make this clear in *Cleansed*. Oppression is tackled in a different and startling way showing the evil inside human beings as citizens in the modern age. Most writers agree on one important point regarding oppression which is one class is controlling another. The first is main and the second is minor leading to another form of discrimination in a world full of pain and sadness. To deal with any human being as a minor component of society implies the fact that they are dehumanized. Good sense refuses such a treatment that leads humans to lose their humanity. Marilyn Frye states that those who suffer from oppression are unable to feel free, which is another form of slavery. They are molded within one frame and forced to behave accordingly. She said that:

The experience of oppressed people is that the living of one's life is confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable, but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction . [1]

Such a point helps making a clear distinction between "injustice and oppression". In any society, the absence of justice leads people to be separated from the rest in one specific level. But oppression is more specific in removing any chance for them to be free.[1]

As a writer, Sarah Kane suffered from depression which is clear in all her works. It leads her to commit suicide at the age of twenty-eight leaving behind all the success as a playwright and a director. Violence is used in a new startling way. She introduces different levels of meaning one is above the other to give a chance to the audience to draw assimilations between those events and their own life.[2]

The reactions towards her writings are varied as the human nature itself. Some critics regard the plays an exaggerated form for some events cannot come or happen all together. Another group of writers regard them as "inspired, thought-provoking and refreshing. "Kane's position in the new revolutionary movement in the British Theatre is doubtless for she worked with a group of other writers who want to exceed the limits pushing the spectators to search for their identities. Postmodernism produces a new perspective for the meaning of a theatre. It is not only a place of enjoyment for the middle and upper classes but a place for sharing the universal "truth" about our existence.[2]

Kane's childhood was controlled by the religious thoughts of her parents which provide a connection between her plays and the bible. The religious tendencies are clear in all her plays, turning the Bible into a main source in not only exposing harshness and oppression all around her but sending a message to the audience to be aware of such a life that is leading to destroy humanity from the inside. All the scenes in *Cleansed* are recurrent in the everyday life and the audience is familiar with. The horrifying scenes of bloodshed, treachery, rape, etc. are found in drama since the ancient times, but Kane reused them again in a concentrated way to draw the attention of the modern man to the evil around. She received most of the attention because of her shocking manner in presenting the graphic violence.[3]

Throughout using the "post-dramatic" features, Kane tries to present a challenge to the audience in the form of representation. There are traditional dramatic forms as the three unities (time, place, and event), characters (main and minor), plot, that are linking the different parts of the play and giving unity to the work of art. Kane

tries to break down those forms to give the sense of modernity to the play. In addition, she uses music, symbols, and harsh physical actions to draw the attention to the aesthetic influence of the modern age and its onstage effect.[2,120]

In fact, *Cleansed* is considered a crucial point in Kane's literary career. *Blasted* and *Phaedra's Love* are her first plays in which the audience can observe some sort of action, plot, and stage directions. Also, the heroes are known and can be recognized as the main characters with clear obvious names and gender. *Cleansed* differs first in not being divided into acts to mark a "transition" from being a play to a book that can be performed; and second in not having a recognized beginning as the traditional plays.

Cleansed is divided into twenty scenes that are not completing each other or continuous. It does not provide a logical sequence of time and action. From the beginning, the "short sentences" and the lines with one word only draw the reader's attention to the lack of communication in the modern times. "She uses the smallest amount of words possible to achieve coherence and completeness. All exposition is stripped away; we are given just the most basic of details" [2,p125]

Sarah Kane seems to use the language to serve her aims. She reduces the language in order to be precise and not to use any unneeded word. Kane states that she does not "like writing things you really don't need" and her "favourite exercise is cutting: cut, cut, cut..." [3,p69] As a result, the plays seem to be the first attempt in the direction of leaving any dramatic limits. As Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, the characters are shifting their identities throughout exchanging their dresses or "even bodies". The writer wants to expose the limits of endurance for pain and suffering side by side with the boundaries of love. In a scene, Carl is punished for his betrayal by cutting his tongue which is an act of graphic violence in order not to lie again. Violence continues towards Carl, who insists upon writing about his love by using his feet, through cutting his feet and removing his genitals.[4]

Love is part of the violence and oppression humans have to experience, and the sole solution for their torture is death which is going to end all the forms of suffering. This is the babble of Kane in which she makes fun of happiness and hope. In fact, she ended *Cleansed* in a sarcastic way. The play closes with the shattered bodies of two characters who endured different forms of violence and oppression watching the end of rain and the sun rising in the middle of the sky as a sign of hope that is satirized. The sun is getting "brighter and brighter, the squeaking of rats louder and louder, until the light is blinding and the sound deafening." [5]

Kane sympathizes with the characters who are irresponsible for the pain they endure and give to others because they are the real victims of a harsh, senseless "inescapable institution". Most of the characters shift up their identities by exchanging each other's names, dresses, or bodies to the extent that it is difficult to distinguish the individual personality of each one of them. This is regarded as Kane's attempt in the direction of removing any limits among her characters.

The language, which is important as a means of communication in any literary work, turns in *Cleansed* to be a tool for showing thoughts, feelings, and burdens. Kane adopts what is called "pared dialogue", which is one of her experiments to explain the meaning of the play by pictures and not only words. Therefore, she invents the "theatre of images" in her play through avoiding any additional misused words or words that waste actions, and translating her thoughts into clear shocking pictures.[6]

2. Oppression in *Cleansed*:

Cleansed is one of Kane's five plays that tackled the human nature with a frame of brutality and violence. She focuses on the failures of love which is mixed with pain and torture. The play presents violence in an emotional atmosphere where rape and

sexual desires dominated by physical and psychological abuse. This will lead the audience to feel unrest and discomfort and to the over-whelming success of *Cleansed* as well as the other plays by Kane.

Sarah Kane is a prominent figure in the In-yer-face movement. This theatre is characterized by its sexual abuse, ugly language and hatefulvehemence. The In-yer-face stage shakes people and shocks them at the same time leading them to face the modern gloomy life and itsbitter reality. By scenes that include violence and cruelty, Sarah Kane disturbs the audience through the sexual explicitness, homosexuality and rape. She insists on revealing their hidden feelings. She approaches to reality to reflect the disillusioned gloomy life which is full of pain and depression. Kane's *Cleansed* in fact "reflects the futility to formal patterns in a world where chaos is slickly dressed as order." [7.p275] She asserts in an interview that "almost every line in *Cleansed* has, more than one meaning." [8.p5]

The play consists of main five characters: Grace, Graham, Rod, Carl, Robin with their sadistic torturer Tinker. The play occurs inside a university campus, a very vague setting that may indicate different metaphorical meanings. The university which is the place of education and culture is turned to be a prison of oppression and severe violence. This point may refer to Kane's rejection for the modern educational system with its restrictions and bonds. According to her, the young generations are not free in their relations due to the chains of societies and authorities.

The play opens with the addict Graham who is killed by Tinker with an overdose injection of heroin. Graham who is Grace's brother asked Tinker to kill him. Tinker agrees when he "injects into the corner of Graham's eyes" [5]. Grace imagines that her brother is alive and she keeps wearing his clothes and dancing with his soul. [4.96]

Both of Rod and Carl are related to each other by promise of endless love. It is very clear that they have a homosexual affair. Rod is very faithful to his lover and even ready to sacrifice his life, but Carl betrays this love easily. There is another love relation between Grace and the mentally-ill student Robin. Being unable to face life problems, Robin commits suicide finally. The sadistic Tinker also has feelings of love toward a girl dancing in a night club. Surprisingly, he calls her Grace several times, a point that may indicate his wish to create a new Grace from her. [4]

Through the setting, Kane presents a very clear message that the center of learning is turned to be a place of oppressive ways, full of pain and suffering, the victims are the young men and women who are supposed to be the future generations of countries. This point becomes clear in the play through the character of Tinker who dominated everyone, and tries to correct their faults by using different kinds of violence and even by killing them. It is suggested that the name of Tinker is named behind Jack Tinker the reviewer of Kane's *Blasted* who announces that the "play which appears to know no bounds of decency" since it is a "disgusting feast of filth". [9]

Another suggestion about the name comes from the similarity between "tinker" and "thinker" since it refers to the "character that assumes a position of knowledge". [7.p278] In addition to that the word also means:

a person who makes a living by travelling from place to place mending pans and other metal utensils". "Tinker" noun; the job of a tinker, therefore, could be defined simply as an act of repairing something flawed or broken. Interestingly enough, tinkering as a verb means "making small changes to something in order to repair or improve it especially in a way that may not be helpful" ("Tinker" verb). In compliance with the suggestion of his name, the

character of Tinker tries to fix the so-called anomalies of the other characters throughout the play and turn them into individuals attuned to society. [7]

There is no one main theme in *Cleansed* and this leads the play to be very complex. The play is about the lives of different characters chanced to be in a campus of an old university. The central character Tinker tries to dominate their fates and he repeatedly tortures them when they commit a mistake since he represents the high authority in the play.[10]

By presenting scenes which are full of terrifying and disgusting events, Sarah Kane shocks the audience and disturbs them thinking that this is the only way to draw their attention. She is a sincere follower for the in-her-face theater by using its methods as the severe violence in very effective scenes full of oppression[11]:

Thus, the non-realistic setting is a blending of diverse settings existing in reality: prison, university, brothel, and hospital. Kane concocts a setting of implicated violence (prison), help (hospital), and learning (university) into a metaphorical location that can be interpreted as Kane's sinister view of the world. Thus, the people living in it are prisoners and made dependent upon help and sources of knowledge of some external powers in society. [11]

Nicholas de Jongh, attacked *Cleansed* when he said "it was one of the most disgusting experiences in my life. I couldn't look at the stage constantly. I left the play insolently as I wanted." [12]

John Peter also comments that "I felt as if my bones were broken, my stomach was strained and was very hopeless after I watched the play I think the thing that Kane tries to do is that" [12]. Defending her position against this harsh criticism, Sarah Kane asserts that: "Authorities can do everything unless the victims prevent them. There is no place for sensitivity in this world; the only exchangeable thing is oppression." [13]

The heroin addict Graham prefers to die than to lead a meaningless life full of pain and cruelty. It is supposed that his "feeling of entrapment that leads Graham to opt for death as the more liberating alternative at the beginning of play". [7. p281]

Tinker is the one who fulfills this wish not as a matter of help but his sadistic nature which is devoid of any humanity is satisfied when he kills or tortures others. His aggressive cruel behavior towards others is merely to satisfy his personal egos.

The homosexual love between Rod and Carl is displayed clearly in scene two. In spite of this relation, Carl betrays Rod and consequently Rod is ready to leave him or to do the same. Tinker who is keeper of order in the play will punish both Rod and Carl. The first punishment is cutting Carl's clapper.[13] Later on, Carl's apology from Rod is written on the muddy surface:

Rod: Baby.

Carl: (Looks at Rod. He opens his mouth. No sound comes out.)

Rod: You'd have watched them crucify me.

Carl: Tries to speak. Nothing.

He beats the ground in frustration.

He scrabbles around in the mud and begins to write while Rod talks)

Rod: And the rats eat my faceso what. I'd have done the same only I never said I wouldn't. You are young. I don't blame you. Don't blame yourself. No one's to blame.

(Tinker is watching He lets Carl finish what he is writing, then goes to him and reads it.)

Rod: Say you forgive me. (He puts on the ring)
I won't lie to you Carl. (Scene 8, p23)

On the other hand, Tinker punishes Rod violently when he cuts his two legs while dancing with "The love dance of Rod". Finally, Rod clarifies that: "I will love you forever. I will never betray you". Even when Tinker asks about his decision, Rod insists on his love: "You or Him? Decide! And Rod answers... I" (scene,13). Lastly, Rod sacrifices his life for the sake of love. In the play Tinker destroys all lovers. Any character has human feeling, is expected to be a victim on the hand of Tinker.[14,p89]

Ironically speaking, Tinker is the torturer of all lovers but he himself loves the dancing women. Unconsciously he calls her Grace, a point which indicates his hidden love for Grace.

Woman : I love you.
Tinker : Please.
Woman : Though you loved me.
Tinker : As you are.
Woman : Then love me , fucking love
Tinker: Grace.
Woman : Don't turn away.
(scene 14,p32)

Grace loves her brother Graham and after his death she dreams of meeting him. Being unable to forget him, she accepts Robin as the dead Graham especially when Robin imitates him by wearing his clothes. In scene seven Grace wants to get rid of her body: "My body. So it looked like it feels. Graham outside like Graham inside." (Scene 7, P20). This wish will be fulfilled on the hands of Tinker when he changes her sex at the end of the play and she becomes a transsexual.[14,p12] It seems that Carl also will lose his male body like Grace because of the torturer Tinker.

Grace lies unconscious on a bed. She is naked apart from tight strapping around her groin and chest, and blood where her breasts should be. Carl lies unconscious next to her. He is naked apart from a bloodied bandage strapped around his groin.
(scene18,p38)

The last scene of the play when the Grace(as Graham) speaks with Carl while crying indicates the gloominess of their lives.

Body perfect.
Back to life.
Felt it.
Here. Inside.
Here. And when I don't feel it, it's pointless.
Think about getting up, it's pointless.
Think about eating, it's pointless.
Think about dressing, it's pointless.
Think about speaking, it's pointless.
Think about dying only it's totally fucking pointless.
(scene20, p.43)

Yet, there is a sign of hope in the above speech when Grace as Graham proves that death is unable to end the true love. In spite of their sadness and pain, both of Carl and Grace are looking at the sky while they are holding each other. This proves that love is the most prominent power in life.

Grace/ Graham looks at Carl.

Carl is crying....

They stare at the sky, Carl crying.

It stops raining .

The sun comes out.

Grace / Graham smiles. (scene 20, p44)

Kane's message at the end of the play is that the meaningless life which is dominated by pain, fear, oppression, ugliness, violence and homosexuality can also contain hope, true love and faithfulness. This message is strongly supported by the final atmosphere:

The sun gets brighter and brighter, the squeaking of the rats louder and louder, until the light is blinding and the sound deafening. Blackout.

(scene20, P44)

Through these two contrasted pictures in life, Kane tries to suggest a solution for the relationship between "the dominant and the innocent" in *Cleansed*. [15]

The final results cannot be completed without a process of purification which is suggested strongly by the play's title since it "implies a purification process, and such a process has to be based on the presumption that there is something blemished, contaminated or somehow disgraced that needs purifying." [7,p285]

As a conclusion it is surprisingly to find that Tinker is the one who is purified after all.

It is not, however, easy to recognize exactly who has been cleansed at the end of the play. Counter to the expected outcome, of the cleansing of the misfit characters, which runs through the play, the closing section suggests that it is in fact Tinker who has been cleansed of his evil ways by eventually finding it in himself to help other. [7]

Sarah Kane considers theatre as a medium to face the different hidden problems in societies. And through the metaphorical character of Tinker, she gives hope that violence and ugliness could be ended by love.

Theatre, after all, offers the perfect medium for an audience to confront invisible problems, whether they are related to the social and the political or the visceral and the mental. Their threatening presence is constantly felt but they do not make an appearance. Tinker is, thus, not a fully-developed, realistically portrayed character; he appears as a metaphor, one that is created to make visible the way power mechanisms exercise control in society. [7,p286]

3.Conclusion

Adopting images from the torturing camps in former Yugoslavia as a main source in *Cleansed*, Sarah Kane exaggerates in presenting her characters and the cruelty of their life. From the beginning, Kane tries to display the most disgusting pictures and actions in the human life. Her characters witness different types of torture

and suffering, as cutting a tongue, feet, genitals, and changing identities which leave them unidentified. Such scenes cause rejection and disapproval from the critics and audience; yet the author's main aim is to show the power and the need for love in such a distorted world as the characters themselves who are left on the stage with their bodies shattered all around.

The theme of love is central in *Cleansed*, but it is the modern love which brings to mind all the forms of oppression and cruelty in post-modern life. Kane's message is unique as some of the lessons in the bible, desiring from the audience to put aside all the shocking scenes and to witness the greatness of love that is able to surpass all the difficulties in human's life.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

There are no conflicts of interest

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