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**Love as a Redemptive Solution for the Human Trauma  
in Sarah Kane's *Cleansed*  
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**Abstract:**

The traumatic experience of violence is a predominant feature of contemporary culture and especially in the realm of literature. Yet, love represents the most suitable solution for the human trauma. The paper, therefore, examines how love of different sorts can conduce to the healing of many traumatic experiences in Sarah Kane's *Cleansed*. The play is a representation of the human trauma caused mainly by the growing instability during the 1990s which had a profound impact on the whole Europe. It is about a number of characters who live in a university campus, and they are subject to different traumas; but love helps them overcome these traumas in the end. Sarah Kane in her play *Cleansed* seems to be a more positive and hopeful person regardless of the fact that the first reading of the play may engender the impression that it expresses a sense of loss, trauma, and social disintegration, and this is somehow true.

**”الحب بوصفه حلاً للآلام الانسانية في مسرحية سارة كين“ التطهير**

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قسم اللغة الانكليزية

**المخلص:**

تعد تجربة العنف المؤلمة ميزة بارزة للثقافة المعاصرة لا سيما في مجال الادب. بيد ان الحب يمثل الحل الامثل للآلام الانسانية. وعليه يتناول البحث موضوع كيف ان انواع الحب المختلفة يمكن ان تفضي الى معالجة العديد من التجارب الاليمية في مسرحية سارة كين التطهير . والمسرحية هي تمثيل للآلام الانسانية التي حدثت بفعل عدم الاستقرار المتزايد في حقبة التسعينيات وكان له اثرا بالغاً على كل اوربا، وتدور احداث المسرحية حول عدد من الشخصيات التي تعيش في حرم جامعي وهي عرضة لكثير من الالام المختلفة. بيد أن الحب يتغلب على هذه الالام في نهاية المطاف، ويبدو ان سارة كين في مسرحيتها هذه تكون شخصية ايجابية ومناقلة بغض النظر ان القراءة الأولى للمسرحية قد تولد انطباعا يعبر عن الشعور بالخسارة، والالام ، والتفكك الاجتماعي وهذا الامر صحيح الى حد ما.

## 1. Introduction:

Sarah Kane (1971- 1999) is generally acclaimed to be one of the most outspoken playwrights who emerged in 1990s in Britain. Although her career is short; yet, she is a very influential writer. She wrote five plays: *Blasted*, *Phaedra's Love*, *Cleansed*, *Crave*, *4.48 Psychosis*, and one short film, *Skin*. Her writings doubtless mirror Sarah the woman who passed through psychological fluctuations and disturbances which led her in the end to commit suicide in 1999. Such a psychopathic personality is clearly seen in her characters. The world she lived in witnessed radical transformations in all walks of life, especially at the political level. Violence is what came out of these changes, a violence that found its best expression in her plays.

Kane is one of the harbingers of the novel dramatic movement famously called “the in-yer-theater.” According to *the New Oxford English Dictionary* (1998), the phrase ‘in-yer-face’ is defined as something ‘blatantly aggressive or provocative, impossible to ignore or avoid.’ The *Collins English Dictionary* adds another meaning to the previous one which is ‘confrontational.’<sup>1</sup> In this sense, in-yer-theater is a new theater that embraces the provocation of feeling and the straightforward confrontation with the audience through performing everything without any kind of reservation. Such theater clearly involves a grisly confrontation between the institutionalized realms of life and the dramatists who took the lead to change people’s life.

Her theater is often described as despairing, provocative, pessimistic, and negative. Still, some of her dramas leave the audience and the reader alike with a kind of hope, faith, redemption, and survival. Redemption through love is a theme that can be conceived of showing the Kaneian optimism despite the fact that her theater gives much space to what is discouraging, painful, and negative in life. In her plays there are sparse suggestions and indications to the possibility of survival. According to David Greig, the plays of Sarah “mapped the darkest and most unforgiving internal landscapes: landscapes of violation, of loneliness, of power, of mental collapse, and most consistently, the landscape of love.”<sup>2</sup> Accurately designated, a Kane play “is the exploration of love’s assault upon the wholeness of the self.”<sup>3</sup>

The representation of experience constitutes the core of the world of Sarah Kane. Kane herself used the term ‘experiential’ as an accurate description “for the theater she wanted to make... It is a theater that must be lived through.”<sup>4</sup> Her theater puts people “in direct physical contact with thought and feeling.”<sup>5</sup>

The world witnessed a series of violent developments during 1990s. Such developments can be strongly felt in the conflicts in the former

Yugoslavia, inter-ethnic conflicts in the former Soviet Union, the first invasion of Chechnya and the horror of the Rwandan genocide; violence in the west was locally committed.<sup>6</sup> Waters also adds that there is a central concern in Kane's work which "is a passionate, almost pathological identification with pain and trauma and a concomitant desire to communicate the horror of pain in its own idiom."<sup>7</sup>

The theater of Sarah Kane handles the ever-increasing problem of violence that takes much of her thinking. She herself was not in a safe shelter from violence; she was a victim of self-inflicted violence when she killed herself as a final resort to end her own personal dilemmas which are mainly embodied in her psychological disturbance and the lack of true love. In this regard, she explains how violence and her identity are closely connected: "My main source of thinking about how violence happens is myself, and in some ways all of my characters are me."<sup>8</sup> Kane emphasizes that her themes explore the fundamental human problems, adding that "I am not writing about sexual politics. Class, race or gender divisions are a symptom of societies based on violence or the threat of violence, not the cause."<sup>9</sup>

Kane's poetics of violence recalls Antonin Artaud's theater of cruelty. In his famous book *The Theater and Its Double*, Artaud laid down the fundamental foundations of his theory of the new theater. For him the theater of Cruelty has been created in order to restore to the theater a passionate and convulsive conception of life, and it is in this sense of violent rigor and extreme condensation of scenic elements that the cruelty on which it is based must be understood.<sup>10</sup> The theater of Cruelty will deal with subjects and themes which are similar to the agitation and unrest of his epoch.<sup>11</sup> As such, Kane's theater exemplifies the turbulent years in her epoch which is an age clearly marked by violence, chaos, and instability in the first place.

## **2. Love as a Redemptive Solution for the Human Trauma in Sarah Kane's *Cleansed*:**

Whatever its kind is, love is indispensable in man's life. It has become of much concern in life and literature alike. Love "*is an active power in man; a power which breaks through the walls which separate man from his fellow men, which unites him with others; love makes him overcome the sense of isolation and separateness....*"<sup>12</sup> The love story "is the tribute the lover must pay to the world in order to be reconciled with."<sup>13</sup> In postmodern times, and with the rise of globalization, life has become an inferno - like place in many aspects. To courageously face the seamy sides

of life, human beings have at their disposal multitudinous ways. Love is strongly believed to have such power to make life bearable and meaningful.

*Cleansed* is a very optimistic play. Sarah Kane demonstrates how suffering, loss, and chaos can be an occasion to instill hope for the better in life. The title of the play, *Cleaned*, suggests an Aristotelian sense of catharsis or purification, a purification of grievances, suffering, and depression. Sierz argues that the play is the second of an informal trilogy that examines hope, faith and love in a time of war.<sup>14</sup> Kane herself affirms the play has pleasant things to ponder over in spite of the fact that many people have seen the play only from the perspective of the spectacles of violence that penetrate its texture:

When people read the script, they latch on to the violent things. And yes, for me there's an enormous amount of despair in the play because I felt writing it before *Blasted* was produced and it's taken three-and-a-half years- I had to keep taking breaks because the material was so difficult. But there are a lot of very beautiful things in the play too, so I'm calling a love story even though that's not newsworthy as saying it's about someone getting the balls chopped.<sup>15</sup>

Although the general atmosphere of Kane's play is most despairing and shocking, the element of love accentuates the possibility of redemption and hope in the play. Kane has a firm belief that an unrivalled aesthetic picture can be created out of the violent and chaotic situation.

Quite fundamentally, Kane's plays underscore the changes that man faces in everyday situations. Sierz maintains that "Both *Blasted* and *Cleansed* are about distressing things which we'd like to think we should survive. If people can still love after that, then love is the most powerful thing."<sup>16</sup> As Kane also argues in another occasion, the play was "written by someone who believed utterly in the power of love."<sup>17</sup> Sarah Kane reveals her own state of mind when she came to write the play, affirming that she never thought of the success of *Cleansed* as if it was written by her hands. Her description of the play runs as follows:

When I was working on *Cleansed*, I was in a very extreme state. I was going through the most appalling depression, and it was about that; but then on the other hand I was so completely utterly and madly in love that those two things didn't seem to be any contradiction at all- these days it does. Sometimes when I read

*Cleansed*, it's like by another writer. I, as I am now, could not write it. But it was never about the violence; it was about how much these people love. I think *Cleansed*, more than any of my other plays, uses violence as a metaphor.<sup>18</sup>

It is quite conspicuous that Kane is more obsessed with the nexus of love than the spectacles of violence in the play. She realizes the gross nature of the world; yet, she has a deeply - rooted conviction in the unrivaled power of love in building a better and safer world for people to live in. This dramatic orientation is thoughtful in the sense that it displays how Kane wants to revolutionize her society at all the levels.

*Cleansed* incorporates the story of some people who are psychologically traumatized by the absence of a truly social relationship, and they feel that love does not exist in their life. The play is a close-knit portrayal of the human struggle in the pursuit of real love. Tinker, Graham, Grace, Rod, and others experience the feeling of being destitute of love. The action occurs in a university campus where everything is psychologically spotlighted. Tinker is a psychiatrist who tries with a sly manipulativeness to treat other people around him, running the institution in a way as to show his dominant personality. He himself searches for the sort of love which he is not able to find till now. He is “the sadistic person [who] commands, exploits, hurts, humiliates” [others].<sup>19</sup>

The play is structured around twenty scenes which explore how characters are greatly bewitched by their quest for love. “The characters ‘are all emanating great love and going after they need. The obstacles in the way are extremely unpleasant, but that’s not what the play is about. What drives people is need.’”<sup>20</sup> The instigating cause for people is the need for a true love in their life.

Love in *Cleansed* is incarnated in three main relationships: the story of Tinker and his sense of a romantic forlorn love, the transsexual bond between Carl and Rod, and finally Grace’s search for a true love with her brother Graham. To begin with, Tinker seems to be a good example that illustrates that love is the solution for human anxieties and problems. Tinker’s early behavior with others is symptomatic of his inner ontological insecurity. *Cleansed* initiates with Tinker talking to Graham. Tinker represents the authoritative voice, and spares no efforts to influence and control others through torture. Elaine Scarry illustrates three elements that lie at the centre of the process of torture:

- (1) the infliction of pain
- (2) the objectification of the subjective attributes of pain
- (3) the translation of the objectified attributes of pain into the insignia of power.<sup>21</sup>

These elements are quite observable in the character of Tinker who acts the role of the torturer in the play. “The goal of the torturer is to make the one, the body, emphatically and crushingly *present* by destroying it, and to make the other, the voice, *absent* by destroying it.”<sup>22</sup>

The queer relationship between Rod and Carl shows Kane’s attachment to the role of love in solving the excruciating human trauma. Staging sexuality has frequently been dealt with in postmodernist times. It is worthwhile to mention that nudity is a controversially discussed characteristic in Kane’s dramatic world by some critics. Even so, this theatrical nudity has a metaphorically significant meaning. Sierz points out such significance:

A naked body’s inherent vulnerability can be heavy with metaphorical significance: it can be morally ‘exposed’, or ‘stripped’ of illusions. At other times, removing your clothes can be an act of political power, of liberation from convention, a statement of transgression that can expose a spectator’s mixed feelings about being naked. As always, responses to a natural fact, nudity, imply a cultural act, nakedness in all the many meanings of the word.<sup>23</sup>

Nakedness is figuratively dubbed as a kind of resistance as Kane believes, a resistance that implies a political dimension in the first place. It underscores the fact that it is an effective defense mechanism used by the subaltern people who cannot speak out or act against the hegemonic authority. Kane makes much use of this cultural mode to express her strong resentment and disapproval of the violence and grievances practised in her world.

Rod and Carl feel themselves at a great loss; therefore, they believe in their unfamiliar love relationship as a therapy for their problems. The meeting happens in daylight, and they sit on the college green inside the perimeter fence of the university where the sounds of a cricket match are heard on the other side of the fence. Carl takes off his own ring and presents it to Rod as a ‘sign’ for ‘commitment’ ( sc. ii 109):<sup>24</sup>

Carl: (*Closes his eyes and puts the ring on **Rod**’s finger.*)

Rod: What are you thinking?

Carl: That I’ll always love you.

Rod: (*Laughs.*)

Carl: That I’ll never betray you.

Rod: (*Laughs more.*)

Carl: That I’ll never lie to you.

Carl cannot hide his true feelings towards Rod anymore. He expresses his admiration in such mesmeric words:

I love you *now*.

I'm with you *now*.

I'll do my best, moment to moment, not to betray you.

Now.

That's it. No more. Don't make me lie to you. ( sc. 2, 109 )

Unquestionably, these lines indicate the strong love Rod bears for his friend, Carl. Betrayal is one of the most recurrent themes in contemporary culture and drama in particular. The relationship between Carl and Rod embraces the antithesis of betrayal and it reveals overmuch about the importance of love in breaking the pervasive emotional stagnation that seems to emerge itself in the world of Sarah Kane

Brotherly love is another type of love, which clearly emerges in Sarah Kane's plays. In his book *The Art of Loving*, Fromm sees this love as the most fundamental of all kinds of love, a love which is marked by "the sense of responsibility, care, respect, and knowledge of any other human being, the wish to further his life."<sup>25</sup> Graham and Grace represent this fraternal love in the play. Set in a white room in the university, scene 3 displays the encounter between Tinker and Grace. Grace wants to know about the destiny of her brother, Graham. Tinker checks a file of his subjects in order to tell Grace what really happened to Graham. Grace in turn "*stands alone, waiting*" (*Cleansed*, 112). Waiting is a traumatic experience primarily caused by the absence of a very dear person to one's heart. Barthes argues that "The lover's fatal identity is precisely: *I am the one who waits*."<sup>26</sup> The scene starts with the following dialogue between Tinker and Grace:

Tinker: He's been dead six months. We don't normally keep the clothes that long.

Grace: What happens to them?

Tinker: Recycled. Or incinerated.

Grace: Recycled?

Tinker: Most likely incinerated, but-

Grace: You give them to someone else?

Tinker: Yes.

Grace: Isn't that very unhygienic?

Tinker: He died of an overdose.

Grace: Then why burn his body?

Tinker: You thought nobody cared. (sc.3, 112)

Grace seems extremely angered at the news of her brother's death upon taking an overdose which ends in the cremation of his body as an act of keeping the environment unpolluted. Given this painfully bad experience,

she feels quite crestfallen because of the loss of her brother. Sierz writes about Grace's traumatic situation, saying: "People are cleansed by pain and terror; Grace is burnt clean by torture. To make up for the loss of her brother, she gives up her own identity. Then she takes up her dead brother's identity as a way of loving him, as a way of finding herself and as a way of changing."<sup>27</sup> Traumatic experiences are conspicuously seen as occasions for fostering one's patience and building an independent identity.

Sometime later, a boy, Robin, is called by Tinker to replace Grace's brother. He removes his own clothes, giving them to Grace. She dresses his clothes as a way to mitigate her sense of suffering. In this way, Tinker wants to psychologically treat her. Tinker takes the task of exercising power over his subject, Grace, a power that comes out of his knowledge of his subject's psyche:

**Grace dresses in Robin's /Graham's clothes.**

*When fully dressed, she stands for a few moments, completely.*

*She begins to shake.*

*She breaks own and wails uncontrollably.*

*She collapses.*

**Tinker lifts her onto a bed.**

*He injects her. She relaxes.*

(Sc.3, 113)

Scene five is intimately related to scene 3, and the story of Grace's relationship with her brother is continued. Here, Grace has a dream vision where she speaks to Graham. It is a scene fraught with the fact that how a traumatic experience can be solved through love.

Graham: Hello, Sunshine.

*Silence.*

*Grace stares at him.*

*She smacks him around the face as hard as she can, then hugs*

*him to her as tightly as possible.*

*She hold his face in her hands and looks closely at him*

Grace: You're clean.

Graham: *(Smiles.)*

Grace: Don't ever leave me again.

Graham: No.

Grace: Swear.

Graham: On my life.

*Pause. They look at each other in silence.* ( 5, 118-9)

Most important is the performance of dancing, which underlies the idea of harmony and reciprocal understanding. Graham makes “a *dance of love for Grace*” (119). Grace skillfully and quickly imitates all his movements to the extent that “*she no longer has to watch him- she mirrors him perfectly as they dance exactly in time.*” Dancing by itself implies a kind of concordance and order in the world; it is “an obvious symbol of the uniting of the community around the couple.”<sup>28</sup> This symbolic unity is further enhanced by the song of ‘*You Are My Sunshine*’ by Jim Davis and Charles Mitchell. Some of the verses of this romantic song deserve quoting here in as much as it is syncretized with the framework within which the whole play is put:

You are my sunshine,  
 My only sunshine.  
 You make me happy  
 When skies are grey.  
 You'll never know, dear,  
 How much I love you.  
 Please don't take my sunshine away.  
 I'll always love you  
 And make you happy.  
 If you will only say the same.  
 But if you leave me  
 To love another  
 You'll regret it all some day.<sup>29</sup>

This song clarifies the strong relationship between Grace and Graham. Love is understandably focal and essential in making partners very rejoiced in their life as is the case in this confraternal story. All difficulties are easily vanquished by the true existence of love.

Both Grace and Graham faithfully pledge that under no circumstances should they leave each other. In their meeting, there appears a bouquet of flowers over their heads, which ushers in a positive direction in the course of their relationship. What is most important in their view is that they thereafter never separate and live in seclusion:

Grace: Love me or kill me, Graham.

Graham: I used to... think about you and ...

I used to... wish it was you when I...

Used to...

Grace: Doesn't matter. You went away but now you're  
 back and nothing else happens

Graham: Makes no difference now. ( sc.5, 120)

Physical torture and trauma is brought together in scene 10 where Grace is violently beaten, and afterwards raped by a number of unseen men whose voices are terrifically audible. She is continuously hit by baseball bats, and she reacts in a way as to show her pain because of the act of violence. Grace “*lies motionless, terrified of bringing on more blows.*” (131). Meanwhile, Graham appears to express how fraternal love is represented. Grace is raped by one of the voices, and “*she looks into **Graham’s** eyes throughout,/ **Graham** holds her head between his hands.*” (132). Her clothes turn red because of the bleeding caused by the atrocious act of rape. Graham’s body starts bleeding in the same way, a matter that accentuates the spiritual union between the two. This incident is immediately followed by a volley of automatic gunfire, which indicates the theater of military operations. The stage directions tellingly reveal this radical development:

***Graham** shields **Grace’s** body with his own, and holds her head between his hands.  
The gunfire goes on and on and on.  
The wall is pitted with bullet marks, and as the gunfire continues,  
huge chunks of plaster and brick are blown from the wall.  
The wall is being shot to pieces and is splatted with blood.  
After several minutes, the gunfire stops. (sc.10, 133)*

The crux of the matter here is war and its ensuing ramifications. Kane affirms that people and the milieu they inhabit are deeply affected by the monstrosity of war. It is clear that Graham and Grace fall victims to this traumatic experience. However, love can heal their somatic and emotional wounds. Out of this violence of war, love comes out to be an all-cure prescription for the human trauma whatsoever.

Towards the close of the play, love stands out again as the purifying force of the human trauma, giving *Cleansed* its rather reconciling hallmark. Such a reconciliation is intricately entwined in Tinker finding his lost love in the character of the woman who comes to be a simulacrum of Grace. Observably, what motivates Tinker to behave abnormally in the first part of the play is his lack of real love.

Body perfect  
Chain-smoked all day but danced like a  
dream you’d never know.  
Have they done it yet?  
Died.  
Burnt.

Lump of charred meat stripped of its  
 Clothes.  
 Back to life.  
 Why don't you ever say anything?  
 Loved  
 Me  
 Hear a voice or catch a smile turning from the mirror You  
 bastard dare  
 you leave me like this.  
 Felt it.  
 Here. Inside. Here. (Sc.20, 150)

The final speech, and by extension, *Cleaned*, is quite emblematic of the significance of love in recognizing the self and other simultaneously. Love is the only way of making sense of a life that is otherwise without meaning, is 'pointless'. Yet, like *Blasted*, *Cleansed* "ends with a feeling of hope (however fragile); hope dependent on the possibility of love surviving a contemporary world represented as a violent, authoritarian 'wasteland.'"<sup>30</sup> On this point, Fromm's gripping statement demonstrates Kane's mindset and her understanding of love:

If I truly love one person I love all persons, I love the world, I love life. If I can say to somebody else, 'I love you,' I must be able to say, 'I love in you everybody, I love through you the world, I love in you also myself.'<sup>31</sup>

Kane has undertaken the task of showing people the way to resilience and salvation. It is love that can stop the human suffering and destroy all the borderlands that separate man from his/her fellows. As Sierz rightly argues, "*Cleansed*'s idealism lies in its conviction that love is the one basis of hope in an evil world. It presents a vision of a tough love that can survive not only by physical torture but also the need to tell the truth about ourselves."<sup>32</sup> Throughout her dramatic career Kane focuses upon the involvement of the element of love in her play to drive home the point that out of despair, violence and chaos a glimpse of hope can be firmly felt. This is what *Cleansed* reflects in a very appropriate manner.

### 3. Conclusion

Sarah Kane's drama has been paid a lot of attention by critics. Some critics launch a very opprobrious criticism on the use of much violence and negativism in her plays. From a more different perspective other critics

discover in her plays a more realistic scrutiny of the problems that heavily hit the British community during 1990s. They maintain that there is a glimpse of hope that penetrates the dark trajectory of Kane's plays.

In *Cleansed*, Sarah Kane seems to be a more positive and hopeful person regardless of the fact that the first reading of the play may engender the impression that it is about sense of loss, suffering, and social disintegration, and this is somehow true. Most significantly, Sarah Kane's *Cleansed* underpins the fact that although people encounter many difficulties besetting their life, the fact remains so obvious that "Life is sweet."

Kane gives us a vivid picture of how the issue of instability leaves many indelible marks on all slices of life, especially at the social level. Redemption through love is a theme that can be conceived of as showing the Kaneian optimism despite the fact that her theater gives much space to what is discouraging, painful, and negative in life. In her plays there are sparse suggestions and indications to the possibility of survival.

### **Notes:**

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3. Greig, xvi.
4. Quoted in Biçer, Ahmet Gökhan. "Depiction of Violence Onstage: Physical, Sexual and Verbal Dimensions of Violence in Sarah Kane's Experiential Theater." *The Journal of International Social Research*, Vol.4, Issue 16. (Winter 2011), 81.
5. Sarah Kane quoted in Biçer, 81.
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7. Waters, 373.
8. Quoted in Sierz, 111.
9. Quoted in Sierz, 111.
10. Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*. Tran by Mary Caroline Richards, (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 122.
11. Artaud, 122.
12. Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, (London: Thorsons, 1985), 16.
13. Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, (London: Penguin Books, 1978), 7.
14. Sierz, 115.

15. Stratton quoted in Graham Saunders, *About Kane: the Playwright & the Work*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2009) , 73-74.
16. Sierz, 116.
17. Quoted in Sierz, 117.
18. Sanders, 74.
19. Fromm, 16,
20. Sierz, 115.
21. Sierz, 115.
22. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and the Unmaking of the World*, (Oxford: OUP, 1987), 49.
23. Sierz, 8.
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26. Barthes, 40.
27. Sierz, 115.
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31. Fromm, 36.
32. Sierz, 114.

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