



JOURNAL OF SOCIAL AND HUMANITIES SCIENCES RESEARCH

Uluslararası Sosyal ve Beşeri Bilimler Araştırma Dergisi
Open Access Refereed e-Journal & Refereed & Indexed

Article Type	Research Article	Accepted / Makale Kabul	14.03.2019
Received / Makale Geliş	05.12.2018	Published / Yayınlanma	15.03.2019

THE DEPICTION OF VIOLENCE IN SARAH KANE'S CLEANSED: TORTURE AND MUTILATION

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ABSTRACT

This study traces the elements of violence in *Cleansed* which is written by Sarah Kane who was a profound writer in Yer Face movement. The study examines the limitless power of authorities which torture, mutilate, kill and oppress without being questioned by anyone. It presents how the writer uses the images of violence in order to remind us the savage historical events which happened in the civil wars in Europe specifically in Bosnia.

Keywords: cleansed, torture, mutilation, violence, civil war

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Violence in Yer-Face-Theatres

The emergence of in-yer-face was preceded in terms of shock factor by the theatre of the absurd, the 1950s movement of playwrights such as Beckett with his renowned play: *Waiting for Godot*. The works of dramatists of this age greatly influenced the creators of in-yer-face such as Sarah Kane, and they possess certain similarities that set them apart. For the current study, however, attention will be turned to in-yer-face, especially the clearly defined themes of violence it incorporated.

In-yer-face is a term that was coined from the English phrase 'in your face' which is used to indicate to a condition where a person gets aggressively invasive of another's personal space. "It suggests the crossing of normal boundaries" (Sierz 4). Acts staged by in-yer-face dramatists employ unconventional methods to bring the audience's attention to issues of interest to them by the use of unprecedented shock. The plays are meant to challenge the views of the audience on their identities, seeking to jolt them into serious debate about issues that may not be considered as important in the mainstream, such as sexual abuse, mental illness, and violence.

Sarah Kane, a celebrated playwright and drama radical, was the first dramatist to use what has now been defined as in-yer-face. Debuting with *Blasted* in 1993, Kane immediately gained notoriety from the non-conformist style used. The rebellious nature of rejecting established norms in staging plays became the standard marker of in-yer-face theatrical showcases that dominated the 1990s. Aleks Sierz, the most authoritative in-yer-face scholar, defines the concept thus:

In-yer-face takes the audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes it until it gets the message. It is a theatre of sensation: it jolts both actors and spectators out of conventional responses, touching nerves, provoking alarm and making the audience take notice. (Sierz 4)

Unlike typical plays where the action does not involve the audience in presentation and that is meant to entertain, in-yer-face provokes the audience into reacting, gets under their skins, and causes them to react in some way. Due to the confrontational style of presentation, reactions are often walk-outs and condemning editorials. The shock factor improves the interest in the play being staged, which

subsequently raises awareness of the topic being addressed. Characters in the plays are made to represent the lowest social classes such as “prostitutes, thieves, drug addicts, rapists, child abusers, tormentors, murderers and other psychological malfunctioning or simply [the] mad” (Kitzler 7) to further jolt the audience. Violence takes centre-stage in both the writing and presentation of plays to the audience, a transcending feature that is inseparable from in-her-face style plays.

The forms of violence that takes place in the play are classified into torture and mutilation as discussed below.

1.2. Torture

Kofi Anan, the former United Nations secretary general, defines torture as “an atrocious violation of human dignity that dehumanizes both the victim and the perpetrator” (Miller 5). The purpose of torture is normally to inflict pain on another person or other people with the aim of punishing them or to get them to act in a particular way. In physically inflicted harm, the aim is to leave lasting scars as a deterrent to the victim possible refusal to obey the demands of the offender. The dignified form of torture is directed towards people who do not necessarily deserve it and it does not serve any particular purpose apart from the fulfilment of the perpetrator. Undeserved torture is often not deserved, born out of the offender’s malevolence. The innocence of the victim causes the scarring of both themselves and their torturers.

In other cases, “torture could simply be physical harm to the victim’s body that surpasses that which is necessary and causes the victim physical suffering in form of pain and does not serve any purpose inherent to the interrogation” (Miller 3). This is torture defined by the Israeli Supreme Court in a case between the government security agencies and the Public Committee against Torture in Israel. The definition serves the purpose of defining torture that is considered deserved by the victim in cases of national security and such legal matters.

The distinction between torture for the sake of torture and torture during interrogation is important to note. The Kantian theory was developed by Immanuel Kant, a great German of the 18th century. It states that: “human beings have an intrinsic worth or dignity which makes them very valuable ‘above all price.’ They may never be “used” as means to an end” (Rachels 1). This is sometimes referred to as Kant’s definition of the ultimate law of morality.

In one case, the victim is a suspected wrongdoer who has information that is perhaps critical to the government preventing a terror attack. Information to be extracted from the victim can be said to be intended for good use and in some cases, failure to get the information may lead to homicide or mass murder. For dignified torture, the perpetrator is often doing it for their own means, without the necessity or legality of the actions. The premise of dehumanisation indicates malevolence, sadism, and undue violence. For the purposes of clarification, all tortures apart from lawful constitutionally sanctioned ones in which specialist torturers are involved falls under the category of an invasion of dignity.

Physical torture is the most persevering form of violence in *Cleansed*. Tinker is the main and sole perpetrator of the torture, directing his sadistic ploys on characters at his pleasure. Crimes that deserve punishment, the kind of torture to be given, and ways in which the pain is to be instilled are all decided by him. As a self-styled love authority, Tinker focuses on love crimes, which many of the characters are guilty of. Lee J. Gutscher captures the situation perfectly in her book, *Revelation or Damnation? Depictions of Violence in Sarah Kane’s Theatre*:

Whereas the excessive representation of all sorts of brutality may at first glance appear irrational, the cruelties, which are committed in the course of the play, are by no means random but follow a certain pattern and fulfil a clear function. (73)

The theme of imperfect love is addressed in all three instances of love: between Carl and Rod-homosexual love and traitorous love by Carl, between Grace and her brother Graham- incestuous love, and the attempt of Robin to win Grace’s love by material things (chocolate)- venal love. Tinker, as the authority figure, becomes the executioner, the supreme or god figure who reserves the right to punish according to his discretion. The influence of Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* views of love “as an act of defiance-a counteraction against repressive forces – and also how those very forces police and crush

through torture any attempt at expression of love” (Saunders 92) on Kane is clear in this concept of a supreme being policing the inmates of the institution.

Tinker is made the embodiment of love’s effects on inmates, indicating the strength of emotional love and its disadvantages when used as a social force.

Torture in *Cleansed* is used mainly on Grace in punishment for her incestuous relationship with her brother, with whom she continues to have sexual fantasies with even after his death earlier in the play at the hands of Tinker. Her first incident of torture comes in the form of confronting the death of her brother when she enters the hospital. Adamant on seeing the clothes her brother had worn before his death, she has Tinker demand that Robin- who had taken to wearing them to imitate Graham- removes them and hands them to her:

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

She begins to shake.

She breaks down and wails uncontrollably.

She collapses. (Greig 113)

This represents the effects of the great shock she suffers upon learning about the death of her brother-lover, which also causes her to refuse to leave the institution to be closer to her brother. This is despite the attempts by Tinker to get her to leave because it is not right that she remains there as she needs help. To this she asks to be treated as any other inmates and he agrees. Confinement gives Tinker the opportunity to exercise his power of god over her in the course of the next scenes. He warns her of what is to take place later and foreshadows the horrors awaiting her: “I am not responsible, Grace” (114). This indicates her entering into his realm of control, placing her fate in his hands to do with her as he pleases. After this she becomes subject to the puritan lordship of Tinker, who is especially particular about love.

She continues to be non-repentant about the incestuous feelings she has for her brother, fantasies of which are featured in Scene 5. After his appearance then, he accompanies her everywhere she goes including in Scene 10 when a beating is delivered to her “by an unseen group of men whose voices we hear”(130) using a baseball bat. Her body contorts from the pain of the force of the beating and she calls out to Graham to save her. The punishment is sustained over a few minutes as Graham watches and tries to comfort her to be strong with childhood anecdotes.

The forms of tortures are increased to include sexual violence where *Grace* is raped by one of the voices (132). She remains steadfast throughout the ordeal, staring into her brother’s eyes all through. Awhile later, the two share in her pain, with the blood seeping through her clothes and turning them red as Graham touches her.

The firing squad is then unleashed on her, with a lengthy torrent of gunfire directed at her. Graham joins her to share in the suffering and tries to shield her, with their love connecting them in their pain. Her torture culminates in the transformation into her brother with a stitched on penis at the end of the play.

Sarah Kane used torture to indicate punishment of sin as a form of cleansing. The different forms of sin are defined by the society’s interpretations of people who are different. In this case, Grace and Graham are in an incestuous relationship. The punishment meted out on Grace is meant to change her to have a ‘normal’ relationship with Tinker, who is secretly in love with her. His love tortures him and probably is the cause for his sadistic treatment of the inmates. It definitely makes him demand that the woman at the live peep-hole porn show answer to the name Grace while he masturbates. In the case of Grace’s torture in the hands of Tinker, both of them undergo pain, Grace in the physical sense and Tinker emotionally and psychologically.

Torture is also used on Robin who is introduced to the readers and the audience as a mentally retarded teenager who does not know how to read and write before Grace offers to teach him how to read and write. Ignorance is indeed bliss; for “after learning how to read and use an abacus, he realizes how long his sentence is and hangs himself” (Sierz 112). The situation bares similarities with the black man who is said to have been on:

Robben Island with Nelson Mandela. He was eighteen years old. He was put on Robben Island and told he was going to be there for forty-five years. It didn't mean anything to him- he was illiterate. Nelson Mandela and some of the other prisoners taught him how to read and write. He learnt to count, realized what forty -five years was and hung himself. (Robellato qtd. in Saunders 76-77)

Following the shock of losing his love, his innocence, and his tools of enlightenment- the books- Robin vows to commit suicide. His condition of mentally retardation contributes to his to arbitrary decision to commit suicide, a direct result of insufficiency in conscious and unconscious soundness of mind (Freud quoted in Sousa 210). Mentally retarded people are therefore more likely to commit suicide or entertain suicidal thoughts because they are not sufficiently able to judge their environment from a correct perspective.

Robin is a greatly tortured person, suffering under the burden of his immense love for Grace, which is unfortunately not reciprocated: "I love you too. But in a very particular- You're a lovely boy-" (Greig 127). She laughs the expressions of love off as a sort of a joke and doesn't pay him any attention. Undeterred, Robin procures a box of chocolate, intending to present them to Grace in another attempt to gain her favour. However, before he has the opportunity to do this, Tinker forces him to eat the chocolate, tossing the pieces out to him one by one.

Being a symbol of his love for Grace, being forced to eat the chocolate indicates the destruction of his love. Tinker does not allow Robin to express his love: he tortures him just like Carl and Rod. The only difference between the two cases is that in this event, Tinker applies psychological rather than physical torture on Robin. Psychological torture is defined as "the exertion of non-physical methods of torture on an individual to get them to do as the executor desires" (108) by Pau Pérez-Sales, a highly decorated modern psychologist.

The aggravated levels of threats on Robin's life causes him to wet the floor during the ordeal, an act that further angers Tinker and causes an unceremonious burning of all books he had been reading from. The burning of books is defined as "an act of censorship by an authority figure to stop scholarly activities that are considered to be a threat to them" (Chan 101). Tinker is threatened by the progress of Robin in getting closer to Grace, a feat he would like to achieve but is kept off by her obsessive love for her brother. By denying Robin the chance to become more knowledgeable, he diminishes the chances of Grace developing a romantic interest in him. The burning of the books in the course of the play therefore signifies Tinker's domineering and sadistic nature to oppress the inmates and hamper any progress they attempt to make.

This is also an indication of the attempts of the powers-that-be to suppress the progress of the downtrodden, to keep them down and domineer over them. World superpower countries, for example, will do anything to suppress smaller countries that do not conform to the status quo or those who are different. Grace's lack of concern for her tools of enlightenment going up in flames (actually remarking "Lovely") indicates society's lack of concern or other people's suffering, which only aggravates their anguish.

The burning of books is an additional rebuke of Kane towards her tutor at Birmingham University, a demonstration of her dissatisfaction with the Masters course she studied for at the institution which did not impress her quite much (Sierz 9).

In *Cleansed*, the unforgiving nature of judgement indicates the surety of consequences of one's doings. Despite the cruelty- and in some cases the partiality- with which Tinker administered torture on his victims, there was always and underlying guilty conviction for all inmates to whom punishment was meted out:

Even with the cruelties inflicted on Carl: the cutting off of tongue, hands, feet, and his penis, a sense of justice is brought about by the realisation that these punishing acts were only perpetrated in response to the unforgivable sin of betrayal he had committed. (Gutscher 74)

This was in keeping in line with the overriding theme in *Cleansed*, which was stated as "written by someone who believed utterly in the power of love" (Sierz 117). All victims suffered for the impurity

of their love as judged by a self-righteous, egoistic, and sadistic Tinker. Carl was especially picked out for punishment, suffering untold torture over the course of the play. Starting as a test of his overzealous confession of love, it turns to betrayal during a torture session and spirals wildly into mutilation as he tries fruitlessly to atone for his sins. To deal with the fate of Carl, his suffering is best addressed under mutilation going by the unprecedented levels of physical injury sustained.

1.3. Mutilation

Mutilation is another form of violence that is perpetrated in *Cleansed*. Mutilation is defined as aggravated torture in which the victim loses the total use of their body (Weissbrodt and Heilman 364). This definition involves all forms of punishment that cause organs not to function well, even when they remain attached to the body.

The World Health Organisation, on the other hand, defines mutilation as: “all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external (body parts) ...or other injury to the...organs for non-medical reasons” (1).

The WHO defined meaning involves the separation of part of body from the rest of the body for reasons other than those of maintaining the healthy wellbeing of the individual. Mutilation has been used as a mean for punishment since ancient times, on the basis of ‘an eye for an eye’ being the dominant feature, though in a convoluted manner. For example, the sin of stealing may have the hand cut off to avoid further sinning. Mutilation as a form of punishment instills the fear of the punishment on the individual to prevent them from perpetrating the sin. Mutilation is no longer an applicable mode of punishment for crimes in democratic countries.

Other prominent uses of mutilation in drama include *Titus Andronicus* (1594) where Lavinia is raped and mutilated. This corresponds to incidences within the play such as the penetration of Carl using the pole, the rape of Grace by the voices. In the recent past, *The American Dream* by Edward Albee (1961) featured common features as the severance of the tongue, chopping of hands, and scratching out of eyes (Albee 61). The fact that these things are done by trust figures is not escapable, it indicates the fickle nature of love and life.

In Sarah Kane’s *Cleansed*, mutilation is perpetuated on Carl for his betrayal of his manically confessed love for Rod. The greatest crime is committed by Carl when he speaks lightly about matters of love, promising unconditional love to Rod, even though they are not very well acquainted:

Rod: You’d die for me?

Carl: Yes. (Greig 109)

Carl: That I will never betray you.

Rod: (Laughs more). (110)

This exchange represents Rod’s interrogation of the phrase “I love you” in accordance to Roland Berthas and the book *A Lover Discourse* which advances the notion that love is a “socially irresponsible word” (148). Rod opts to promise nothing that he would not be able to fulfil, instead choosing later in the play the ultimate sacrifice of dying for love. Carl, on the other hand, pledges undying love, never to betray Rod, and a myriad of other empty promises.

When Tinker tests this commitment of love a scene later, Carl is quick to betray his friend and begs to be let off and for Rod to take his place: “ROD NOT ME ROD NOT ME” (117). Given, he speaks the words under inhuman torture as Tinker inserts a pole into his anus, with the pain being obviously unbearable. His readiness to betray the vows he’d made earlier on indicates great weakness, and in the eyes of Tinker, an unforgivable act for which he would suffer greatly.

This torture by penetration is reminiscent of *Edward II* in Christopher Marlowe’s play. Yet the use of this form of torture by Kane highlighted the crucifixion with the pole through the anus to the shoulder was used by Serbians on Muslims. Offenders thus punished then die over a period of five days to the pleasure of the perpetrators (Saunders 90).

Moments later, Rod materializes and Carl immediately embarks on another lie about being contrite. Probably having considered him a helpless case, Tinker appears with a huge pair of scissors and chops off his tongue to prevent him from sinning anymore (Gutscher 74).

From the representation of love as the greatest good in the play, doing wrong against it is a forbidden act that cannot be forgiven. Therefore, any attempts made by Carl in the rest of the play to make amends to Rod are thwarted by Tinker, whose mission it is to keep him under condemnation and prevent his cleansing.

In scene 8, Carl writes on the sand begging Rod to forgive him. After a hawkish Tinker intrudes into the lovers' privacy and denies Carl further chances on writing his repentance by chopping off his hands, Rod takes his ring from the severed hand. He then reads the message written on the ground:

Rod: Say you forgive me.

(He puts on the ring.)

I won't lie to you, Carl. (Greig 129-30)

Not to be deterred Carl attempts yet again to ask for forgiveness by dancing to "a dance for the love of Rod" which then turns into a dance of distressed regret (Gutscher 74). At this point, Tinker yet again swoops in and chops off his feet, completely incapacitating him. His abilities to perform mundane acts are continually denied him, his initial sin apparently having condemned him to purgatory.

This indicates the permanence of actions committed by people, which are permanent and irreversible, especially when they involve heartbreak. Kane's idea was to caution lovers on the consequences of spoken vows, and how important it is for humanity to realize the consequences of neglecting loved ones. Failure to follow through on international community commitments, for example, brings untold suffering to the victims of violence, which ends up affecting the whole world, one way or another. The cruelty of the world is indicated in the monologue by Rod just before Carl's legs are chopped off for his "spasmodic dance of desperate regret" (Greig 136).

"Death is not the worst thing they can do to you. Tinker made a man bite off another man's testicles. Can take away your life but not give you death instead" (30). The cruelty of Tinker stands for the harshness of the world, which ostracizes those who are different and yet leaves them to suffer without the mercy of death. Psychological torture is indicated by the inference that death is not the most terrible thing that might occur to a person. It would have to be a bleak existence indeed if the prospect of death would be welcome over life, a situation insinuated by Kane in this excerpt.

Another act of mutilation against Carl in scene 16 involves the slitting off of Rod's throat after the later promises to continue loving him, and that he would actually die for him. After making love to him, Tinker appears in the scene and makes Rod choose between his life and Carl's. Without hesitation, Rod chooses "Me. Not Carl. Me" (136). Tinker proceeds to cut his throat as Carl watches and tries desperately to get to him. Rod's body is then ordered burned.

This non-physical act of mutilation of Carl involves a deeper reach of the loss, which is Rod, whom he really loves, after all. In choosing to kill Rod- the one who had practiced perfect love throughout, Kane indicates that true love requires much personal sacrifice, often calling for the person to lose themselves for another. From Carl losing his lover, it means that appreciation for endowments and opportunities should be done when they are there, for they may end up being taken away. Rod made the ultimate sacrifice in dying to save Carl's life, and Carl got the ultimate mutilation when his love was taken away from him. No longer would there be a possibility of righting his wrong. This indicates that the opportunity to love perfectly should be taken while it exists, for it might not be possible to continue having it in the future.

In the white room, alongside Grace, the final act of mutilation occurs for Carl. His penis is chopped off and stitched on Grace: "Carl lies unconscious next to her. He is naked apart from a bloodied bandage strapped around his groin" (145). The swapping of his genitals with Grace's indicates retribution of his homosexual ways, whereby he is made to convert into a woman and possibly enjoy reproductive sexual relations. At this point, Carl has lost his power of speech, his power to work or touch, his mobility, and the love of his life. The final removal of his penis, his apparent transformation into a woman, indicates

the final loss of his identity. Here Sarah Kane is trying to sound a warning to people to remain true to their values, especially pure love, or risk getting lost to the emptiness that is left.

The mutilation of Grace, on the other hand, is the conclusion of events in which she indicated a great desire to convert into her brother.

Grace: I look like him. Say you thought I was a man. (114)

From the moment of learning about his death, Grace changes into his clothes and starts behaving like him as well. Another incidence appears in Scene 5 when the two dances the dance of love for Grace. "She mirrors him perfectly as they dance exactly in time" (119). The denial of her own body in favour of her brother's body is an indication of mental self-mutilation, which develops through the scenes until finally, the penis from Carl is stitched onto her groin and her breasts ironed out. Her desire of turning into her brother is thus fulfilled. The phenomenon represents the trauma experienced by people with gender identity issues, who are unable to fit into one sex or the other, go through serious social segregation, and suffer the psychological torment associated with condition.

Overall, Kane explains that: it is "not about the actual chop; it's about that person who can no longer express love with his hands, [legs, and tongue]" (Saunders 89). Ultimately, the play ends in massive transformation, where:

Under the relentless pressure of Tinker's sadistic acts, the characters' bodies begin to break apart. Limbs are removed, skins removed, genitals removed, and identities forcibly changed until, in the play's final scenes, each inhabitants carries the fragments of someone else's identity. The woman says she is Grace; Grace looks like Graham, Carl wears Robin's clothes . . . the characters find refuge in mutability, transcending their own limits. (Greig 12)

This event demonstrates the ability of people in stressful conditions rallying and finding ways to make their lives function by incorporating change rather than resisting it. The eventual conversion into her brother is part of the ending for the play in which everyone is left with the features of other characters as well as the achievement of her dream to turn into her brother. The sun that comes out and her smiling at the end of the play represent this satisfaction she derives from the voluntary mutilation.

2. CONCLUSION

As a play in its entirety, *Cleansed* draws powerfully from events taking place in former Yugoslavia. The civil war that broke out in Bosnia along ethnic lines caused by political intolerance was directly implied in the play. In what was termed as a case of 'ethnic cleansing', Serbian forces killed thousands of innocent citizens because of their ancestral difference. In the worst of these attacks, more than 8,000 men and boys were shot to death in 1995. The aim was to ensure that the ethnic groups from which the victims came would be suppressed with such a heavy toll on their reproductive male population (Bildt 115).

In response to this, Sarah Kane, just like many other creative around the world, created the play to address the issue. The concept was that after Tinker punishes the characters and tortures them as he did, the end product was a 'Cleansed' person, delivered from their sins by figurative fire. Of course the end result was that the 'clean' characters, representative of the diverse members of the society, were either dead or they had lost their identity. This indicates how futile it is to try to force people to be the same: the differences are what make the world function properly.

For Kane, she decides to retain the savagery of violence as a disgusting reminder of what has been done in concentration camps all around the world. She fuses the familiar with the unfamiliar to reproduce the terrifying shock of the instantaneous use of social areas like the deployment of gymnasiums in Bosnia as torment chambers. However, due to the complacency of audiences to expect humorous shows in theatre, the current atmosphere was not receptive to the kind of reception she required to deliver with the gravity the current issue required. She thus uses savage torture, physical and sexual assault, and bloody amputations to confront us with things that no one dares to face. As direct or indirect players in the barbarism, Kane endeavours to instil even though the history is a shameful testament to man's

humanitarianism, addressing the issues is much better than hiding behind selfish cares and comforts of our blissful existence.

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