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Critique of Media and Contemporary Society in Sarah Kane's *Blasted*

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Abstract

Sarah Kane's *Blasted* is one of the most controversial plays in 1990s and has influenced lots of playwrights as well as theatre critics. The play draws a wide range of severe criticism from the critics, actors and directors but at the same time the play has become remarkable for the presentation of violent, brutal and gruesome acts on stage. This research paper tries to analyse the play as a critique of contemporary media, society and of the attitudes of contemporary people. The play draws a parallel discussion of Ian, one of the main characters, who is represented in the play as a common man in the British Society and then focuses on the soldier who is the victim of war crime. The play also shows how the British media propagates the concepts and notions that manipulate the ideology of the mass and how they are responsible for creating racial hatred as well as set the 'Us-Them' binary opposition in the society. The play further analyses Kane's purpose of representing so much violence and sexuality in the plays.

Keywords

The British Media; 'Cool Britannia'; Function of Society; Experiential Theatre; In-Yer-Face Theatre; Theatre of Extremists; Sarah Kane; *Blasted*.

After Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* in 1956, the most remarkable play that shakes Britain from its core and draws vituperative criticism from all corners for its representation of onstage violence and graphical representation of anal sex, cannibalism, grotesqueness, homosexuality, torture, pain, death, atrocity etc., is written by a young woman playwright, Sarah Kane, whose quite different vision of reality and sense of security and protection in society from that of contemporary cultural attitudes lead her to write such a landmark play *Blasted*. The play was first staged on 18th January, 1995, in Royal Court Theatre, London, and since then it shifts the boundary of stage to a new dimension by appropriating and modifying the content of unrepresentable on stage. Besides Kane the emergence of a host of writers in mid 1990s like Mark Ravenhill, Philip Ridley, Martin McDonagh take the British theatre by storm for their presentation of new content (social taboos) using new techniques that herald a new era in the British theatre which Aleks Sierz termed as In-Yer-Face Theatre.

Aleks Sierz defines In-Yer-Face theatre as "any drama that 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 and provoking alarm" (4). For Sierz, In-Yer-Face theatre is shocking because "it is new in tone or structure, or because it is bolder or more experimental than what audiences are used to" (4). In-Yer-Face theatre challenges the established notion of theatre that dictates "what can or what should be shown onstage" (4). As Sierz further defines, "Unlike the type of theatre that allows us to sit back and contemplate what we see in detachment, the best in-yer-face theatre takes us on an emotional journey, getting under our skin. In other words, it is experiential, not speculative" (4). Sarah Kane's drama fits best

in this category as her drama projects relentlessly brutal and violent experiences of her characters on stage that forces her audiences to undergo similar emotional and psychological experiences in the theatre.

Though this In-Yer-Face theatre is not a self-claimed group or movement which does not have any manifesto or aim or determined goal but the common thematic content and techniques, common anger against the contemporary society, common and shared belief in the anti-establishment political, social, economical, and cultural concept and common belief against the 'cool Britannia' of the then Blair government which projects London as a cultural brand in the global arena are some major components that bind these young playwrights under an umbrella. They are all invective against the contemporary society for the so called 'cool' attitude that governs the mood of contemporary society emphasizing on individualism rather than family as a whole. This new form of theatre comes up as an avant-garde theatre in the mid 1990s as a protest against the Thatcherism, financial cutbacks, rampant commercialism, hostile culture, consumer capitalism, social inequality, sexual discrimination, violence and war—the era in which this host of young writers grew up and experienced the world first hand with critical sensibility.

In order to shock her audiences from their cool whatsoever attitudes, which makes them emotionally paralyzed and indifferent towards the injustice of society, and bludgeon them to ponder over the prevailing violence and moral depravity in contemporary culture, Sarah Kane unashamedly uses blatant eroticism, sexual perversion, and extreme on stage violence as weapons of shock tactics. Her plays represent deeply unsettling scenes in which morally depraved characters display their bestial nature and break social taboos in an attempt to involve audiences emotionally in the events on stage, immerse them in the sickening futility of their own social environment and ultimately make them aware of the barbarity in the ruthless world.

With a belief in putting her audiences through an experience in the theatre to purge them of their sickening complacency, she prevents herself being didactic

and prefers in action that haunts her audience. "I'm not interested in sloganizing," she says, "No one would listen to me. But what you can do is put people through an intense experience. Maybe in a small way, from that, you can change things" (Christopher 8). In an interview Kane explains further, "If we can experience something through art, then we might be able to change our future because experience engraves lessons on our hearts through suffering whereas speculation leaves us untouched..." (qtd. in Stephenson and Langridge 133.) This is why her theatre is also known as experiential theatre.

This is exactly the reason why Kane has written *Blasted* with full of gruesome acts that draws equally violent and harsh criticism from the critics and journalists from its first day enactment in the Royal Court theatre. Jack Tinker for *The Daily Mail* in London referred to the play as "a disgusting feast of filth" and for *The Sunday Telegraph* John Gross termed the play as "a gratuitous welter of carnage, cannibalism, male rape, eye gouging and other atrocities". Charles Spencer's review of the play was even harsher:

Blasted isn't just disgusting, it's pathetic. Miss Kane may kid herself that she has written a searing indictment of Britain today. What she has actually produced is a lazy, tawdry piece of work without an idea in its head beyond an adolescent desire to shock...*Blasted* is a work entirely devoid of intellectual or artistic merit. It seems sure to cause a rumpus, but the piece isn't even worth defending on the grounds of cultural freedom. (40)

But few dramatists like Mark Ravenhill, Harold Pinter, Michael Billington and Edward Bond appear in support of Kane and Edward Bond goes on saying that the play comes "from the centre of our humanity and our ancient need for theatre" (qtd. in Saunders 49) and declares that Kane is one such promising young playwright whose play is fruitful for making a more humane and self-conscious society.

Despite the bitter criticism and castigated as immoral, Kane appears very calm and defends herself in the following way:

The violence in this play is completely de-glamorized. It's just presented...Take the glamour of violence and it becomes utterly repulsive. Would people seriously prefer it if the violence were appealing? You'd think people would be able to tell the difference between something that's about violence and something that's violent. I don't think it's violent at all. It's quite a peaceful play.
(Benedict)

She criticizes the hostile reception to her play and sarcastically attacks the media which is indifferent to the numerous violent crimes taking place in the society. She says in an interview that when the play was performed in London:

[t]here was an earthquake in Japan in which thousands of people died, and in this country a fifteen-year-old girl was raped and murdered in a wood, but *Blasted* got more media coverage in some newspapers than either of these events. (qtd. in Sierz 130)

She further attacks media by saying that “the thing that shocks me most is that the media seems to have been more upset by the representation of violence than by the violence itself” (qtd. in Sierz 97).

The second half of the play is written in direct response to the Bosnian War that took place during 1992-1995 after the breakup of former Yugoslavia in which Slovenians and Croatia declared independence from former Yugoslavia after the fall of Berlin Wall and collapse of Communism in 1990. During the war, ethnic cleansing of Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Croats took place in the areas controlled by the Bosnian Serb Army. The mass rape of women, murder of elderly men and young children, willful killings, forced pregnancies, torture and other heinous crimes were committed in the camps to which media is negligent in reporting the incidents. In 1993 when Kane was writing *Blasted*, she saw a report on TV and wanted to establish a connection between the domestic violence that happens in a hotel room in Leeds and the inhuman war crimes committed in the centre of Europe. She says in an interview with Dan Rebellato in 1998:

I think with *Blasted* that it was a direct response to material as it began to happen...I knew that I wanted to write a play about a man and a woman in a hotel room, and that there was a complete power imbalance which resulted in a rape. I'd been doing it for a few days and I switched on the news one night while I was having a break from writing, and there was a very old woman's face in Srebrenica just weeping and looking into the camera and saying- 'please, please, somebody help us, because we need the UN to come here and help us'. I thought this is absolutely terrible and I'm writing this ridiculous play about two people in a hotel room. What's the point of carrying on? So this is what I wanted to write about, yet somehow this story about the man and the woman is still attracting me. So I thought what could possibly be the connection between a common rape in a Leeds hotel room and what's happening in Bosnia? And suddenly the penny dropped and I thought of course it's obvious, one is the seed and the other is the tree. I do think that the seeds of full-scale war can be found in peace-time civilisation. (Rebellato)

The whole play is actually a bitter criticism of the indifferent attitude and apathy of contemporary society and of the role of western media that fails to fulfill its responsibilities in reporting heinous crimes and decimation of lives of people in a country. When media is busy in reporting the insignificant incidents enlisting some trivial local crimes, the society is busy in indulging in leisurely activities, drinking and sex. In the play Ian plays the part of a man in a society who is ignorant of the ongoing crimes and indulges himself in his own recreation through drinking and smoking as well as he is the media of the western world as he plays the role of a journalist who does not deal with foreign affairs rather with personal stories. In his conversation with the soldier, he depicts his responsibilities as a journalist in the following way:

I do other stuff. Shootings and rapes and kids getting fiddled by queer priests and school teachers. Not soldiers screwing each other

for a piece of land. It has to be...personal...No joy in a story about blacks who gives a shit? Why bring you to light? (Kane 46)

Kane, in fact, here through the mouth of Ian satirizes the Western media, especially the British media, which in its quest to put an end to the violence actually fails to condemn the real violence and inhuman crimes by denigrating the perpetrators and victims of the crime as merely 'Other' to whom the British people are not interested. The pain and sufferings of 'Other' do not bring in remorse in the lives of the British people for which they do not want to explore the real cause of the sufferings of these 'blacks' and it goes unreported. In Ian's words, "This isn't a story anyone wants to hear" (Kane 45). Kane through the play most seriously warns the audience about the ability of the media for inciting the racial hatred by creating the binary opposition of 'us-them' in the mind of the British people who are unaware of such genocide because of media's role in manipulating the ideology of the mass. This racial hatred is again represented through Ian who is proud of his Welsh origin and hates the 'Other' so much so that despite being repeatedly requested by the soldier to report the pain and sufferings of the victims of war crime and his desperate move to convince Ian by saying, "Tell them you saw me. Tell them . . . you saw me", Ian apathetically replies, "It's not my job" (Kane 46). In the beginning of the play Ian tries to manipulate Cate, his former girlfriend, by expressing his abhorrence for the 'Other' when he says, "Hate this city. Stinks. Wogs and Pakis taking over" (Kane 4) and when Cate raises an objection to his statement, he retorts back to her, "You a nigger-lover?...You like our coloured brethren?" (Kane 4).

The process of instilling the racial hatred in the mind of people is done vehemently as many people of other countries, especially from Indian Subcontinent and South East Asia, move to London in search of a better job and better life as London has become a 'lifestyle' and hub of cultural brand at that time. Obviously, a group of people see this as an intrusion in the cultural milieu of Britain and also a threat to the equation of job seekers and vacancies available in the country; for which they want the outsiders or non-Britishers to be

deported by the government at which government officially does not pay any heed. This attitude of government and its desire to promote London as a cultural brand in the global arena lead this group of people to promote violence against 'Others' in the country by manipulating the common ideology of mass against 'them'. Though Ian in his effort to convince Cate fails here but his failure is not the failure of a common man rather the failure of the media that seeks biased report to be published.

In her own caustic satirical tone Kane actually parodies the media in the play when Ian dictates a news report over a telephone. Ian goes on to dictate in the following tone:

A serial killer slaughtered British tourist Samantha Scrace in a sick murder ritual comma, police revealed yesterday point new par. The bubbly nineteen year old from Leeds was among seven victims found buried in identical triangular tombs an isolated New Zealand forest point new par. Each had been stabbed more than twenty times and placed face down comma, hands bound behind their backs point new par. Caps up, ashes at the site showed the maniac had stayed to cook a meal, caps down point new par, Samantha comma, a beautiful redhead with dreams of becoming a model comma, was on the trip of a lifetime after finishing her A level last year point. Samantha's heartbroken mum said yesterday colon quoting, we pray the police will come up with something dash, anything comma, soon point still quoting. The sooner this lunatic is brought to justice the better point end quote new par. (Kane 12)

The language of this news report is such as to raise sympathy for the dead girl and the news has been presented as some story with minute details like a gossip. The inefficacy of media and its heartless apathetic attitude is reflected here when just after this Ian mentions over the phone, "Scouse tart, spread her legs. No. Forget it. Tears and lies, not worth the space. No" (Kane 12). So it is media which censors the news to be published and not the gravity of the crime or any

rationality of publication is to get any importance or a space in the news. Besides media is going to publish only what happens in the locality without giving priority to the international affairs. Ian's mechanical and monotonous dictation of the news over the phone is a proof of media's mechanical reworking on the incident, how trivial it may be, happening in the nearby area; thus presenting a gossip like news for the mercenary purpose to the mindless people who are engrossed in their own physical pleasures.

But Kane from the beginning of the play puts a warning to the media and contemporary society by presenting Ian in a dying condition or at least who is acutely suffering from some serious disease because of his un-quenching thirst of liquor and non-stop smoking. Even Ian is himself aware of his own pathetic condition and knows that even heart transplant surgery cannot save him. He aggravates his own condition with more drinking, smoking and sex but he does not want to face death. This diseased condition of Ian is actually, for Kane, the dying condition of the media that forgets its own responsibilities and degraded itself to furnish gossip like news instead of reporting to the ethnic cleansing happening in a country. The parallelism between Ian and media can be further drawn in terms of responsibilities too where like media, Ian is too escaping from his own familial responsibility and in a rendezvous with his own ex-girlfriend in an expensive hotel room of Leeds he tries to seduce her first and then at night rapes her resulting in an incessant bleeding and acute pain endured by her. Kane actually condemns the attitude of the people and of the media by showing that such continual indifference and apathy cannot be borne further and consequently they have to pay a heavy price in near future.

Happy and satiated with reporting the local news and promoting London as a cultural brand, the British media is actually trying to keep its inner cultural, emotional, psychological and national boundaries intact by shunning the happenings of outside of the country and focusing on what is local that can be marketed and advertised in the global ranging from clothes to music to style secrets. In other words, while the media is propagating the idea of London as a

lifestyle in the whole world, on the other hand this media tries to keep its countrymen away from external influences that may change the concept of 'cool Britannia' and this shunning of the external and internal cultural boundaries is reflected in Ian's over cautious and protective acts in opening the door of the hotel room as well as always being alert with his revolver out whenever there's a knock on the door. The media is incapable to realize the gravity of the crime happening in the locale and in other countries.

Kane's narrative shows that for all sorts of violence committed, everyone is responsible. Ian is the perpetrator of the domestic violence over Cate, the soldier is victim of war crimes as he lost his girlfriend who was brutally raped and killed by the enemy soldiers and to take revenge he has himself become the same perpetrator of war crimes by raping and killing the others, as in his own words, "Doing to them what they done to us" (Kane 46); and Cate, though she is the victim in both sense, of domestic violence and later on of war crimes as she exchanges her body to get food, is actually mute spectator and an accomplice of the war crimes because of her own ignorance of the happenings around the world and her disinterestedness in learning the same. But Kate puts her in a sympathetic tone by making her naïve, child-like at the age of 21, and to some extent mentally disabled who is prone to hysteria in pressure or when is confronted with the harsh reality. But that by no way makes her less responsible for the crime taking place elsewhere. Actually Cate is like the people of the country who are collectively responsible for their indifferences towards the camp rapes and the war crimes, and when public crime meets the personal crime, everyone be he/she innocent or not, has to suffer and pay for not raising their voice against such crimes earlier. This is exactly what happens with Cate in the play.

Despite the media's effort to protect the internal boundaries from mingling with the external ones, it is unable to keep it unblended as the arrival of the soldier in the room marks the collapse of the internal and external boundary from which the war crime is injected in the domestic violence resulting in the

realization of Ian, as a common man of England. Further the removal of boundary between the internal and external is accentuated by the explosion in the hotel room which from then onwards become a battle field itself where the war crime is committed upon a subject of perpetrator of domestic violence. Ian is the perpetrator of the domestic violence as a common man and the British people have not shown any concern to mitigate the sufferings of the victims of domestic violence and thousands of such domestic violence goes on unreported everyday in England. Ian on the one hand looks for personal story to publish in the newspaper but his own personal account of domestic violence does not come, according to Ian, under the category of the said personal story to be brought into the light. This hypocrisy of Ian is of the British people who remain busy in their own lives, with their own personal progress, and with their own increasing emphasis on their individualities. Ironically the heinous crime committed by Ian upon Cate is perpetrated by the soldier upon Ian as he is forced by the soldier for anal sex. The rape of Ian by the soldier is transference of pain of the war victim to the perpetrator of domestic violence who is unaware of the sufferings of the war victims and also unwilling to report the incidents as, for Ian, no one will be interested to listen to the story of the war victims. Unable to convince Ian for reporting the heinous crimes, the soldier decides to transfer pain to Ian and, during the rape of Ian, the soldier in a deep despair to seek escape from the chain of unending violence cries his heart out for redemption of the crime he has been committing during the war. Taking out the eyes of Ian and eating out those eyes by the soldier are the real gruesome acts which the soldier does in utter despair after failing to convince Ian to get the sufferings of war victims published in a newspaper.

The act of eye gouging is crucial and important as Ian, a newspaper journalist, despite having his own eyes to view the reality of the world is unable to comprehend the reality and even not eager to learn the reality and not only that when he is told by a war victim about the cruel reality of war and their sufferings he is not ready to publish it just because of his racial hatred. So

symbolically despite having his eyes he is blind and this is what Kane wants to point out about the contemporary people and society and also about the media which despite their enough rationality and intellectual sources they are just not eager to know about the barbarity of the world; so in a way this act of eye gouging and anal sex is symbolical punishment meted out to the society and media from Kane who is very critical about the role of media and complacency of contemporary people in the society. Kane's attitude is not that of immoral or plunging into despair rather to indict the contemporary society and media as the accomplice of what has been happening in the world just because of their conceited and arrogant attitude of being superior and promoting 'us-them' set in a world where collapse of the internal and external may occur at any point of time.

Ian after suffering from immense pain inflicted by the soldier realizes the bitter truth of the world but for which he is not in a situation to publish it, an act which may become redemptive for him but his inability to do so and the realization of truth leads him to utter despair where even his linguistic capability is not enough to explain that desperate condition. Ian is like Rose, Harold Pinter's protagonist character in *The Room*, who clings to her room as a safe haven that protects her from the cruel external world, turns into blind after seeing the external violence present in the room in the form of her husband's cruel treatment to a visitor named Riley which in turn breaks her illusion of being safe in the cruel world that she was not able to see while she had eyes but in her blindness she is completely capable of realizing the threat but accepts her position in the same room with more awareness and insight into the violent world. This condition of utter despair leads Ian to an existential crisis where he proclaims, "No God. No Father Christmas. No fairies. No Narnia. No fucking nothing" (Kane 52) and degrades himself merely on fulfilling his basic instincts of shitting and wiping the shit with a paper, and in masturbation which is Kane's sheer prophetic warning to the contemporary society for its inadvertent accomplice in brutal crimes. The act of wiping the shit with a paper, which

contains local news that Ian read out during his conversation with the soldier to show at what the interest of the British people lies, is also very important as through this Kane wants to condemn the contemporary media which is of no use because of its failure to create awareness among the countrymen.

The soldier's account of war crimes, torture, rape, pain, death, cannibalism etc. during war are innumerable inhumane acts that portrays human beings as the inhabitants of any ancient barbaric civilization where men struggle to survive in hostile circumstances. Even in the hotel room the soldier and Ian struggle with each other for food and basic needs of human being though Ian surrenders to the force executed upon him by the soldier. Relegated to the position of an animal, human beings are exposed to their primary instincts and Kane's chaotic and dystopic vision of the contemporary society through the presentation of brutal violence is a reminder to the society and the media about the consequence of their racial hatred, unwillingness to learn about 'Other', apathetic and indifferent attitude towards the everyday heinous crimes and ethnic cleansing of a race in any country.

Thus a close reading of Kane's *Blasted* shows that the play is actually a critique of the attitudes of contemporary people and of media. Kane's theatre is experiential in which the audience's journey from the personal to the universal is full of shock as the revelation is not what the audience wants to see rather a bitter truth of their own lives in the real world of which they are unaware and which is hard to believe for them. Graham Saunders aptly remarks after comparing Kane with the Jacobean dramatists:

Kane's vision, like her renaissance predecessors, is also an uncompromising one. For her, tragedy is a case of the writer, actor and audience 'descend[ing] into hell imaginatively in order to avoid going there in reality'. Such a reaction is uncannily close to the philosophy that lurks behind Jacobean dramatists like John Webster, a writer also described as an extremist. [Who] embodied certain tendencies of his time to a greater extent than any of his

contemporaries...in a strange and highly individual way,” and whose plays, like Kane’s, show ‘Man’s world...[to be] a “deep pit of darkness,” [where] mankind is “womanish and fearful” in the shadow of the pit.’ (21)

The play actually points out in the face of the audience their own pathetic existence like that of Ian in the play at the end and strips the audience of their own masks that they put on to relish their own existence.

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