

Embodied Brutality: Direct Violence in Sarah Kane's *Blasted* and *Cleansed*

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Abstract: This research paper explores the theme of embodied brutality in Sarah Kane's plays *Blasted* (1995) and *Cleansed* (1998), focusing on the direct depiction of violence as a means to interrogate power dynamics, gender hierarchies, and the human psyche. Through a psychoanalytic lens, the analysis reveals how Kane's onstage representations of rape, torture, mutilation, and war-related atrocities serve not merely as shock tactics but as profound critiques of patriarchal structures and societal detachment from real-world horrors. The paper argues that Kane's work embodies Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty by forcing audiences to confront the visceral reality of violence, thereby challenging traditional theatrical boundaries and fostering empathy through discomfort. Drawing on feminist theories of sexual violence and rape mythology, the detailed examination of key scenes in both plays highlights how brutality is gendered, with female characters often symbolizing vulnerability while male figures perpetuate cycles of domination. Ultimately, this study concludes that Kane's brutal aesthetics subvert normative gender roles and expose the interconnectedness of personal and political violence, offering insights into contemporary issues of oppression and trauma.

I. INTRODUCTION

Sarah Kane (1971–1999) stands as a transformative force in contemporary British theatre, particularly within the "in-her-face" movement of the 1990s, which prioritized raw, confrontational depictions of taboo subjects to provoke audience engagement. Her first play, *Blasted*, debuted at London's Royal Court Theatre in 1995 amid widespread controversy, with critics lambasting its explicit violence—including rape, eye-gouging, and cannibalism—as gratuitous and obscene. However, subsequent re-evaluations have positioned it as a groundbreaking work that merges personal abuse with global conflict, inspired by the Bosnian War's media coverage. Following this, *Cleansed* (1998) escalated the brutality, set in a nightmarish institution where characters endure systematic torture, amputation, and forced gender reassignment, blending horror with poignant explorations of love and identity. This paper investigates "embodied brutality," conceptualized as the tangible, physical enactment of violence on stage that assaults the audience's senses, compelling a bodily and emotional confrontation with human vulnerability and societal decay. Kane's methodology blurs distinctions between private and public spheres, illustrating how interpersonal violence mirrors broader systemic oppressions. The central thesis argues that through direct violence, Kane critiques patriarchal power, debunks rape myths, and employs psychoanalytic depth to unravel trauma's subconscious impacts, ultimately subverting gender norms and fostering audience empathy. The paper is structured to provide introduction; a literature review surveys key scholarly contributions; a detailed analysis dissects pivotal scenes from both plays; and a conclusion synthesizes findings with implications for modern theatre and society.

2. Literature Review

Scholarship on Sarah Kane's works has proliferated since her untimely death, with a focus on violence as a core element of her dramaturgy. Early critiques, such as those surrounding *Blasted*'s premiere, often dismissed her as sensationalist, but later studies reframe her brutality as purposeful critique. Dina Zhurba's thesis (2008) examines sexual violence in *Blasted*, arguing that rape scenes highlight gender power imbalances and challenge "rape in general" as a transhistorical tool of female subjugation, emphasizing the under-discussed female-on-male dynamics. Similarly, Al-Badainah's psychoanalytic study (n.d.) applies Freudian and Lacanian lenses to violence in *Blasted* and *Cleansed*, viewing acts like mutilation as eruptions of repressed desires and societal neuroses. Feminist perspectives dominate discussions of gendered violence. Ian Ward (2013) explores rape mythology in Kane's plays, noting how she intensifies violence through repeated rape motifs to debunk victim-blaming narratives and feminist debates

on sexual coercion. Selen Biroğlu (2019) analyzes rape and war in *Blasted*, illustrating how conflict escalates personal violations, including male victimization and cannibalism, to critique wartime atrocities. In *Cleansed*, Biroğlu (n.d.) traces torture and mutilation as institutional tools, aligning with Artaud's cruelty to expose identity suppression. Broader theoretical frameworks include Artaud's influence. Amanda Taylor (2014) discusses Kane's subversive performance, where cruelty witnesses' audience complicity in violence, subverting gender through bodily violations. Dilek Inan (2021) positions violence in both plays as interrogating male dominance, enabling female empowerment via resistance. Queer and vulnerability theories emerge in works like Catarina Martins (n.d.), who examines gender fluidity and queer desire in *Cleansed*, viewing violence as symptomatic of identity assumption. Elisabeth Angel-Perez (2022) analyzes torture's role in subjectivity construction, comparing Kane to historical depictions. Trauma and ethics are addressed in Graham Saunders (2002, cited in studies) and Ken Urban (2001), who see Kane's catastrophe ethics as fostering empathy through horror. Recent papers, like Hasan Al-Momani (2023), discourse violence's ambiguity against women, while Leonardo Zin (n.d.) balances violence with love. This review reveals gaps in interdisciplinary approaches, which this paper addresses by synthesizing psychoanalysis, feminism, and cruelty theory.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Violence in *Blasted*: Rape, War, and Personal Devastation.

Blasted begins in a Leeds hotel room, where journalist Ian attempts to seduce the vulnerable Cate, escalating to off-stage rape that sets the tone for the play's descent into chaos. This initial act embodies brutality as a private violation, highlighting power imbalances: Ian, a middle-aged man with racist and misogynistic views, exerts control over Cate, who stutters and faints under stress, symbolizing feminine fragility in a patriarchal context. The rape is not shown explicitly at first, underscoring cultural tendencies to silence female victims, but its aftermath—Cate's distress and scattered flowers as a metaphor—reinforces its lingering impact. The intrusion of a Soldier, evoking Bosnian War atrocities, shifts the violence to a public scale. The Soldier rapes Ian, gouging out his eyes and committing suicide, inverting gender roles by feminizing the male body through violation. This scene challenges rape mythology by depicting male victimhood, yet it ultimately reaffirms rape as a gendered act targeting the "feminine" other, as Ian's assault metonymically echoes Cate's earlier trauma. Psychoanalytically, the Soldier's stories of war rapes represent the return of repressed collective guilt, forcing Ian (and the audience) to witness horrors detached from daily life. The play culminates in Ian's cannibalism of a dead baby and his self-entombment, embodying ultimate degradation. These acts critique societal numbness to violence, as Kane draws parallels between domestic abuse and global conflict, suggesting that personal brutality mirrors geopolitical savagery. Through embodied brutality, Kane subverts the male gaze, making violence a vehicle for interrogating patriarchal order.

3.2 Violence in *Cleansed*: Torture, Mutilation, and Institutional Oppression

In *Cleansed*, violence is institutionalized within a university-turned-concentration-camp under the sadistic Tinker, who orchestrates tortures to "cleanse" inmates of deviant desires. The play opens with Graham's overdose and resurrection, followed by brutal acts like Rod's finger amputation and Carl's tongue removal for expressing love, symbolizing the suppression of emotion in oppressive regimes. Gender subversion is evident in Grace's arc: after her brother's death, she undergoes electroshock, rape, and gender reassignment surgery, emerging with Carl's severed penis, blurring binary identities. This embodies brutality as a tool for deconstructing norms, where mutilation exposes the body's constructed nature under patriarchal control. Rape scenes, such as those involving Robin and the Woman, perpetuate myths of victim blaming, yet Kane juxtaposes them with tenderness, like Carl and Rod's relationship, to humanize victims amid horror. Psychoanalytically, Tinker's experiments reflect a god-like projection of sadistic impulses, while characters' endurance signifies resilience against trauma. The play's structure—20 fragmented scenes—mirrors the disjointed psyche under violence, aligning with Artaud's cruelty by assaulting spectators with unrelenting imagery. Comparatively, both plays use direct violence to link personal and systemic brutality, with *Blasted* focusing on war's intrusion into the domestic and *Cleansed* on institutional erasure of identity.

4. Conclusion

Sarah Kane's *Blasted* and *Cleansed* exemplify embodied brutality as a dramatic strategy to dismantle complacency, expose gender inequities, and probe the depths of human suffering. Through rape, torture, and mutilation, Kane not only shocks but also invites ethical witnessing, challenging audiences to confront real-world parallels like ethnic cleansing and domestic abuse. Psychoanalytically, these acts reveal the subconscious undercurrents of violence, while feminist readings underscore their role in debunking rape myths. Kane's legacy lies in her subversion of theatrical norms, using cruelty to foster empathy and critique patriarchy. Future research could extend this to her other works or contemporary adaptations, affirming her enduring relevance in addressing embodied violence in an increasingly desensitized world.

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