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Blending of Personal Trauma and War Trauma: A Critical Study of Sarah Kane's *Blasted*

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Abstract:

Sarah Kane's *Blasted* is one of the most controversial plays in the recent British theatre. Highly criticized and denounced for the representation of on stage crude violence and vulgarity, this play deals with lots of contemporary issues about which audience is either ignorant or indifferent. This research paper shows how the characters in this play are victim of domestic as well as war violence that lead them in the state of trauma and despite their enormous effort to come out of that painful traumatic existence they, on the contrary, are involved in a chain of cyclical violence that further deteriorates their traumatic condition. They revisit the site of the events leading them to trauma for an escape which they are unable to find and ultimately succumb to death.

Keywords: Trauma, violence, existential crisis, Sarah Kane, *Blasted*, Experiential Theatre, In-Yer Face Theatre.

The emergence of new playwrights in mid 1990s in Britain has diverted the course of British theatre to a new horizon with full possibility of exploring the mundane life of human beings that have been remaining in the dark till that time. They focus on the daily experiences of human beings applying new techniques that are innovative as well as shocking enough to push back the audiences to ponder over about their lives. One such playwright is Sarah Kane whose experiential theatre has become quite controversial for depiction of violent images of war, sex, rape, grotesqueness, cannibalism, massacre, abuse, obsessed love, verbal cruelty, homosexuality, torture, pain, death and atrocity etc. in crude forms and that confronts the audience with the crude reality of contemporary world and lives. This experiential quality which she has used to mirror the postmodern life to the audience is one of the important features of her plays as well as the new playwrights of mid 1990s. "Experiential is the reference point Kane herself used for the theatre she wanted to make... It is a theatre that must be lived through" (Wallace 89). Audience felt a direct physical contact with the graphic violence, thought and feeling depicted on the stage. Aleks Sierz defines this experiential theatre as:

[t]he kind of drama, usually put on in studio spaces, that aims to give audiences the experience of actually having lived through the actions depicted on stage. (But not literally!) Instead of allowing spectators to just sit back and contemplate the play, experiential theatre grabs its audiences and forces them to confront the reality of the feelings shown to them. (Sierz 2010)

Sarah Kane uses experiential theatre to depict violence and its traumatic effect on human beings. "The ferocity images within Kane's texts suck both the performers and audience into a catastrophic cycle of life and death. Kane invites their participation not to shock them with the rawness of violence for violence's sake, but rather to break open a deep exploration of the lack of compassion in the human experience" (Moshy, 2008: 30). Her attitude is clear when she says in an interview with Rodolfo di Giammarco:

[...] Violence is the most urgent problem we have as species, and the most urgent thing we need to confront. Personally, I say there is nothing better to write about. I don't like violent films, that's true, and I don't like violent scenes; and the reason I don't like violence is when I happen to see *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction* or the other films of that type I feel like using violence. When I wrote *Blasted* I tried to discuss what it means to be violent and to suffer violence, and it's like the music that's played when you're cutting off an ear. You are in a state of extreme suffering; it's not possible you can like it for the music. (Giammarco, 1997)

Thus Sarah Kane has used violence to wake up his audience from the deep slumber in the theatre by transforming their experiences from seeking pleasure to witnessing torture and dehumanizing process to shatter their beliefs of happy go around life. With this specific purpose she depicts violence and its unending traumatic consequences on the victims and has taken theater as a hammer to unease the audience from their comfort zone.

By presenting violence in her plays Kane shows the traumatic effect her characters face as victims of violence. All her characters are victims of this meaningless cycle of violence and the traumatic effect leads them to perpetrate violence as they continue visiting the site of violence either physically or psychologically. Therefore these victims after visiting the site of violence reenact the main act that traumatizes them. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* Cathy Caruth says:

In its general definition, trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, or other repetitive phenomena. Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness. The repetitions of the traumatic event- which remain unavailable to consciousness but intrude repeatedly on sight- thus suggest a larger relation to the event that extends beyond what can simply be seen or what can be known, and is inextricably tied up with the belatedness and incomprehensibility that remain at the heart of this repetitive seeing. (91)

Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery* says,

Psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless. At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force . . . Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they rarely occur, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary adaptations to life. Unlike commonplace misfortunes, traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death. (33)

There is a possibility that traumatic memories may be triggered from the witnessing of representational events which, in themselves, may be considered as traumatic. Though on an individual level the specific trauma may not be possible to represent actually, it can be accessed through some images or action or language which can be then termed generically traumatic. Judith Herman further says that,

Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community. They shatter the construction of self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. They violate the victim's faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis. (51)

This is a key to the psychological makeup of the victim as trauma causes a deep chasm between the understanding of victim as an individual and reality of the world in which they live in leaving them in a state of questioning to the continuous ordering of life that is beyond the normal comprehension of the victim. Trauma has a power that destabilizes the 'construction of self' which depends on the relationship with others and on the human experiences.

Thus Sarah Kane in presenting several forms of violence is actually presenting how violence begets violence and how her characters after being victimized of traumatic events reenact those events in the present situation. In short they re-experience those traumatic events in their memory or in their physical form but are unable to differentiate between past and present. But Sarah Kane's characters are able to differentiate between past and present but they are unable to ignore the impact of traumatic events. Trapped in the past traumatic events, her characters seek refuge by revisiting the site of trauma, in this case the human body, to relive the past for the sake of seeking an escape from the painful experiences.

Sarah Kane's first play *Blasted* is a depiction of verbal, physical and sexual violence and its traumatic impact upon the psyche of characters. Vehemently attacked by the critics for onstage representation of crude and raw uninhibited violent images to project the reality of contemporary world, Sarah Kane's *Blasted* is actually a presentation of chain of visceral images through which she tries to depict the impact of violence in human society. The play is empowered by its humanizing aspect of fear to death which connotes the traumatic subconsciousness of death in terms of social, political, historical, cultural and psychological memory of violence in a society. Peter Buse says, "Trauma is a kind of brutalizing shock, and it is for submitting her audiences to exactly this, in heavy doses, that Kane has been both applauded and dismissed" (173). She writes *Blasted* in direct response to the physical, spiritual and sexual dimensions of violence of Bosnian war in former Yugoslavia after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communism in the 1990s. In this regard in the play violence is not an aberration but a concrete reality of the war. In *Blasted* she draws parallels between one couple's violated relationship in a hotel room in Leeds and ethnic cleansing and rape camps of a civil war at the centre of Europe. In an interview with Rebellato, Sarah Kane points out:

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, 1998)

All the characters, Ian, Cate and Soldier, are victims of past traumatic events and they are in search of an escape from the painful experiences of the past. The relationship between Cate and Ian is itself affected by the trauma of break up between them. Cate and Ian were once lovers but for a long time they have been separated. Their rendezvous in an expensive hotel

room of Leeds is an effort to reconcile their broken relationship, especially from Ian's part. Ian tries to seduce Cate in the hotel but Cate does not reciprocate to his feelings, though finally she succumbs to the approach of Ian.

Ian's relationship with his wife cannot be called normal as, for Ian, she has turned into a lesbian relationship and left him. Talking about his family Ian says, "His [Matthew, his son] mother is a lesbos. ... I loved Stella (his wife) till she become a witch and fucked off with a dyke..." (Kane 17). The trauma of his relationship with wife unconsciously occupies his mind and it reflects in the conversation between Ian and Cate as Ian repeatedly points out to the lesbian relationship of Cate in which she has not been involved. Finally Ian points out to her attire which, according to him, is like that of a lesbian. He even asks her whether she has slept with her boy friend Shaun. Ian's preoccupation with this sexual relationship and sexual activities of Cate, his former girlfriend, emerges from his broken relationship with his wife and his wife's infidelity towards him. He is equally indifferent towards his son to whom he will send his funeral invitation only as he knows that his son hates him. About having kids, his own opinion is too harsh, "Don't even think about it. Who would have children. You have kids, they grow up, they hate you and you die" (Kane 20). Unable to keep his own family in unison and failure to check his wife's extra marital affair, Ian gradually slips into self inflicted pain by indulging in heavy drinking and smoking, as well as accuses Cate of those activities that his wife, according to him, was once involved.

The personal trauma of Ian leads him towards acquiring sadistic pleasure which is also reflected in his news paper report that he normally covers. In his sarcastic tone he reports the news through which he seems to acquire sadistic pleasure, "Tears and lies, not worth the space" (Kane 12). Despite his mostly report dealing with death, he himself has an ambivalent attitude towards death. He seeks death to escape from immense pain in his chest and the agony of his trauma but on the other hand he is unable to face the fit of Cate, "Can't stand it. ... Death. Not being" (Kane 9-10). Later on in the Scene II he says after getting scared of a car banging sound outside of the hotel room, "I'm not scared of cars, I'm scared of dying" (Kane 27).

It is not only his personal trauma but also his past job of being a killer for a secret agency that made him do some awful task of killing people and disposing off their bodies to save the nation, is responsible for his present traumatic condition. His past job also forces him to leave Cate as he thought it would be dangerous for her. His dealing with the death of people as the killer left a deep impact in his psyche. Still in his delusion of the present worldview he tries to justify his own act of killing people with an illusory concept of patriotism, "It's my job. I love this country. I won't see it destroyed by slag" (Kane 30). He explains fiercely what is apparent as the result of looking at things from one side, "Can't always be taking it backing down letting them think they have got a right turn the other cheek SHIT some things are worth more than that have to be protected from shite" (Kane 31). What he has done in the past haunts him in his present days as he is always afraid of being killed by someone else or someone may break in his room in the hotel for which he appears to be extremely cautious with every knock on the door. On the one hand he dealt with death and on the other hand he is afraid of getting killed.

To escape from the harsh realities of life, his approaching death, and his trauma, he again and again visits to the site of trauma, either in one form or in other, here in the form of a hotel in a rendezvous with his former girlfriend to seek solace and peace. But when in that refuge from the external world Cate talks about the cruelties of life and whether he can shoot her or anyone with his gun, Ian desperate to find peace and love in his life says to Cate, "When I'm with you I can't think about anything else. You take me to another place" and that another place, for Cate, is "It's like that when I have a fit" (Kane 21), a place between life and

death where one can't visit willingly rather with a nervous breakdown caused by some cataclysmic event. Cate further explains:

The world don't exist, not like this. Looks the same but--

Time slows down.

A dream I get stuck in, can't do nothing about it.

One time--

Blocks out everything else. (Kane 21)

The place of solace for Ian turns into a place of trauma which becomes inescapable for anyone and where one keeps visiting again and again insatiably. In one's trauma one remains temporally stuck in keeping everything of external world cut off from that temporal existence, waiting to return in the real world, and unable to differentiate between two existences of life as both look the indistinguishable. On this spur of a moment one is not able to realize the familial bond or relationship, one is beyond the question of one's own identity and with the fractured comprehension of rationality and logic one's belief of oneself is shattered. Ian and Cate both are victims of their traumatic relationships and both have experienced this in their own circumstances.

In her relationship with Ian, Cate has experienced the same trauma of ignominy and humiliation that Ian has had from his wife. But Cate cannot remain aloof from Ian and returns to a rendezvous in a hotel once again where she, despite her effort to keep herself away from any sort of physical intimacy, faces physical advance, in fact physical assault, from Ian who tries to seduce her and even to rape her in his strive to achieve mental solace from his inescapable traumatic existence. Unable to realize her traumatic mental condition and insensitive towards her feeling, Ian makes fun of her frugal economic condition, of her brother for mingling with the 'coloured brethren' (Kane 4), and of her effort to get a job in an advertising agency to which he deliberately teases her for her inability to get a job that leads her to a hysterical fit. Though Ian proclaims his love for Cate but it appears that he brings her in the hotel room only for sexual encounter for which he repeatedly but unsuccessfully pleads to Cate leading Ian resort to force himself upon her. Cate, a victim of the domestic violence first in her family and then by her former boyfriend Ian, appears to be mentally unfit as she is a girl of 21 years but mentally she seems still a child. Traumatized in her earlier relationship, she still returns to her former lover to make non-sexual love as she repeatedly denies to have sexual intercourse but sucking her thumb like a child denotes her craving for her unrequited love that leads her in a dilemma of making love to what extent. Like a child she believes in a world full of love, a world without any violence and not killing people for which she hates Ian. Her denial to learn the way of the violent world and denial to grow up the way Ian wants makes her an outsider in this real world, makes her an inhabitant of "the world (that) 'don't exist'" (Kane 21) where she is stuck between dream and reality, where according to her Ian is a 'nightmare' (Kane 31). This hysterical fit is a process of transcending from the real world to the world of her traumatic existence where she dwells in between life and death, dream and reality. Inability to face any confrontation, torture, teasing, pressure as it leads her to the hysterical fit is in actuality the representation of her severed existence in this world as she wonders about her own world, "Just before I'm wondering what it'll be like, and just after I'm thinking about the next one, but just as it happens it's lovely, I don't think of nothing else" (Kane 21). Being a victim of domestic violence she finds her solace, unlike Ian, in her traumatic existence and she is kind of obsessed with that existence. She accepts it as a kind of refuge from cruelties of the world and this is the basic reason why she avoids sexual intercourse with Ian. Even in the next morning when she is not willing to stay in the hotel because of getting raped by Ian, she is again in trauma of being raped that makes her bleeding to which Ian replies very coldly, "Drink lots of water. ... It'll heal" (Kane 32). As a victim of trauma she is in a state of trance.

Sarah Kane's treatment of trauma takes a new turn when she introduces the character of the nameless soldier in the Scene II by merging the space of personal sphere and national sphere, by blending the domestic trauma and war trauma, by placing the victim of domestic trauma against the victim of war trauma. The soldier remains nameless for a special purpose-- to denote the universal quality of human beings trauma of war. The soldier could have been anyone from the war torn countries; thus the trauma of war could have been of anyone. This subtle blending of personal and universal element through the postdramatic strategy of an on stage explosion in the hotel room, thereby making it a battle front itself, is the reminder of bringing down of the fourth wall in Brechtian theatre. Violence ensues further violence and it fulfills the cycle of a violence entailing a situation from where no one can escape, where everyone is entrapped in a traumatic existence without any hope of redemption. This can be seen in the character of the nameless soldier who is himself in a state of severe trauma of war after witnessing the rape and murder of his wife Col, "Col, they bugged her. Cut her throat. Hacked her ears and nose off, nailed them to the front door" (Kane 45). This killing of his wife leaves a deep imprint in the psyche of the soldier from which he tries to escape in a futile way, only to return in the path of violence again and again like a victim of trauma. In his way to redemption of the war trauma he revisits the site only to commit the same crime that had happened with his wife:

Went to a house just outside a town. All gone. Apart from a small boy hiding in the corner. One of the others took him outside. Lay him on the ground and shot him through the legs. Heard crying in the basement. Went down. Three men and four women. Called the others. They held the men while I fucked the women. Youngest was twelve. Didn't cry, just lay there. Turned her over and-- Then she cried. Made her lick me clean. Close my eyes and thought of-- Shot her father in the mouth. Brothers shouted. Hung them from the ceiling by their testicles. (Kane 40-41)

The brutal killing of the family also depicts the brutality of war and ensuing war trauma of the victims who survive. The soldier before killing the father of the family closed his eyes and thought of his wife and her sufferings. Though it remains unuttered but is obvious. Being a representative of the external world and the victim of a war trauma the soldier brings the horror of war in front of a journalist, Ian, as if to make it a news to bring it in the light to the wider audience who is unaware of this severe violence or at least remains indifferent to the crime taken place during war. For the soldier as if this is a way to his redemption of the sins and crime committed by him and his rescue from the traumatic existence of a war victim but the apathy of the audience is reflected in the following conversation between the soldier and Ian:

Soldier: Proving it happened. I'm here, got no choice. But you. You should be telling people.

Ian: No one's interested.

Soldier: You can do something, for me--

Ian: No.

Soldier: Course you can.

Ian: I can't do anything.

Soldier: Try.

Ian: I write. . . stories. That's all. Stories. This isn't a story anyone wants to hear.

Soldier: Why not?

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Soldier: Doing them what they done to us, what good is that? At home I'm clean. Like it never happened. Tell them. . . you saw me. Tell them. . . you saw me.

Ian: It's not my job. (Kane 45-46)

The above conversation emphasizes an aspect that victim of war trauma, the soldier, wants redemption by letting the world know about truth of war whereas the world is not interested to know the truth. Failing to convince Ian for what the soldier wants Ian to do, he narrates further horror of the war and sufferings of the people who have become cannibal to quench their thirst and hunger to which he was the witness and that has left an indelible impression of trauma in his mind. This trauma revisits when the soldier takes the eyes of Ian out to quench his thirst and hunger in the hotel room.

The transference of war trauma and domestic trauma happens when the soldier sodomizes Ian on stage as before that Ian is a victim of personal relationship but now becomes a victim of war after being sodomized. Ironically, for Ian this is the fulfillment of cycle of violence that he has inflicted on Cate by raping her in the hotel room. His revisit to the site of trauma leads him to the cycle of another trauma about which either he is ignorant or keeps ignoring till then and thus the escape from his traumatic world becomes impossible and gradually he lapses to the space between life and death. His fear of death puts him in an existence from where he even cannot embrace death. On the other hand the soldier during sodomy tries to seek an escape from his own inescapable traumatic existence by crying his heart out. But his inability to find redemption and escape from the cycle of trauma leads him to suicide-- death which makes an end to everything.

Finally to escape from this intolerable pain Ian tries to commit suicide but is not able to do so as Cate hands him over a blank revolver. Realizing the inescapable way of trauma he lapses into utter despair, "No God. No Father Christmas. No fairies. No Narnia. No fucking nothing" (Kane 52). Once again he seeks solace and escape from his traumatic existence in the arms of Cate but she keeps a distance from him. After her departure from the room to seek food, desperate Ian resorts to masturbation, strangling himself, shitting and then cleaning, crying, laughing, and finally eats the corpse of the baby culminating in the transference of war trauma in his existence, like that of the soldier. His hysterical laugh at the climax of the play is reminiscent of the hysterical laugh of Cate. He faints to death but wakes up when Cate enters with food.

Cate does not remain untouched from the trauma of war as she exchanges her body to get food. When she returns blood is seeping between her legs and becomes a victim of war trauma like Ian. Like that of Ian she also experiences the cycle of trauma. Unlike Ian she is not despair to die as her belief on God prevents her to commit suicide rather she emerges at the end of the play as a character who faces the insurmountable cycle of trauma with calm and composure manner in her own characteristically innocent way and ready to face another trauma in this dystopian and chaotic world. The feeding of Ian by Cate at the end of the play and Ian's acknowledgement of that by thanking her is the only relief and display of humanity in Sarah Kane's traumatic world of *Blasted*.

Sarah Kane's vision of dystopian world and representation of her characters' traumatic condition shocks the entire theatre going audience and that's exactly is her purpose. To make the audience aware of the ongoing violence in the contemporary world, she presents on stage representation of the real world incidents in the face of audience and it can be said that after observing the traumatic condition of her characters the audience actually experience the trauma in the first hand realizing their own painful existence in this world. The shock that they receive in the theatre is not less than the sufferings of the on stage characters and this is why the pleasure seeking theatre going audience are unable to accept the on stage representation of violence.

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