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AN ANALYSIS OF SARAH KANE'S *BLASTED* AS A WORK OF IN-YER-FACE THEATRE

Nilay ERDEM AYYILDIZ*

Abstract

Sarah Kane is one of the most significant playwrights of the 1990s' in-yer-face theatre. Kane, who believes in the power of theatre in changing people's lives, aims to shake the audiences' senses not to remain silent about the unpleasant events around them. In this sense, her *Blasted* is an achievement. The play exemplifies all features of in-yer-face theatre. By examining *Blasted*, the study aims at indicating how in-yer-face theatre makes the spectators face the things which are unsaid and concealed. Through its vulgar language, sexuality, violence, and atmosphere constructed with catastrophic plots on the stage, the play violates a lot of conventional theatrical features and breaks all taboos.

Keywords: *Sarah Kane, In-yer-face theatre, Vulgar language, Sexuality, Violence.*

YÜZLEŞTİRMECİ TİYATRO ESERİ OLARAK SARAH KANE'NİN *BLASTED* ADLI OYUNUNUN BİR ANALİZİ

Özet

Sarah Kane, 1990'ların yüzleştirmeci tiyatrosunun en önemli yazarlarından biridir. Tiyatronun insanların hayatlarını değiştirmedeki gücüne inanan Kane, etraflarındaki hoş olmayan olaylara sessiz kalmamaları için izleyicilerin hislerini sarsmayı amaçlar. Bu anlamda, *Blasted* eseri bir başarıdır. Oyun, yüzleştirmeci tiyatrosunun bütün niteliklerini örneklemektedir. Bu çalışma, *Blasted* adlı oyunu inceleyerek, yüzleştirmeci tiyatrosunun izleyicileri dile getirilmeyen ve gizlenen hadiselerle nasıl yüzleştirdiğini göstermeyi amaçlar. Sahnedeki argo dil, cinsellik, şiddet ve felaket senaryolarıyla oluşturulan ortamıyla, oyun birçok geleneksel tiyatro özelliklerini yıkarak bütün tabuları kırar.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Sarah Kane, Yüzleştirmeci tiyatro, Argo dil, Cinsellik, Şiddet.*

* Dr. Instructor, School of Foreign Languages, Firat University, ELAZIĞ.

e-mail: nerdem@firat.edu.tr (orcid.org/0000-0002-1779-8464)

The English playwright Sarah Kane (1971-1999) was born in Essex to the evangelical parents, and she was a committed Christian in her adolescence, but then gave up those beliefs. She was an educated playwright. Struggling with severe depression for many years, Kane committed suicide at London's King's College Hospital where she was being treated for her psychological disorder (Saunders, 2002: 224-225). Dying at the age of twenty-eight, Kane, in this short lifespan, wrote five plays, *Blasted* (1995), *Phaedra's Love* (1996), *Cleansed* (1998), *Crave* (1998), and *4.48 Psychosis* (1999), one short film *Skin* (1995), and two newspaper articles for *The Guardian*. In her works, she deals with such topics as death, incest, violence, especially sexual violence, and hetero- and homosexual love. With her works, she goes over the boundaries of the common reality. Aleks Sierz characterizes Kane as one of the "big three of in-yer-face theatre" with her shocking and disturbing plots and her alarming word choice for their descriptions (2001: 12). The "big three" mentioned by Sierz refer to Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, and Anthony Neilson, who are the pioneers of this theatre. Kane's *Blasted* exemplifies in-yer-face theatre. Therefore, the paper aims at identifying the features of in-yer-face theatre and exploring them in *Blasted*, which is known as "one of the most important British plays of the decade [the 1990s]" (Urban, 2001: 36). Thus, the study intends to reveal to what extent the play features theatrical properties such as filthy language, violence, sexuality and catastrophic plots performed on the stage, all of which are prerequisite for in-yer-face theatre.

"In-yer-face-theatre" is defined by Aleks Sierz as "any drama that takes the audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes it until it gets the message" (2001: 4). Obviously, he emphasizes the perlocutionary act of the theatre, which touches the minds and souls, provokes and shocks in order to reach its spectators, smash their taboos, and make them disgust the heroes or hate them. In other words, it shakes the audience's emotions so deeply that they cannot leave insensible to the happening on the stage. The term "in-yer-face" appeared in American journalism in the mid-seventies and became popular in everyday language in time. It may be claimed to mean that you are forcing somebody to see something close up so that your boundaries are being destroyed. Thus, in-yer-face-theatre is such a kind of theatre, which puts the audience in the situation, which is performed on the stage (Sierz: 2001, 4). Thus, it may be claimed that the theatrical style of in-yer-face theatre draws an apparent contrast to the Brechtian theatre which aims at alienating the audience's emotions from the plot by improving a critical consciousness to the normalized issues in the society. In this regard, in comparison to the Brechtian theatre, in-yer-face theatre doubles the impact of bitter realism through traumatic emotions which shocking scenes evoke in the audience. Urban notes that the 90s' generation argues that their plays often criticize the conservative ideology that draws boundaries for the plays by excluding some characters and subject matters considered to be unsuitable for art. However, Kane's concept of the theatre was significantly different from the conservative one. She noted in her interview: "There isn't anything you can't represent on stage. If you are saying that you can't represent something, you are saying you can't talk about it, you are denying its existence. My responsibility is to the truth, however difficult that truth happens to be" (qtd. in Urban, 2001: 39). Evidently, Kane's notion of theatre is significantly different from conventional one because it includes everything to say, act and display on the stage so that she can confront the audience with the truths in the world.

Sierz mentions two separate versions of in-yer-face theatre as the hot version and the cool version by stating the difference between them. For him, the hot version is usually only for a small circle of people exposed and enjoys the "aesthetic of extremism" (2001: 7). The players use a very striking language and explicit actions. Hence, the impressions of the audience are unforgettable through the explicit aggression and violence. On the other hand, cooler version avoids radical provocations with the help of stylistic and language devices. The most usual of them is the comedy. However, whether hot or cool this theatre is to wake up the deepest senses of spectators and make them think over common norms and rules. The main purpose of the in-yer-face theatre is to shock the spectators by showing them disgusting scenes full of pain and violence (Sierz, 2001: 7-8). As for *Blasted*, it is definitely a hot version of the in-yer-face theatre.

Blasted takes place in a hotel room in Leeds and revolves around an alcoholic middle-aged journalist called Ian and his ex-girlfriend called Cate. The terminally ill Ian takes the young woman to the hotel room where he seduces and rapes her. Then, the hotel room changes into a secret war zone. The play also begins to follow an unconventional style. The third character, A Soldier comes in with his gun. Cate escapes, and the Soldier points his gun at Ian's head. The Soldier tells about the horrible experiences that he has experienced including the

observation of his former lovers being raped and murdered. The Soldier tries to sodomize Ian and then blinds him by taking out his eyes. Then, he commits suicide by shooting at his own head. Then, Cate returns to the hotel room by bringing an abandoned baby with her. When the baby subsequently dies, she buries it under the floorboards and then leaves the room in order to look for food. Left alone, Ian eats the baby. Cate returns with some food, which we learn she has obtained in return for sexing with some soldiers outside. The play ends with Cate feeding Ian with some food and drink, and his monosyllabic, "Thanks" (Kane, 2001: 5.61).

The play, which is comprised of only one act and five scenes is set in one place; only the hotel room. In addition, it may be understood from the expressions "Darkness" and "Light" that the play takes more than one day. While the main plot is around Ian and Cate, the encounter between Ian and A Soldier is the subplot. Sierz claims about in-yer-face theatre: "the language is usually very filthy, characters talk about unmentionable subjects, take their clothes off, have sex, humiliate each other, experience unpleasant emotions, become suddenly violent" (2001: 5). This unconventional theatre uses startling tactics to wake up the audience's consciousness which is put to sleep by the social norms by subjecting them to the 'intolerable' happenings to the characters on the stage. Therefore, the playwrights of this movement intend to investigate the human nature and its barriers and bounds; they intend to question their foundations and sense. The other reason for this shocking tactic is searching for deeper meaning, an attempt to see just how far they can go (Sierz, 2001: 5). The authors try to challenge the traditional distinctions such as good and bad, right and wrong, normal and abnormal. These terms are normally out of the question for most people and of course, questioning them becomes easily shocking.

Regarding all these characteristics mentioned above, it is understandable why "an unprecedented barrage of negative criticism" *Blasted* created when it was staged at the Royal Court's Theatre Upstairs for the first time (Saunders, 2004: 69). It is also because of Kane's striking and harsh style in her play, she was labeled as "the bad girl of the stage" and "the karate kid of the British theatre" (Bull, 2005: 117). Her distinctive rebelling position seems to result from the movement's characteristics which are so unconventional and out of the borders. Nevertheless, Kane notes: "My plays certainly exist within a theatrical tradition" and adds: "...I am at the extreme end of theatrical tradition" by emphasizing the extremity of in-yer-face theatre within the theatrical tradition (qtd. in Saunders, 2002: 26).

One of the points distinguishing in-yer-face theatre from any kinds of plays is about its themes. This kind of theatre concentrates on the issues, which most people feel too painful, too acute or too mortifying. This is the reason why they avoid these things; it shows us all unpleasant things; human beings are capable of. However, at the same time such things as violence, sexuality exist in people's nature, and they are curious about these forbidden sides of the human nature and emotions associated with them. Thus, it may be claimed that in-yer-face theatre touches upon raw senses of the spectators to react the happenings not only on the stage but also around the world. Kane's *Blasted* also portrays the traumatic happenings in bitter life such as war, rape, violence, and loss. Although there is not a single word "Bosnia" in the play, Kane states that she has been inspired by the Bosnian conflict of the early 1990s. She states in an interview with Saunders:

I switched on the news one night while I was having a break from writing [she had started writing *Blasted*], 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.' And I was sitting there and watching it and I thought no one's going to do anything...I thought this is absolutely terrible and I'm writing this ridiculous play about two people in a room. [...] 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.' (Kane, qtd. in 2002: 48)

Kane indicates various kinds of violence throughout the play. For instance, she combines domestic violence between Ian and Cate in a hotel room and public violence demonstrated by means of Ian and Soldier after being inspired by the news related to the Bosnian war. As Malpede argues: "...theatre seems uniquely suited to portray the complex interpersonal [and intrapersonal] realities of trauma" (1996: 168), the key word here is "trauma". Caruth describes trauma as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which

the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (1996: 11). *Blasted* draws a graph of trauma which destroys peoples' lives without a reason or warning. Kane notes about the play: "It was about violence, about rape, and it was about these things happening between people who know each other and ostensibly love each other...suddenly, violently, without any warning, people's lives are completely ripped to pieces" (qtd in Sierz, 2001: 101-102). Accordingly, trauma leads a cyclical path throughout the play. For instance, Ian and Cate's relationship revolves around a vicious cycle of wounding for each other. The victimized Cate says she has a boyfriend called "Shaun" with whom she has not slept yet (Kane, 2001: 1.1.16). Nevertheless, she feels forced to surrender Ian's seduction and violence. Ian undergoes a constant oscillation between two opposite feelings; he both loves and hates, and he feels both fear and aggression at the same time. After insulting Cate on almost every occasion, he says: "Cate, love, I am trying to look after you. Stop you getting hurt" (Kane, 2001: 1.1.17). Cate is also a problematic character. She suffers from epilepsy and is unemployed. She often sucks her thumb throughout the play and is abused by Ian. She deserves the label "masochistic woman," because, despite Ian's ill-treatment, she is always worried about him and returns to the hotel room twice after going out. Her body is scarred by rape and war outside, nevertheless she returns with some food, and she shares it with the raped and blinded Ian, whose head is seen on the surface of his self-made grave, under the rain from the roof dripping on.

The Soldier attends this circular traumatic relationship later. The Soldier's girlfriend, Col is told to be raped and murdered by a group of "bastard soldiers" in the war (Kane, 2001: 3.47). In return, the Soldier rapes Ian, who has just raped Cate in the hotel room. The Soldier forces Ian to visualize one of the brutal scenes he has been a participant of in the ongoing civil war outside and he tells:

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...Closed my eyes and thought of --...shot her father in the mouth. Brothers shouted. Hung them from the ceiling by their testicles (Kane, 2001: 3.43)

He also tells about the happenings to his girlfriend: "They buggered her. Cut her throat. Hacked her ears and nose off, nailed them to the front door" and "ate her eyes" (Kane, 2001: 3.47), and then he applies the same violence on Ian's body. In fact, he exerts his power over Ian with the help of the gun he directs at Ian's head because he is overwhelmed with his lust for revenge of his murdered girlfriend. In this regard, Saunders argues: "The tale he [the Soldier] recounts and the literal re-enactment on Ian of her [his girlfriend's] rape and blinding culminate in his suicide, as the only way of truly connecting with his murdered lover" (Kane, 2001: 2004: 71). Thus, the witnessed violence is reflected upon the witnesser's behaviors. The severe effect of violence in a war is reflected by the Soldier devouring Ian's eyes and raping him. The scene of the Soldier's eating Ian's eyes is horrific and meaningful one. It is noteworthy that Ian is a middle-class journalist in Yorkshire, and it is implied that he reports the events related to violence in the society as if it were ordinary and common one in his job. For instance, while he is reporting the serial killer's slaughtering a young British model to somebody on the phone, he speaks "in a cold voice" (Kane, 2001: 1.13). It is very obvious that Ian, just like many other journalists, isolates himself from the brutality of the events, which he reports. He uses an insensitive language while reporting the brutal events in order to conceal the horror and make facts more tolerable for people. He also comments that it was the victim Samantha Scrace's fault, as she was the one who spread her legs and it was not worth the space to talk about (Kane, 2001: 1.13). As claimed by Buse, Ian proves to be a "bad witness" because "not only does he make the events he reports seem routine and commonplace but he is detached, both literally and symbolically, from those events" (2001: 185). It is the Soldier in the play who reminds him of his true responsibility as a journalist:

SOLDIER. Some journalist, that's your job.

[...]

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

[...]

SOLDIER. [...] Tell them you saw me. Tell them... you saw me.

IAN. It's not my job.

[...]

Why bring you to light? (Kane, 2001: 3.47-48)

There is no other more effective way of making the spectator aware of the true responsibility of a journalist and drawing their attention to this point than allowing the Soldier devouring Ian's eyes. Kane tells Saunders in her personal interview: "[I]f you're a reporter your eyes are actually your main organ. So I thought rather than have him castrated, which felt melodramatic, I could go for a more kind of metaphorical castration" (qtd. in 2004: 72).

It is significant that Kane does not give a specific name to the Soldier. He can be interpreted as the representation of violence hidden in human nature and society, or he embodies all types of military atrocities including group rapes and torture, and killings. On the other hand, Kane reports about him in her interview with Saunders:

The Soldier is a kind of personification of Ian's psyche in some sense, and it was a very deliberate thing. I thought the person who comes crashing through that door actually has to make Ian look like a baby in terms of violence – and I think that's successful. It's difficult because when you look at what Ian does to Cate it's utterly appalling, and you think, 'I can't imagine anything worse', and then something worse happens. (qtd. in 2004: 72)

The Soldier may be taken as the debased part of the character Ian. He feels himself insignificant, and that is why he wants Ian to report about him even if it is a negative issue and a negative association. Perhaps, he wants to feel that he has been given importance in life before his death. It seems that Ian's violence toward Cate is overwhelmed by the Soldier's violence toward him. The Soldier also seeks to respond to the violence applied to his girlfriend. Furthermore, the raped and blinded Ian, then, responds the violence applied to him by eating the dead baby, which Cate has buried before going out to look for food. Thus, the lines between domestic violence and public violence, and the victim and the victimized are blurred. The only living being who does not drive the cycle of violence applied on herself/himself in the play is the abandoned baby brought by Cate to the hotel room. It dies of hunger and then it is eaten by Ian when he is alone in the hotel room. It is striking that the playwright does not attribute any sexes to the baby and does not refer to the baby as he or she. Thus, it may be claimed that the baby represents the future of all human beings. In this context, the baby as a representative hope for humanity is even is victimized, and it cannot take its revenge. Therefore, human beings destroy their future by themselves. As noted by Kane herself above, the characters' lives are observed to be "*completely ripped to pieces*", and as noted by Pena, the play, as a work of "*in-yer-face theatre,*" intends to arise "*spectators' awareness of their own passivity in front of several forms of violence, and invite their audience to actively denounce not only wars and conflicts taking place in distant places but also in their own immediate surroundings*" (2009: 111). The demonstration of violence is impossible to overlook or ignore, it shows naked pain, suffering, humiliation, and torturous death. Violence is shown literally as well as figuratively. It is primitive and irrational.

The author's success in "*in-yer-face theatre*" seems to be lying in the way of representation of different types of violence which are becoming normalized in life. In-yer-face theatre presents violence and trauma in too "*real*" for the spectators to ignore. There are many extreme scenes in the play; Ian's raping Cate and masturbation over Cate's body and the Soldier's raping Ian and sucking his eyes out, pissing on the bed and Ian's eating up the dead body of the baby. These scenes appear to be a naturalistic representation of some extremely unpleasant acts. As the content of the play is away from the conventional rules the traditional drama, the way of presentation is also uncommon. It is more effective than a movie seen at the cinema because the spectators watch live action in real time with real actors. Thus, their taboos are broken not in private space but a public one, in surrounding of the other people who also feel confused and uneasy. According to Sierz, live performance can make some scenes almost unendurable. Otherwise, the spectators think that play is something unreal. On the other hand, they invest emotionally in it, because they can empathize with the actors who are real and close enough even to be touched while performing. (2001: 7). It is obvious that the in-yer-face theatre is characterized through the use of such private and intimate situations as sex and in this case unavoidable nudity. The nudity on the stage disturbs spectators because they feel offended with something which people try to keep secret and not to show in public. Here is an example from the play:

IAN. *masturbating.*

IAN. *cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt*

...

IAN. *shitting. And then trying to clean it up with newspaper.*

[...]

IAN. *tears the cross out of the ground, rips up the boards and lifts the baby's body out. He eats the baby. He puts the sheet the baby was wrapped in back in the hole. A beat, then he climbs in after it and lies down, head poking out of the floor. He dies with relief. It starts to rain on him, coming through the roof. (Kane, 2001: 5.59-60)*

Considering Ian's acts when he is alone in the hotel room, after he has been raped and blinded by the Soldier and Cate has gone out, it may be claimed that they are the actions that belong to private space and cannot be acted lively in front of many spectators, and this stands out the most distinctive characteristic of in-yer-face theatre. It breaks a rule of human morality. Accordingly, Duggan claims an acceptable point by stating:

It is the physical connection between bodies in a space that gives any theatrical experience its power; being part of the live event, watching bodies move in front of you, places you in a direct corporeal/phenomenological relationship with the performers and with the representations/images being presented in the piece. (2007: 54)

Moreover, Garner argues that the experience of the theatre is registered through the body by stating: "[t]he embodied I of theatrical spectatorship is grounded, one might say, in an embodied eye" (1994: 4). In other words, the unconcealed violence on the stage catches the spectators and they can discover some unpleasant and disturbing truths in their nature and life.

Another perspective may be developed about the Soldier's raping Ian by feminizing him. It may be interpreted that Kane aims to break another taboo, according to which rape is about the woman, and only a woman can be raped. It is obvious that the writer seeks to turn the feminized rape issue upside down. In the play, the Soldier feminizes Ian, forcing him into a submissive role:

SOLDIER. You smell like her. Same cigarettes.

The Soldier turns Ian over with one hand. He holds the revolver to Ian's head with the other. He pulls down Ian's trousers, undoes his own and rapes him – eyes closed and smelling Ian's hair. The Soldier is crying his heart out. (Kane, 2001: 4.49)

Although Ian is a male, the Soldier still rapes him as if he took a revenge from men and tries to feel that Ian is a female by smelling his hair. Thus, Ian is presented as if he were a woman who prefers being murdered to being raped. It is obvious that another taboo is also broken in Kane's play: Rape is not peculiar to women.

Another significant characteristic of in-yer-face theatre is the filthy language used in plays. The usage of taboo words is very important in confusing and shocking the spectators, because "*humans are language animals*" in Sierz's words, and the words can offend them more as an act itself. These words have some magic power; they mark a line that is not to cross (2001: 7). Like all taboos, they protect us and make the human behavior more or less predictable. When uttered on the stage, these words have an effect of an explosion, for they are used openly and by real people. Throughout *Blasted*, such words as "bastard", "fucking", "masturbation" and "shitting" are used so many times.

In conclusion, Kane's *Blasted* exemplifies a hot version of in-yer-face theatre from beginning till the end with its filthy language, nudity, sexuality and different kinds of violence, primarily sexual violence and war. The play breaks the line between 'normal' and 'abnormal' and makes the audience question them. Thus, it subverts all conventional dramatic structures and breaks all taboos. It makes people think these things once more while observing them all over the world and experiencing in their lives. In this regard, the play takes the audience to a battle of traumas by presenting them the whole evil face of the world in a hotel room where the past, the present

and the future of humanity are interpenetrated. By uttering and performing every 'unmentionable' thing in front of people, the play holds a bitter realist mirror up to human beings to shake their senses and alert them for action so as not to greet a dark future in the world.

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