



THE INDIAN REVIEW OF WORLD LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

A Peer-Reviewed And Indexed Bi-Annual Online Literary Journal

<http://worldlitononline.net/>

ISSN: 0974-097X • Vol 15. No. II • July-December 2019



Being in Auschwitz: A Study of Sarah Kane's *Cleansed* as a Vivid Picture of Nazi Human Experimentation

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Introduction: Sarah Kane and Her Oeuvre

One of the most influential voices in modern European theatre, Sarah Kane, wrote five plays before her “suicide in 1999, just three days after the completion of her final play, *4:48 Psychosis*, [which] virtually guaranteed the visionary playwright a place in theatrical history among the likes of George Buchner, Heinrich von Kleist, and Virginia Woolf” (Earnest 153). Although Kane attracted controversy while alive now “many critics celebrate Kane’s contribution: each of her plays is an experiment in new theatrical form, challenging traditional naturalistic writing” (Hurley 1143).

Her first play, *Blasted*, was produced at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in 1995. Her second and third play, *Phaedra’s Love* and *Cleansed* were produced at the Gate Theatre in 1996 and at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs in 1998 respectively and in September 1998, *Crave* was produced by Paines Plough and Bright Ltd at the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh. *4.48 Psychosis*, Kane’s last play, premiered at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs in June 2000 and her short film, *Skin*, produced by British Screen, premiered in June 1997.

Kane committed suicide in 1999 at the age of 28. Her drama breaks away from the conventions of naturalist theatre using extreme stage action to depict themes of love, death and physical and psychological pain and torture. Extreme themes of her work such as violence and sexuality as well as their dreary outlook at life have made her a pioneer in “in-yer-face theatre” that pushes the boundaries of conventional theatre.

The Play

“*Cleansed* departed from the legible context of English playwriting and broke up into an assemblage of images with a lineage in expressionism and performance art” (Waters 379). At the beginning of the play Graham, an addict, is given an injection into his eyes by Tinker, the supreme manipulator of the institution, and he dies of an overdose. Sometime later, Graham’s sister, Grace, comes to Tinker’s institution to collect her brother’s clothes. She wears Graham’s clothes, stays in the institution and has sex with Graham who appears to her. Robin, a young boy, who has befriended Grace is tortured and then kills himself. Rod and Carl are two lovers whose protestations of love are tested by Tinker by cutting out Carl’s tongue, hands and feet. Tinker, himself, makes love with a dancing woman whom he regularly visits in a booth. Finally Grace is attacked and operated upon and is given male genitals and it is as if she is reunited with Graham through this metamorphosis.

WWII and Concentration Camps

Sparked by the 1939 Nazi invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939, WWII dragged on for six years and the occupation of Poland was followed by aggression against other countries: in April 1940 the German army attacked and occupied Denmark and Norway, in May 1940 it attacked Belgium, Holland and Luxembourg and then started occupying France. In April 1941 it attacked Yugoslavia and Greece and in June 1941 it struck its ally, the Soviet Union and meanwhile Nazi Germany concentration camps were maintained throughout the territories it controlled and occupied. In fact, “in their attempt to create a “racially pure” society the Nazis planned the extermination of Jews, as well as Slavs, Gypsies (Romanies), and others” (Mensfelt3). Auschwitz “much the same as other Nazi concentration camps, was a state institution, managed by the German state central authorities.” (Mensfelt4) and it associated “as the symbol of the Holocaust, of genocide and terror”. This camp “was set up by the German occupying forces in mid-1940 in the suburbs of Oświęcim, a Polish town that the Nazis incorporated into the Third Reich” and “from 1942 onwards – it started becoming the largest centre of mass murder of Jews.” (Mensfelt4). “The Germans isolated all Auschwitz complex camps and sub-camps from the outside world and surrounded them with towers and barbed-wire fencing. All contact by prisoners with the outside world was strictly forbidden” (Mensfelt7).

The Jews who were transported to the concentration camps were executed there or “during selection by SS doctors, those classified as fit to work or selected to undergo criminal medical experiments, were registered in the camp” and those considered “as unfit for work were murdered in the gas chambers...[including] the ill, the elderly, pregnant women, and children” (Mensfelt9) but “more than 50% died in Auschwitz of hunger, excessive forced labor practices, terror, executions, appalling conditions, illness and epidemics, punishment, torture and criminal medical experiments.” (Mensfelt8).

According to Kord “unethical experiments were exceptional and were conducted on a relatively small scale before World War II” which “represents a watershed in human experimentation” (Korda 33). But Since “a major concern of the Nazis was the “need” to remove the “inferior races”... much research was directed at methods of killing”; for example, “poisons were the subject of many of these experiments” that in one case “were secretly administered in food to four Russian prisoners, and German doctors stood behind a curtain to watch the reactions of the prisoners”; “another experiment involved the use of poisoned bullets impregnated with aconitin nitrate. Prisoners were selected and shot in the upper part of the left thigh and their deaths were observed and documented” (Korda 33). “In Auschwitz, intravenous injections of hydrogen peroxide, petrol, evipan and phenol were used to kill the more seriously ill people.” (Korda 34).

“Sterilization methods were also widely investigated” (korda 34). In sterilization of men using x-rays “the penis and testicles were subjected to irradiation for 15 minutes, and 2 weeks later, under caudal anesthesia, both testicles were removed for examination” while “no consent was sought”. “In another experiment, the “success” of x-ray burns to the ovary was studied. The irradiated women were given a spinal anesthetic, and then tied to the operating table. The abdomen was incised and the ovary removed. Often the ovarian artery was not ligated. Instruments were neither washed nor sterilized, and the victims were often fully aware of everything that took place” (Korda 34).

“Hetero plastic transplantation experiments were also carried out” during which “whole limbs — shoulder, arm or leg — were amputated from living prisoners... wrapped in sterile moist dressings and sent by car to the hospital... where a futile attempt was made at hetero plastic transplantation. The “donor” prisoners were usually killed by lethal injection” (Korda 36).

Throughout these experiments “medical practitioners justified their actions on the grounds that the Jew, the gypsy, the homosexual, the handicapped and the Slav posed a biological intimidation of the Reich. The appropriate response to such threat is to remove it, just like a burst appendix” (Korda 37).

***Cleansed* as a Picture of Nazi Human Experimentation**

In writing *Cleansed* “Kane is certainly drawn to extremes”: ““if you want to write about extreme love you can only write about it in an extreme way,”” says Kane; she adds that ““both *Blasted* and *Cleansed* are about distressing things which we’d like to think we would survive. If people can still love after that, then love is the most powerful thing.”” (Sierz 122). So “a central concern in Kane’s work... is a passionate, almost pathological identification with pain and trauma and a concomitant desire to communicate the horror of pain in its own idiom” (Waters 373). “Kane herself talked about *Blasted* and *Cleansed* as two plays in a possible trilogy about the ‘nature of war’.” (Aston 78) and in one of her interviews Kane revealed that *Cleansed* “was a response to Roland Barthes’s provocative comment in *A Lover’s Discourse* that being in love was akin to incarceration in Dachau” (Saunders 93). As a result, “as a dramatist she stages a ‘perceptual critique’ of our violent contemporary world”; to Aston “a complaint frequently made about her theatre is that it has no moral framework, but viewed in this way, Kane’s theatre is highly moral in that its purpose is to connect directly with the horror of the world and its violence, so that ‘we are compel [led] to feel that which we perceive’” (Aston 82). Kane’s “emphasis on representation of violence is not to glamorize it or insensate the audience towards horrendous images, but is to show local and global realities in a stark and shocking manner to stimulate awareness.” (KÜMBET 1203-1204).

In an interview Kane explains,

...I’ve always tried to avoid any reference to an actual situation. So in *Blasted* obviously I didn’t want to mention Bosnia because then you get into an argument with people who were actually there and have experienced it. I’ve always thought, if you can avoid actual case histories but still write about them then that’s fine... Like *Cleansed*, I didn’t want to get into the situation of: this is about Germany and the Jews. It definitely had a strong impact on me but the play is not ABOUT that, so why use that as to give something a context? ... I hope that *Cleansed* and *Blasted* have resonance beyond what happened in Bosnia or Germany specifically” (www.iainfisher.com).

According to this interview Kane “deliberately renounced explicit references to the war in Bosnia in *Blasted* and to the slaughter of six million Jews in Nazi Germany in *Cleansed*, being afraid that the texts might lose their significance and various dimensions if they were rendered too concrete and limited to only one level” (Gutscher 72). However one cannot but admit that “Kane drew inspiration from the war in Bosnia for *Blasted*, or the death camps of Auschwitz for *Cleansed*” (Saunders 15) since it “had been triggered in Kane’s imagination after reading Roland Barthes’s line that “being in love was like being in Auschwitz”” (Ravenhill).

Viewed in the light of this assumption, Kane’s purpose was “to retain the savagery of violence as a disgusting reminder of what has been done in concentration camps all around the world” especially in Germany (BİROĞLU 745). In *Cleansed*, the title, the setting and the tortures the victims go through, are all reminiscent of practices employed by the Nazis at the concentration camps.

The significance of the title of the play lies in the fact that “with the title “Cleansed” Kane may be referring to ethnic cleansing which occurred in Nazi camps where people were reduced to subjects or to Bosnia where Serbian soldiers exerted harsh torture and pain on Muslims” (KÜMBET 1203-1204).

The setting of the play is also critical since it becomes the visual representation of Kane’s ideas about war crimes and atrocities; it’s a university that is also a prison: “the institution Grace enters is

described as a university with cricket grounds and medical rooms, but it functions like a site for animal experimentation... it is a death camp but also, in a contemporary twist, a rape camp... the setting is also a house of correction, a prison and an asylum” (Waters 380). Like those imprisoned in Nazi concentration camps, the characters in the play are physically concentrated in one location: the university that is reminiscent of a concentration camp. It looks like an extermination camp where experiments are performed as well. The victims have no chance to escape. They are torn from the ones they love, are killed and are used as test subjects.

This play is a vision of “severe bodily torture”(Urban 43) and the tortures inflicted on the victims in this horrible place remind one of extermination practices by Nazi Germany during the Second World War. There are four main relationships in *Cleansed*: “Grace and Graham represent the fantasy of incestuous, identity-sharing twins; Carl and Rod are the classic couple, one member of which is idealistic, the other realistic; Tinker and the dancer represent domination and alienated love; Grace and Robin experience a teacher and pupil, mother and child rapport” (Sierz119-120). Graham is an addict, Rod and Carl are homosexuals, Grace has incestuous desire and Robin is a seemingly careless and shy person; thus their death and killing show an attempt to sterilizing those with undesirable trait slice those who were marginalized, imprisoned or murdered under the Nazi Germany. Just like the inmates of concentration camps who were subject to cruel experiments to determine how well and how long they could survive in those situations, the individuals in *Cleansed* are involuntary victims of harsh experiments as well, to test the durability of their love. There are also other qualities the play’s overall atmosphere has in common with that of Nazi human experimentation camps: the experiments are done by force and without any regard to the consent of the victims and the victims experience excruciating pain. Some characters die and those who survive suffer disabilities; it seems that Tinker wants whether to exterminate or experiment. As a doctor and physician, Tinker is supposed to help people maintain good health but unethically, he conducts medical experiments on the characters such as nightmarish explorations including amputating limbs off of the victims and transplanting them onto others.

In *Cleansed* “five inmates are imprisoned in a barbarous university, each one viciously controlled by a doctor named Tinker” (Urban 43) and their acts are scanned and scrutinized by him. In fact, Tinker, a central character, is both a healer and a torturer. Tinker’s act of injecting a fatal dose of heroin into Graham’s eye at the beginning of the play, which leads to his death, hints at the experimentation on twins in Nazi camps during which chemicals were injected into twin’s eyes to change their eye color.

Grace, Graham’s sister, undergoes severe pain and suffering although against all odds she survives in the end. Grace is beaten by an unseen group of men for having sex with Graham and is raped by one of the anonymous Voices. Graham passively holds Grace’s head in his arms while she is raped and then presses his hands onto Grace and her clothes turn red where he touches, blood seeping through. Simultaneously, his own body begins to bleed in the same places since they have become a single soul inhabiting two bodies. The situation is worsened when there is a long stream of automatic gunfire and again Graham, unable to act to change the situation, shields Grace’s body by his own. The wall is splattered with blood and Grace’s body is thrown into rigid shock by an electronic current and as a result bits of her brain are burnt out. Grace and Carl undergo involuntary metamorphosis sex change operation towards the end of the play, which shows the Nazis’ experiment of cutting open the victims’ limbs and introducing different bacteria to the wound to test a new drug and its results on the wound, usually done under an unsterile condition: Grace lies unconscious on a bed; she is naked with a strapping around her groin and chest; there is blood where her breasts should be and Carl is lying next to her. He is naked with a bloodied bandage strapped around his groin. So they do not receive postoperative care including pain management and wound care.

Robin, the young boy who befriends Grace, undergoes similar violent and humiliating processes: Tinker commands Robin to take off all Graham's/his clothes and to give them to Grace; so he stands shivering with his hands over his genitals which reminds one of the freezing experiments performed by Nazi doctors during which victims had to tolerate extreme cold to find a way to help German soldiers face the harsh weather conditions of Russia and Eastern Europe. Moreover, Tinker pulls Robin up by the hair while he is asleep, and he is force-fed; Tinker forces Robin to eat an entire box of chocolates which has a double layer in a span of minutes. Affected by fear and stress, Robin wets himself and Tinker rubs Robin's face in his own urine.

One of the categories of prisoners at KL Auschwitz was homosexuals (Men felt 8) and one of the relationships introduced in the play is that of Carl and Rod, a homosexual couples. When Tinker hears Carl promising he'd die for Rod, he puts it to the test and he is punished with successive dismemberments. In scene four, a pole is pushed a few inches up Carl's anus. Then Tinker cuts off his tongue with a large pair of scissors; Carl's mouth is full of blood and Tinker makes him swallow the ring on Rod's finger. In scene eight, Carl writes a message in the mud and Rod reads it. Tinker who is watching, cuts off Carl's hands. In scene thirteen, Carl begins a frenzied, frantic dance of love for Rod while making grunting noises. Suddenly the dance loses rhythm, Carl jerks and lurches out of time and his feet stick in the mud. Tinker who is watching forces him to the ground and cuts off his feet and the rats carry them away. Finally, Tinker cuts Rod's throat, he dies and tinker orders to burn him. Carl struggles to get to Rod but is held by Tinker. Cutting off limbs in the play, refers to amputation of limbs in concentration camps in an effort to attach them to those lacking the particular limbs and their being carried away by rats points to their unsuccessful and useless attempts to transport these limbs to other humans. Maybe Kane's fascination with rats also emphasizes the fact that instead of using rats, inhuman experiments are performed on these prisoners. They symbolize disease and uncleanliness as well reminiscent of filthy, unsanitary and hazardous conditions of Nazi concentration camps.

The showers in the university sports hall are converted into peep-show booths and Tinker visits the dancing Woman there; although Tinker has an affectionate tone at the beginning, suddenly "in a climactic, cathartic moment...he unleashes a torrent of verbal abuse at the woman and demands that she open her legs and touch his penis to prove that «she» ... is really a woman" (Rayner 60-61). So the peep-show booths can be considered as having sexual connotation and overtone with the slot as a vaginal orifice and the Woman represents sexual exploitation.

Conclusion

Kane's *Cleansed* can be interpreted as her concern for social and political issues and by representing violence in her play, Kane purposefully attempts to dramatize our violent world using theatre as her medium. The play portrays a vivid picture of violence, torture and unethical human experimentation similar to those performed in Nazi concentration camps as a source of inspiration for Kane and as a background against which to explore love. These tortures include dismemberment, rape, forced feeding, surgical procedures, gunfire, physical assaults, injections and hanging. To Sierz the central theme of the play is "the ability of love to survive fascistic, institutional cruelty" and the fact that "love is the one basis of hope in an evil world" (120). The story is set in a death camp and the victims are brutally tortured to prove "that love is strong and that lovers endure" (Sierz123); a topic that is itself worth pursuing in another research.

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