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STAGING VIOLENCE IN SARAH KANE'S *BLASTED* & ALI ABDULNEBI AL ZIADI'S *FOURTH GENERATION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY*

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ABSTRACT

Violence occurs as a daily human action all over the world; it may cause so many kinds of damage to individuals as well as to society: physical, psychological, or both. Many literary authors of different genres have tried their best to portray violence by showing its negative effects, especially playwrights because they have the chance to show people the dangers of violence through performance on stage to warn them against such negatively affected action. It has been a human action since the beginning of human life on this planet when the first crime happened on earth when Cane killed his brother Abel.

In our modern world, people are witnessing daily violent actions as a result of destructive wars that turned the humans into brutal beings. This paper deals with violence as it occurred as a result of the atrocities of wars in two different societies during the same period of the 1990s: A European country (probably Bosnia or Britain), as reflected in Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995), and Iraqi, as shown by Ali Abdulnebi Al Zaidi's *Fourth Generation* (1997). Although violence takes different shapes, still it has the same destructive effects on the life of people who are involved in. The researcher tries to show how both writers have staged violence during the performances of their plays.

Keywords: *Violence, atrocities of war, in-yer-face theatre, Sarah Kane, Ali Abdulnebi Al Zaidi, Blasted, Fourth Generation.*

Violence can be defined as “an act of physical force that causes or is intended to cause harm. The damage inflicted by violence may be physical, psychological, or both.” Violence is a rather common type of human action that takes place in the whole world. Violence can be conducted by different ages, especially adults who are always involved in violent actions. It is caused by many reasons and it has many negative effects on the individuals as well as the society (*Britannica Encyclopedia*).

Sarah Kane (1971-1999) was a 1990s revolutionary British playwright who set apart the dominant dramatic mode of ‘kitchen sink’ realism in the post-war period. What distinguishes her plays, Mel Kenyon believes, is ‘raw emotion’ in

combination with ‘theatrical experimentation’ (Iball, 5). Her suicide in 1999 has resulted in canonizing her work. David Greig believes that her collected work, *Sarah Kane Complete Plays*, throughout her brief career feels like ‘the sound of a door shutting’ (Sierz, Print).

Sarah Kane belonged to that style of dramatic and theatrical practice, called *in-yer-face*¹ theatre. It is defined as an experimental form of theatre that applies the agenda depicted by early twentieth-century avant-garde artists, “shock[ing] audiences by the extremism of its language

¹ **In-yer-face theatre** is the kind of theatre which grabs the audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes it until it gets the message. The sanitized phrase 'in-your-face' is defined by the New Oxford English Dictionary (1998) as something 'blatantly aggressive or provocative, impossible to ignore or avoid'.

(<http://www.inyerfacetheatre.com/what.html>)

and images; unsettl[ing] them by its emotional frankness and disturb[ing] them by its acute questioning of moral norms” (Qtd. in Ablett, 78).

Kane’s *Blasted* (1995), as one of the most controversial plays that appeared on London stages, was inspired by the Bosnian civil war that lasted from 1992 to 1995 which caused atrocities to the society at that time. Kane wanted to reflect the horrors of war and the violence it causes to the place where it occurs. That is why the play becomes a list of atrocities like: “anal rape, frottage, urination and defecation, baby eating, cunnilingus, fellatio, the sucking and chewing of eyeballs”. That is why there was the scream of the press to avoid such kind of representations on the stage and they called for respect of human rights and decency. Kane replied that controversy claiming that these were not real atrocities, but imaginative ones. She stated that Ian is “clearly not eating the baby. It’s absolutely fucking obvious. This is a theatrical image. He’s not doing it at all, and thus she asserts that “in a way” such representation is more demanding because it throws you back on your own imagination” (Quoted in Iball, 3). Kane explores the political landscape of Europe in the 1990s through ‘boldly experimental theatrics, neo-mythical form, and

unrelenting focus on physical and psychic pain’ (Sierz, Print).

In one of the interviews with Kane about *Blasted*, she says, “[p]ersonally, I think it is a shocking play, but only in the sense that falling down the stairs is shocking, it’s painful and it makes you aware of your own fragility, but one doesn’t tend to be morally outraged about falling down the stairs” (Sierz, Print). She tries to defend her work against the harsh attack of the press at the time when the play was performed. She compares the brutally violent play to falling down the stairs. The play events are random, shocking, and violent and Kane leaves everything up to the audience to make sense of these actions. From the very title of the play “blasted”, the audience can guess that conceptions about society, war, sexuality and violence are about to be blasted. The title indicates destruction or desire for destruction and condemnation of dreams, hopes, happiness, and love as a result of violent actions towards Ian and Cate and all the others who live in a desperate existence. That is why the play was shocking to the critics as well as to the audiences (Armstrong, 41).

Kane’s play reflects sexual and non-sexual violence on stage in order to show the audience the juxtaposition of the private

sexual violence between Ian and Cate in the hotel room with the public violence of war. Also the play reflects how Kane examines sexual violence as a feature of war. Ian pukes racial and sexual insults, and the Soldier represents irrational violence. As a continuing issue in Britain, the working middle class is still deprived of opportunity for economic improvement and material wealth and comfort. Concern for the lack of opportunity amongst people like Cate surfaces in this play (45).

Kane uses an unconventional method in which the setting and the way of developing action never let the audiences discover what is going on, about what the conflict is, and why the streets are full of soldiers. Audiences must designate their own meaning to the events of the play. They can relate the situation to the war in Bosnia, but it is not certainly about that (46).

Two main characters, Cate and Ian, are in “a very expensive hotel room in Leeds” (Kane, *Blasted*, 3) where the whole action of the play takes place. Cate claims that she comes to Ian because Ian “sounded unhappy” (4). Her sympathy with him has turned into a chance for him to rape her. Then a soldier makes his way into the room where he finds Ian alone because Cate has escaped from the bathroom

window. The Soldier represents the difficulties and atrocities of war. He enters the hotel room with a sniper rifle, ready to pass violence on whoever he meets. He has been deadened to violence and brutality by his service in the military, and he attacks and harms Ian without a second thought (Ablett, 12). The Soldier describes to Ian his violent actions he has done towards people, especially towards women, during his presence in this war city, “I broke a woman’s neck. Stabbed up between her legs, on the fifth stab snapped her spine” (Kane, *Blasted*, 44). He tells him about his lover Col who has been raped and killed by soldiers, “they bugged her, Cut her throat. Hacked her ears and nose off, nailed them to the front door” (45). That is why he imposes several horrible actions upon Ian: raping, and blinding by eating his eyes balls. Then the Soldier kills himself as he has “blown his own brain out” (48). As Cate returns, holding a baby in her hands whose mother seems to be killed by the soldiers, she finds Ian dying. Then the baby dies and Cate buries it under the floorboards. She goes out to search for food and Ian gets the baby out and eats it as an act of cannibalism. Finally, Cate comes with food and it seems that she has got the food in exchange of sex with soldiers. She eats and drinks and feeds Ian and finally he dies. As a

postmodernist playwright, Kane tries to shock her audience through showing them a postmodernist fragmented and violent society like a waste land in which people cannot find a decent life.

David Ian Rabey believes that Ian and Cate behaves in an aggressive way due to certain circumstances in their own families. Cate seems to have regular blackouts since her “dad came back” (9), possibly a reference to abusive kind of family treatment to her; Ian, on the other hand, is not in a better situation with his wife and son. That is why, he is addicted to smoking and drinking. He always feels “stink” (3) and this interprets his obsession with taking regular showering that does nothing to end that tendency of feeling stinky. In Scene 2, Ian is physically collapsed as “his heart, lung, liver and kidneys are all under attack,” (23) but he tries to recover through having more cigarettes and gin (Rabey, 205).

Kane makes her own version of Brecht’s alienation effect in order to alienate her audience and make them reconsider the violent events that have taken place in Western Europe. She explains: “War is confused and illogical, therefore it is wrong to use a form that is predictable” (Otd. in Armstrong, 60). Armstrong states that if the play has been set in a battlefield,

violence is going to be a natural action that occurs; by placing violence in a domestic setting of a hotel, Kane wants to reveal her own message that “the brutality of this distant war, immersed world is not easily assimilated into preexisting conceptions of reality” (Armstrong, 61).

In *Blasted*, two examples of social shocking violence are staged: rape, as a masculine activity, and war, a primarily male activity. Sexual violence works in *Blasted* as an action that connects the private and domestic with the public and national. It can be seen clearly in the first scene where Ian tries to seduce Cate to have sex with him, but she refuses which leads to more violent determination on his part, raping her violently during her blackout. He cannot accept her refusal because she has come to the hotel by her own naive free will to relieve him as she claims that she notices that he “sounded unhappy”. He is perplexed at her refusal. (65). This is clear in the following conversation:

Ian. ...That’s why I love you, want to make love to you.

Cate. But you can’t.

Ian. Why not?

Cate. I don’t want to.

Ian. Why did you come here?

Cate. You sounded unhappy.

Ian. Make me happy.

Cate. I can't.

Ian. Please.

Cate. No.

Ian. Why not?

Cate. Can't.

Ian. Can.

Cate. How?

Ian. You know.

Cate. Don't.

Ian. Please.

Cate. No.

Ian. I love you.

Cate. I don't love you.

Ian. (Turns away. He sees the bouquet of flowers and picks it up).

These are for you.

Blackout.

The sound of spring rain (Kane, *Blasted*, 22).

As the lights come back up, it is obvious for the audience that Ian ignores her protest and rapes her while she is in her

blackout. The shattered flowers on the floor of the room indicates that violence has taken place.

Terrible political events that took place in the 1990s affected the life of people in the whole Europe and this has been clearly portrayed in this play. The play turns to be chaotic as soon as the Soldier enters the hotel room: "there is a blinding light, then a huge explosion" and audiences are told that "the hotel has been blasted by a mortar bomb. There is a large hole in one of the walls and everything is covered in a dust" (Kane, 37). This is something shocking for the audiences, but it can be interpreted only in the light of considering the play as part of the in-her-face theatre (Sierz, Print).

One of the terrible effects of war time on people is in their being aggressive and violent towards each other and their being subject to the acts of rape and killing. While it is true that Cate is victimized, and suffers at the hands of Ian, she is also to some extent both complicit in this and aggressive in return; she bites him severely, and remains in the hotel room after her rape. Similarly, although Ian is seen as the criminal of violence against Cate, he is also a victim of the Soldier, who is, in turn, both an aggressor towards Ian but again a victim of the violence he

has suffered through the loss of his girlfriend Col. Kane's refusal to adapt *Blasted* to the frame of "politically correct" victim drama disturbs the simple associations between female as victim and male as aggressor. Kane rejects these boundaries by reversing them, that once Ian is left blinded and hopeless he is in the position of the "feminine" previously occupied by Cate (Shellard, 189).

In conclusion, Sarah Kane has been very successful in portraying the negative, violent, and destructive effects of war on people in that it makes them destructive, perverts, and aggressive. This is a universal idea and it can be applied anywhere and anytime it takes place as it is clearly seen in this play. During wars, there is no room for ethics or morals, on the contrary, people start destroying each other without being conscious that they are destroying their own lives.

Ali Abdulnebi Al Zaidi's *Fourth Generation* (1997), on the other hand, can be considered as another example of portraying violent actions taken place in society as a result of a sequence of multiple wars in the Iraqi community since the 1980s. After that single performance of *Fourth Generation*, the play disappeared or was hidden away until a collection of Al Zaidi's plays entitled *The Return of the*

Man who wasn't Absent (2005) was published by The Arabic Union of Writers. The play proved to be dangerous for the Iraqi stage during the 1990s because of its subject matter. As Al Zaidi states, it was written as a reaction to the impact of war upon the writer as a member of a society which witnessed the 1980s Iraq-Iran War and the 1991 Gulf War and the economic sanctions that Iraqis suffered for thirteen years afterwards.

Using satire and irony, the play tells the story of a family of a blind Grandfather, a son with one arm (Abu Arm), the son's wife (Mother), a dumb grandson (Son), and a new baby only a few hours old. While the first generation is represented by the grandfather, who lost his eyesight in the war, the second generation is represented by his son, Abu Arm, who has lost his arm in war too. However, it is not clear how the third generation, represented by the dumb grandson, Son, lost the ability to speak. The play opens with some kind of celebration that is overlapped with screams and shouts of anger and sadness while a new baby is born to the family. The father, Abu Arm (the man with one arm), decides that in order to guarantee a decent life for this new baby boy, its arm must be amputated. This is because the men have to beg in order to provide for the family, since begging is the only way open

to them. When Mother objects to the cruelty of the idea, Abu Arm starts a campaign that soon spreads around the whole city, calling for the amputation of human limbs so that they can survive and escape continuous war. The campaign receives welcoming reactions from the city, whose people start to follow the advice of Abu Arm in cutting off their own and their children's limbs. They even start a trade in exporting these limbs to neighboring cities. As a result of the Mother's objection, she is forced to submit to amputation herself; so she loses her arm and is forced to accept the amputation of her baby boy's. The play concludes its action with an unexpected twist when the Mother announces that she is pregnant again.

In spite of the fact that Iraqis are used to seeing a person in real life with lost limbs as a result of long years of wars, terrorism, and violence, the situation enacted on stage can be quite shocking. This is one of the topics that is taboo in Iraq. People are aware of it, but would never openly talk about it. Al Zaidi's courage in bringing this theme to the stage, that is, to the surface of the Iraqi consciousness, is unique, especially during the critical years of the 1990s. This is probably why the audience of this first performance in 1997 was worried about watching the play as

well as being shocked by its content. Al Zaidi states that:

I was watching the reactions of the recipients and listening to their words, as they expressed their surprise that such a play with its dangerous dialogue and open opposition to the oppressive political regime was being publically performed. Many of them told me that it was an extremely risky adventure to stage the play at that time, as it condemned and mocked the authorities, their disastrous wars, and their violent acts against Iraqi citizens, perpetrated by the dictator of that time (Al Amil, 2).

Hence, *Fourth Generation* fulfils Sierz's description of 'in-yer-face' theatre in the sense that it can force Iraqis to look at unpleasant and painful issues. That is why they "avoid them for good reasons – what [these ideas] have to tell [them] is bad news: they remind [them] of awful things human beings are capable of, and of the limits of [their] self-control" (Sierz, 6). Furthermore, this play forced Iraqi audiences to challenge their fear of the authorities by actually watching it.

In an interview with Ghaffar Afrawi in 2010, Al Zaidi states: “most of my texts pay attention to everyday life and to those dark corners which I have taken out to the light” (Afrawi, 2010). Al Zaidi’s theme involves violence and deformity which adds another dimension when he deprives his characters of names, preferring to mark them either by their status in the family, as with Grandfather, Mother, or Son; or by their deformity, as with Abu Arm. It is implied, therefore, that these characters’ names are not important; names can have no use in their lives, and since their existence is a mistake then it is a waste of time to think of a name:

ABU ARM. What shall we name him?

GRANDFATHER. Nothing, nothing... another craziness is breaking into the corners of this house.

SON. (Continues to laugh)

ABU ARM. What shall we call him, then?

[...]

GRANDFATHER. Names, names, names... Nobody calls us by our names; names are mistakes, too, that we stick on our sons’ foreheads.

ABU ARM. I will name him, will you allow me?

GRANDFATHER. Madness, madness, madness, madness, madness...

ABU ARM. (Shouts) Unknown... I’ll call him ‘unknown’.

GRANDFATHER. I’ll leave you with your Unknown and go out.

Charity givers are waiting for me on the

pavements. They are awaiting my gracious hand

on which they put their miserable gifts. (Exits)

ABU ARM. It’s a wonderful name. (He repeats the name

loudly till the echo of his voice fills the house.)

Unknown, Unknown, Unknown.... (Exits)

SON. (His laughter becomes like weeping and severe

moaning) (*Fourth Generation*, 3-4).

Abu Arm finds no other suitable name for his new born baby except ‘Unknown’, which is a cruel sarcasm that Al Zaidi uses

to portray his characters. Furthermore, this is black comedy which is hugely shocking and painful to a normally more reserved Iraqi audience.

The Grandfather may be the playwright's mouthpiece since his opening words invite others to speak up and raise their voices against the tyranny: "Hey, you speak up; you, the dead... (The shouts become louder) Nothing but quiet songs" (*FG*, 2). His words are quite ironic, since the stage direction clearly states that there are loud shouts outside. This probably refers to the way many Iraqi people suffer and scream with pain, but nothing is heard because their shouts are internal and not public as they should be. He further confronts the audience with a direct description of their world with a question: "Craziness, the world is full of craziness. What shall we do, we who are destined to own a little piece of mind?" (*FG*, 2). Although Grandfather declares that they are the only logical people, who still own some reason left in their heads in this world, such statements open the play to the rest of the illogical series of actions that seems to be acceptable to the characters, for instance, when the public declares its support of Abu Arm's idea of amputation. The Grandfather satirically describes their response as a reaction of the dead who try to move towards life:

GRANDFATHER. Reactions of the dead... that can move toward life.

ABU ARM. They supported my idea. I didn't hear one single

objection. One of them said that I am the pioneer

in this field. Another assured me that these ideas

are big and will build the country, and what

made me happy is that one of the men said that

he'll write about me and my ideas and that I am

a national wealth to be proud of.

GRANDFATHER. You have the honor of being the pioneer in the

coming operations of the cutting (*FG*, 11).

The play is full of irony, inviting the audience to question the rationality of whatever is happening or being said on the stage. ABU ARM consistently represents the logic of what is illogical, comparing his family members to lambs. Therefore, as a result of his responsibility as a father he needs to take the violent action of

cutting off the arm of his new born baby, so that he can protect him from a horrible future of war that he witnessed. He says that his father used to shepherd a herd of lambs and cut their ears to distinguish them and protect them: “When the lambs became fat, my father used to cut off their ears. I used to say that my father was a cruel man. But when I grew up, I understood that he was very concerned about the lives of his lambs” (FG, 7). Abu Arm’s description of what he witnessed in war portrays the amount of bitterness, leading to such logic:

He is my son... He was conceived in war and born at a time of preparation for another war. He’ll grow up in the middle of a third war, and get older in a fourth war, and live at the beginning of a fifth war, and die, and be cut into pieces by the end of a sixth war, and will be resurrected again at the beginning of a seventh war and reformed at the beginning of a war... (FG, 8).

He further describes the images of violence as represented by the cut bodies that he has witnessed in war:

I entered [the fire of war], woman; it’s merciless. (Shouts)

Oh God, I saw them, how they were mutilated, their heads being pierced, their chests, their eyes. You are talking about things that you haven’t seen; you didn’t breathe the smell of gun powder that is yeasted in my lungs. I don’t want him to see what I saw, rotten dead bodies; others that are burnt; others turned into ashes. I saw their heads fly away from their bodies; how men returned to their wives with no manhood, ruins of men. I saw how their wives took second husbands because they refused to sleep with dead bodies... (FG, 10).

Therefore, it is only logical to such a character that “Incompletion leads to beauty and will not lead to perfection; because I would hate it if he was complete, like a chicken or a rooster” (7). Hence, when the aims are positive, it does not matter how ugly the actions are: “When the intentions are good, the actions are good too. I’m not aspiring to a personal gain or benefit out of this, but I am trying to live up to my responsibility, as a father” (10). It is this rationality that justifies the whole city practicing amputation; that justifies cutting off the Mother’s arm and the father amputating

his own baby's limb. It is clear that Al Zaidi's intention is to demonstrate the violence that used to control Iraqi life in the 1990s. According to Olga Bolzek, the demonstration of violence in 'in-yer-face' theatre "is impossible to overlook or ignore. It shows naked pain, suffering, humiliation and torturous death. Violence is shown literally as well as figuratively" (Bolzek, 5). There is a difference here in that with 'in-yer-face' theatre, in this case Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, may show such violent images literally on the stage, whilst Al Zaidi's treatment is slightly reserved since his violent amputations are made off stage. Still, Al Zaidi could not keep silent about such violent happenings in society, as he satirizes his people's silence and criticizes their acceptance which he embodies on stage to show the ugliness of the situation of the country during those years. It is worth pointing out that during the 1990s, there were many tales of soldiers inflicting injuries to their bodies just to be able to ask for leave from the army, which was very humiliating and cruel. Stories of soldiers breaking their own arms or legs for this purpose were recurrent anecdotes Iraqis used to privately exchange during that time.

These are the 'signals' that Al Zaidi tries to send to members of his audience who might still be enjoying the illusion of a

peaceful future in Iraq. He suggests that the violence is continuous and is a part of every house as long as they continue to accept it. Al Zaidi clarifies that in writing his plays he tries

to create a reality out of an assumption, in spite of the strangeness of the subject matter I present. [...] I think that the atmosphere of the war of the eighties and the practices of the oppressive authorities against human beings in Iraq were the strong incentives to write this hell in a reading that is almost shocking for the recipients and the authorities as well (Al Amil, 2).

To conclude, both playwrights have succeeded in portraying the modern society that is full of violence as a result of the aftermath of a sequence of wars. Wars always have negative effects on societies; they influence the social, domestic, and psychological life of people. As a result, people start behaving in a violent way towards each other as well as towards themselves. They use violence as a reaction to the difficulties they face and the oppression of the authorities which lead to more crimes. The theatre has taken the responsibility to

reflect such kind of violence and its negative effects so that people will be

aware of avoiding such types of actions in the future because they destroy their lives.

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