



## Pain Politics and Gender Change in Kane's Cleansed

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### Abstract

*Sarah Kane, a seminal member within the in-yer-face theatrical movement, was renowned for shocking the audience with extremities so as to express her philosophical critiques. This article provides a critical analysis of Kane's third work, Cleansed, examining how she employs corporeal violence for the subversion of gender roles and challenge hegemonic norms. Contributing to the critical discourse on late-twentieth-century British Theater, the study reveals that the institution depicted in the play functions as a microcosm of a hegemonic culture. Within this space, gender transformation is not treated as a free act but as a heavily penalized transgression, as the dominant culture systematically punishes any sort of attempts to destabilize fixed binaries. Drawing upon the theories of gender performativity, the analysis highlights how identity is continually reconstructed through and in defiance of bodily trauma. Ultimately, the article argues that Kane frames the physical body as fiercely contested site, where the struggle for autonomy against rigid societal constructs is violently waged.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In-yer-face theater is known for forcing the audience into aggressive confrontation by utilizing avant-garde ideas and manners. One of these manners which has the most prominent position on the stage is violence such that it urges the audience to emotionally partake in a serious engagement concerning the issues being tackled, usually opposing traditional standards in the theatrical stage—inserting the so-called shock factor. As a pioneer of this theater, Sarah Kane is usually credited for this entire theater.

Kane was influenced by the techniques of Artaud, Bond, Pinter, and Beckett as she was writing her play, especially Artaud's Theater of Cruelty. Kane deliberately incorporates visceral, horrifying scenes to challenge the audience's endurance. She argues that without such extremes, the play would be easily dismissed as conventional, failing to leave a profound intellectual or emotional impact.

Thus, pain is the prominent characteristic and motif of the in-yer-face theater. It is employed in various modes in that it could happen at any given moment during the events. Kane usually demonstrates that the males are the ones who inflict and experience violence (Gutscher, 2008, p. 72). Violence is expressed by pain, humiliation, oppression, etc. The unforeseeable method in which violence takes place suddenly serves to make the audience incessantly alert throughout the course of the play.

Violence, having its central role, makes the audience involve with issues—simple and

extreme ones—to raise questions about mores, norms, standards, and the like (Sierz, 2001, p. 9). Kane says, “I hate the idea of theatre just being an evening pastime. It should be emotionally and intellectually demanding. ... [audience] expect to sit back and not participate” (Saunders, 2002, p. 15). From this statement, it is a given that she wants to change the passivity of theater in her own theatrically creative style.

Therefore, all sorts of cruelty in her plays are not the chief aim that she seeks to accomplish, but for her, it helps her formulate the context to express her message in an effectively powerful manner. That is to say, violence is a mere tool by which she berates and/or mirrors how the world is unjust and so she raises the conscience of the audience by making them observe the victims and victimizers of violence (Erden, 2021, p. 403).

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Oftentimes called “gender transition”, gender transformation is the change or the subversion of one’s old gender to another new gender. This process essentially starts by a decision that an individual is not content with the gender assigned to him/her by culture as they were born due to their sex as male or female. As a consequence of this transformation, one’s relationships take a different form, and so roles, social expectations, viewpoints to fashion and aesthetics change as well.

Historically, gender roles have been fluid and responsive to socioeconomic shifts, such as the transition from agrarian settings to the industrialized labor force of the nineteenth century. Then, in the twentieth century, the change started to be drastically highlighted because men went fighting during WWI and WWII, and women took their place in stores, factories, and offices. Many women loved this opportunity, feeling that they have been freed from home, that is, their previous gender role, and so they did not want to regress as the world wars were officially over. Therefore, they started to study in fields, mainly dominated by men, and so they became doctors, businesswomen, politicians, soldiers, etc. Men on the other hand, started to work in posts that were previously assigned for women such as nurses, teachers, secretaries, etc.

American gender theorist Judith Butler (1988) regards gender to be a “constructed identity” (p. 520). That is, it is not organically fixed as sex and not a result of it and so, basically, not connected to it. Therefore, instead of shaping a gender role or identity out of human nature, individuals are influenced by the intervention of social mores and norms. This way of looking at gender roles can be of help when considering the manner through which Sarah Kane represented gender in that it is constructed culturally and that they are dynamic, not static whatsoever.

What it means to be of a certain gender varies according to various aspects: time, region, sexuality, ethnicity, class, etc. Thus, gender roles are always incoherent and inconsistent. It is through language that the limitations and regulations are issued to govern gender. Therefore, transformation of gender roles is doable because gender roles basically rely on repeated acts or behaviors, not biological needs inside the body that urges the person to be either female or male.

## **3. VIOLENCE AS POLITICAL TOOL IN CLEANSED**

To show the sexual, physical, and psychological violence, Kane sets the events in a university, which can be regarded as a patriarchal establishment that gets men to be superior because of the male-biased teachings and ideologies. Aston (2003) claims that the image of an educational institution that is regulating and repressing is seen in the play (p. 89). In the play, there are various spaces that are realistic in essence, such as the brothel, university, hospital,

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and prison. Kane's setting comprised different sub-settings and that constitutes her outlook of life itself. One special for violence, i.e., the prison, and another for help, i.e., the hospital, and yet another for learning, i.e., the university, etc.

Character Tinker is called a doctor and has displayed all sorts of violence. Tinker stands for the forces that practice violence against weaker and smaller beings. As a physician in the mental institution, he exploits his authority to exercise his sadism claiming that he is purging the sins of the inmates. Had any person had the authority of Tinker in the real world, then "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world" (Yeats, n.d.). Tinker embodies the systemic coercion of individuals, forcing them to conform to dominant ideologies under the guise of maintaining social order.

The shapes of violence that occur in *Cleansed* can be categorized into torture, mutilation, homicide, and oppression. In the play, torture is employed chiefly on Grace as a penalty for the incestuous relationship with her sibling, whom she keeps on having sexual fantasies with even following his demise because of Tinker. The first act of torture happens to her in the shape of facing her brother's death as she gets inside the hospital. Determined to sight the clothes that the sibling dressed before his demise, she lets Tinker ask Robin—who wore the clothes to mock Graham—to undress and hand them over to Grace.

"She begins to shake. She breaks down and wails uncontrollably. She collapses." (Kane, 2000, p. 7) This stands for the consequences of the shock that Grace goes through which leads her to reject leaving the hospital such that she stays close to her lover and brother. Therefore, she requests to be dealt with as a prisoner and Tinker approves; the imprisonment gives Tinker carte blanche. Thus, she lets herself get in a world of being controlled by others.

While in scene 10, she is beaten with a baseball bat "by an unseen group of men whose voices we hear" (Kane, 2000, p. 24), her physical structure starts to deform due to the pounding and the injuries. It does not end at this point for once she is raped by one of the voices (Kane, 2000, p. 26) and the blood starts to seep through the outfit. Afterward, the firing squad is released toward her and starts shooting at her. However, Grace's pain reaches its peak as she is transformed into her brother by stitching a penis on her body.

Illiterate Robin as well is tortured; after knowing how to read, "he realizes how long his sentence is and hangs himself" (Sierz, 2001, p. 112). Robin is not tortured only by the realization of his sentence, but also in his unrequited love to Grace. A case in point is when he wants to gift a chocolate box to Grace, Tinker forces him to eat it. Tinker does not let Robin express his feelings which is a facet of violence. Tinker, mostly, uses a psychological method of violence toward Robin unlike the way with Rod and Carl. The constant threats Robin receives causes him to lose control of his bladder and destroys the floor, which leads Tinker to be upset and as a consequence burns the books that Robin reads. This act of burning is another way of restricting Robin to be educated and dissolve the chance that Grace might like him romantically.

Carl is another person who experiences violence. They cut off his tongue, feet, hands, and even his penis. Carl has been picked out for penalty, tormenting throughout the play. He suffers because of mutilation. Mutilation is a facet of violence that is presented in *Cleansed*. Carl experiences it due to his betrayal of Rod. His crime is when he makes a promise that he would never betray Rod—alongside many other promises—despite the fact that both do not know each other well (Kane, 2000, p. 4). As Tinker tests his promise, Carl quickly betrays Rod and starts begging to be left alone and asking that Rod replaces him (Kane, 2000, p. 11). Therefore, Carl is subject to suffer from a terrible violence followed by pain since Tinker slides

a pole inside Carl's anus. To Tinker, Carl should suffer to a great extent because he has done an unpardonable act of betraying someone.

Later on, Rod appears, and Carl starts another lie that he is remorseful. Tinker starts to believe that Carl will never quit such lies, and so he fetches a big pair of scissors and cuts Carl's tongue off such that he lies no more (Kane, 2000, p. 12). In the eighth scene, Carl starts writing, begging Rod for forgiveness, Tinker enters and chops Carl's hands off. However, Carl stubbornly does not stop. Later, he tries to ask Rod to forgive him by dancing. Tinker comes again and cuts Carl's feet off, letting him to be fully disabled.

Tinker is extremely violent in different ways such that he once forces a person to bite off the testicles of another person (Kane, 2000, p. 30). The cruelty of Tinker may symbolize the cruelty of the world, which gets people to endure all sorts of pain without even offering them death as a painkiller. Thus, death is seen as not the worst thing that could happen to a person. Kane says that she does not want people to focus on the act of chopping or any other acts of violence, yet on the condition in which an individual does not have the ability to express his or her love using their hands, tongues, or any other bodily part. In so doing, she demonstrates how she is inspired by Roland Barthes' analogy that "being in love is like being in Auschwitz" (Ravenhill, 2006).

In scene number 16, after Carl and Rod make love, Tinker enters and forces Rod to decide which life he should take—his or Carl's. Rod, unlike Carl in the previous incident, says "Me, not Carl. Me" (Kane, 2000, p. 35). Tinker as a consequence, slits Rod's throat and lets Carl witness what is happening helplessly. Afterward, Rod's body is burned. Even though Carl is not touched, yet the act against Rod whom he loves, antagonized him greatly because Tinker denied him from his love object, which is another act of violence.

While being inside the white room, along with Grace, Carl is to suffer more since that his own penis is severed, and subsequently stitched on Grace's body. He lies next to Grace unconscious with a bandage that covers the groin (Kane, 2000, p. 38). This may stand as a punishment for his homosexuality. Accordingly, ultimately, Carl is denied of the ability to talk, to touch, to move, and to sensually feel, alongside losing his love subject.

The death that represents itself in the scenes of the play through three characters is another demonstration of violence. The first figure to meet his end is Graham as Tinker injects him an overdose of heroin. Tinker does so for he believes that Graham is exhausted from his own life as the latter says, "I want out" (Kane, 2000, p. 1). Tinker, on the other hand, says, while Grace's brother is dying, "life is sweet" (Kane, 2000, p. 2). Since Tinker has the full authority, he has no retribution to face for such terrible actions.

The second character that meets his end is Robin who tries to win the heart of Grace. After Tinker thwarts Robin's all kinds of efforts to win the love of Grace—once by a box of chocolate—and as Grace keeps on overlooking him, he decides to get his tights and threatens Grace that he is going to end his life as he stands on a chair. As Grace stands still, Tinker lurks from Robin's behind and gives him a push and lets him die.

Robin also ultimately plans to end his life; however, this decision is not born of careful reflection, but is instead driven by the psychological torment inflicted by Tinker's disembodied voices. They have instilled the notion of suicide inside his head (Gutscher, 2008, p. 81). Tinker, once again, functions as though he is the death lord since he is helping multiple figures commit suicide. Tinker may also stand for the cruel societies that help its members solely in increasing the scale of bad things that are happening to them instead of ending the miseries and let them reach a form of positivity.

Another facet of violence that is displayed in the play is oppression. As a definition, oppression is the manipulation and abuse that occurs to an individual or a group of individuals by some authority. In the play, a scene of oppression takes place with the prostitute in the booth, and how she is being a sexual object as Tinker is using her erotic dances to masturbate. Although he oppresses others, he goes unpunished as he gives her his word that he is to help her escape from the confinement. That represents how people in general behave toward those whom, in the others' eyes, are quite below them.

Women oftentimes are more prone to victimization, abuse, and oppression than men are (Ditmore, 2006, p. 215). The institution, where the events of *Cleansed* occur, is full of oppression, having a unique atmosphere where violence is huge, mainly through the character of Tinker—for he is the most powerful and baleful entity among the other characters. Rod and Carl, being the embodiment of the only queer relationship in *Cleansed*, were used by Kane to shed light on the oppression of the LGBTQ in the world. As a theme of pain and endurance, their pain is a representation of the way individuals are different to one another and how they are misunderstood, and thus, mistreated by the other people.

The more one proceeds with the actions and events of the play, the characteristics of the in-yer-face theater become increasingly apparent. Sarah Kane had the purpose through which she wanted to amaze the audience with her violence, and she succeeded by utilizing rape, extreme sorts of physical and mental torment, and even murder. What is clear to critics and scholars is that she does not only shed light on violence that is experienced by the women in the play, yet violence against men as well—Graham, Robin, Rod, and Carl.

The dramatist shows Grace as a strong female figure that has the ability to resist Tinker. As a female, she does not ask anybody for protection. Thus, even though the stem for all the danger in the institution is Tinker, he claims to be the one with the protection role. Through this, Kane suggests that male protection is a false construct, as patriarchal figures are frequently the very source of the danger women face. After the shootout against the girl, Tinker, allegedly, tells her that he is there to save her (Kane, 2000, p. 27). However, Tinker along with the voices carry on tormenting her via electroshocks.

#### **4. GENDER PERFORMATIVITY AND TRANSFORMATION**

Sarah Kane has depicted the transformation of gender roles, essentially, through more than one technique—one of which is through clothes, i.e., crossdressing. The act of crossdressing represents an abandonment of what is regarded as appropriate to the heteronormative codes. It is seen as an investigation of the arbitrariness of the construction of gender as well as gender roles. Grace and Robin swap their own outfits during the play, and so they dress what is belonging to the opposite gender. This transmutation that occurs via clothes, besides statements, permeates every scene of the play.

What Sarah Kane wanted to do is to deconstruct, in her own style, the heteronormative matrix of gender by offering a way of reconsidering what is modeled as a true sex or gender through the dichotomic logic that is entangled in reality—a reality that is regulative and, hence, imposes what is appropriate concerning gender. *Cleansed*, despite breaking the norms of gender, shows how culture manifests itself to reassert those norms through Tinker in sharp contrast to the rest of the characters who challenge the meaning of the dichotomy via featuring incest, cross-dressing, and homo-sexual love.

Kane illustrates the flexibility of gender, besides defying the standard comprehension of gender roles, illustrating that identity is transgressive. The performativity of gender represented by Grace's transformation is condensed by love and punishment which is

indifferent to incest and taboos regarding the same sex (Delgado-García, 2012, p. 233). This vision of gender marks itself as Grace becomes Graham after Tinker removes her breasts and the penis connected to her “perfect” body (Kane, 2000, p. 43).

Kane’s characters decline to stick to their original gender roles even when experiencing punishments. Therefore, another technique is violence through which the change of gender roles is sought. The violent acts against Robin lead to the transformation of role from a man to woman. Grace, on the other hand, is transformed from a woman to man to serve her wish to be her brother saying, “I look like him” (Kane, 2000, p. 8). Grace, from the start, has started to wear her brother’s clothes from the moment of her knowing of his death. Aside from that, she starts behaving the way he was behaving.

Concerning Grace, the mere rejection of her own physical body for her brother’s is a way for displaying transformation roles. She gradually transformed until she gets the penis stitched on her and that her breasts are ironed, which makes them seem like those of men. After all of these happen, the strong wish of becoming her brother is realized. By the end of the work, Grace develops to be totally indifferent, not reacting to anything as if her role of being a female has transformed to that of a male even in respect of caring.

Kane proceeds with the transformation of gender roles through the incestuous love between Grace and Graham. Their relationship is a channel through which Sarah Kane endures her way of tackling gender. She brings the matter of queer to express this in that Grace wants to be her brother, and her step toward that is done through wearing his clothes, while Robin is compelled to wear Grace’s clothes. Afterward, she “gradually, she takes on the masculinity of his movements, his facial expressions ... she mirrors him perfectly ... When she speaks, her voice is more like his.” (Kane, 2000, p. 13).

##### **5. SYNTHESIS: BODY AS CONTESTED SITE**

In fact, from the beginning of the play till its end, there is a constant role transformation due to the unspeakable violence of Tinker, even the bodies of the characters start to be detached; for instance, parts being removed, including limbs, genitals, skins, etc. and so each role of a person is transformed since that they begin to carry the fragments of others. A woman claims that she is Grace. Grace herself starts to resemble her brother—Graham. Carl, on the other hand, begins to wear Robin’s clothes. Those characters have found a sense of refuge when transforming their roles, surpassing their own boundaries. These incidents show how everyone ends up with having the characteristics of someone else.

The characters take over each other’s gender, be it through substituting costumes, or by mimicking gestures related to the opposite gender. Also, the personalities transform, as well as the lines spoken by them (Dimitrova, 2016, p. 198). Grace tries to copy her brother’s gestures and acts such that she manifests what she really wants regardless of her body, and so through that Kane embodied the fact that sex and gender are not the same thing. Grace learned the masculine behavior which has no innate connection with the sex, yet culture and society impose them to be what it is called traditional. Grace breaks free from all of that construction and she chooses to become Graham.

The final performance carried by Tinker against Grace and Carl strips the two from their capability to reestablish their own gender according to their own wish. This is illustrated through the sex-change operation which places them back to the heteronormative codes such that the two express their desire with an appropriate outlet, not an outlet that sounds eccentric to the society. So, after this operation, Grace has the freedom to be a man since her gender matches her sex and the same goes for Carl who is now totally stripped of his manhood, wearing

Robin's clothes, which are essentially Grace's clothes.

The transformative roles carried by Grace and Carl have been taken away by the society which can never approve of such differences regarding the construction of gender roles. Tinker says "Can't call you Grace anymore ... I'll call you Graham." (Kane, 2000, p. 39). Because of that, Tinker separates Graham from Grace since now the relationship between the two has developed to be homosexual, not just incestuous. Everything becomes "pointless" since her will is stripped (Kane, 2000, pp. 43–44).

Grace as a character is liminal and she does not inherit gender, but forms one through cross-dressing. Although Grace acts as a male, aside from acting as a female throughout her entire life up until the knowing of the death of her brother, Kane wanted to go against the statement that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (de Beauvoir, 1973, p. 301). Kane rather stands with Butler's view that "the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated ... reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established" (Butler, 2015, p. 178). Therefore, the so-called gender is a set of ritualized behaviors originated and culturally inscribed by the reiterations of gestures, notions, actions, etc.

Kane in *Cleansed* challenged gender in a subversive manner. She agrees with Judith Butler in that gender is established by "social performances means" which constitute the femininity and masculinity and fix it to sex as a method to conceal the character, who wants to perform another gender alongside the potentials for configuring gender away from the context of the male-dominated heterosexuality (Butler, 2015, p. 180).

Basically, the ones who depart from the usual gender role in terms of sexual behavior are Rod and Carl. The two express their feelings by exchanging rings. Carl vows that he will love Rod eternally, whereas Rod tells him that he will stay with him for now without promising (Kane, 2000, p. 5). The inability of Rod to make a vow shows the influence of heterosexuality/society on homosexuality which expects them to stick to traditional male behaviors. Society is represented by Tinker and so he is watching, loathing the sight of them, deciding to punish them for breaking the conventional gender roles.

The heavy punishment is meted out to compel them to regress to their original gender roles, and that is represented by Tinker himself when he orders the punishers, "Don't kill him. Save him." (Kane, 2000, p. 10). Tinker is allegedly trying to save or mend Carl's gender role, wanting to sustain the binary between female and male using whatever means necessary, and as Carl gives up on Rod, it can be seen somehow as a return to the original role, and since Tinker wants Carl to stay this way, to stick to his original gender role, cuts Carl's tongue such that the latter is unable to reiterate his commitment to Rod.

Carl's way of expressing his transforming gender, after losing his tongue, moves to action instead of language. Every way that Carl thinks of in order to convey his love as well as his regret to Rod ends up with failure, because each time he resorts to a new method, that method is taken away from him. For instance, Carl attempts to pen a love letter to Rod in the mud, yet Tinker again comes and chops his hands off. Then, he strives to express his love through dancing, but Tinker comes once again and cuts his feet off. All of that is done with the pretext of saving him.

Ultimately, Tinker is unable to bring neither of them to conformity. As Tinker assigns Rod to choose whom should he punish, him or Carl. Rod chooses it should be him, which is a reassertion of his gender role, and as a consequence, Tinker eradicates him because he has reached a dead end that he cannot force neither Rod nor Carl to go in harmony with the traditional gender roles, and so he does that instead of risking the heteronormative codes (Kane,

2000, p. 35).

## **6. CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS**

Sarah Kane was a prominent proponent of utilizing extreme, visceral violence not merely as a theatrical provocation, but as a profound political and philosophical tool. While *Cleansed* is widely recognized for its notoriously hyperbolic use of the in-her-face aesthetic, this article demonstrates that such violence serves as a highly specific function to express the brutal mechanisms by which patriarchal and heteronormative societies enforce rigid gender roles. Through the harrowing experiences of characters like Grace and Carl, Kane illustrates that the transition or subversion of gender is heavily penalized by institutional forces, represented by Tinker who attempt to cure transgression through corporeal mutilation.

The contribution of this study lies in its repositioning of Kane's theatrical violence. Rather than viewing the mutilation in *Cleansed* solely as an expression of existential despair or a test of audience endurance, the article argues that Kane presents the physical body itself as the ultimate contested site of ideological warfare. By reading the play's violence through the lens of gender performativity and institutional hegemony, this analysis bridges the gap between the sensory shock of experiential theater and the theoretical discourse of gender subversion. It reveals that beneath the extreme cruelty lies a radical defense of love and identity that exists outside the prescribed binary.

These findings extend beyond Kane's theatrical context, offering significant implications for broader scholarship in gender studies, trauma theory, and contemporary British drama. By establishing the mutilated body as a text through which societal anxieties about queer love and gender fluidity are violently inscribed, the study provides a framework for analyzing how she utilized physical trauma to critique institutional power. As contemporary theater continues to explore the boundaries of the human body and identity, *Cleansed* remains a touchstone for understanding how the struggle for autonomy is violently, yet necessarily, waged against the dominant culture.

Overall, violence in *Cleansed* is merely used as a means to display the harsh sides of the system, and so wanted the audience to focus on the harshness rather than the victims, who serve as universal representatives of the oppressed. Therefore, even though *Cleansed* subjects readers and audience to discomfort, it advocates for a better future that can be realized the moment people comprehend the suffering.

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