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DEPICTION OF VIOLENCE IN MODERN DRAMA WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO SARAH KANE, EDWARD BOND AND HAROLD PINTER

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Abstract

Depiction of violence in postmodern and modern theatre provides a gruesome picture of the estrangement of relationships, disintegrated family and at the same time a dysfunctional society turning towards nihilism Edward Bond's *Lear*, is about disintegrated family, Sarah Kane's *Blasted* is about war, gender inequality, and dysfunctional society, whereas, Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming* represents a different kind of violence, which is invisible on stage. Through the present paper, I attempt to highlight that the theme of brutal violence in postmodern as well as modern drama is a very prominent theme.

**Key Words:** violence, gender inequality, brutal, dysfunctional, nihilism, estranged family.

INTRODUCTION

In an interview Edward Bond admitted that he writes, "About violence as naturally as Jane Austen wrote about manners." *Lear's* Bond presents a gruesome picture of disintegrated family. There are various kinds of violence, physical, emotional, killing, hatred, betrayal, tortures, wars, rapes and execution. However, language is simple, but through audio simulations such as mourning, crying, screaming, the dramatist highlights violence in the play. Sara Kane's *Blasted* depicts explicit scenes of rape and gender inequality in the modern world. The dramatist highlights modern society's Trans historical phenomenon of rape as a violent practice of female victimization. Harold Pinter wants to convey the same message through the depiction of violence in his plays.

In Edwards Bond's *Lear*, a number of men and women are shot, a man is brutally beaten and another is blinded, and a woman's body is dissected on stage. In *Blasted*, Sarah Kane presents the plight of a man and a woman being raped on stage, dead bodies and eyeballs being consumed and a man shooting himself through his head. Both the dramatists Bond and Kane by making explicit use of brutal violence on stage seem to convey some message to the society. Harold Pinter, however, wants to convey the same message by referring to violence without actually displaying it on stage. In the case of Bond and Kane displays of physical violence and its plausibility and necessity on stage perhaps questions the effect on the audience and its portrayal becomes, "a hallmark of shallow melodrama, graciously pandering to the sensationalism of the audience."(1) Edward Bond has

concerned himself with the problem of violence more than any other English playwright. For instance, in *The Dwarfs* the scene of the horrific torture and murder of two people on stage and Lear's self blinded attempt by a complicated contraption is reminiscent of Kafka's "In der Strafkolonie." Bond explains the importance of violence in his plays in the foreword of the play: I write about violence as naturally as Jane Austen wrote about manners. Violence shapes and obsesses our society, and if we do not stop being violent we have no future. People who do not want writers to write about violence want to stop them writing about us and our time. It would be immortal not to write about violence. (2)

In Bond's opinion man is not intrinsically violent but tends towards it because the society alienates him from his peaceful nature. Like other Marxists, Bond also believes that 'the root of all evils lies in the capitalist society's alienation of mankind.'

Social laws for him are the reflections of unjust social order leading to latent aggression. He expresses this opinion in his own words:

In this way an unjust society causes and defines crime; and an aggressive social structure which is unjust and must create aggressive social disruption, receives the moral sanction of being 'law and order is one of the steps taken to maintain injustice.' (3) Thus for Bond the roots of violence lie in "social morality", a form of invisible and indirect violence internalized by the individual in the course of his or her socialization process. Bond highlights that the power structures of the ruling class are astonishingly firm and stable. In the play, power is based upon a complex web of violence and vicious circles of oppression. Through the depiction of an image of an imprisoned animal in a central scene in the play, the dramatist highlights the individual's captivity to a network of oppressive social norm and thought patterns from which he must free himself to attain true humanity. The blinding of Lear by a complicated machine symbolizes the scientific, technological form of cruelty and dehumanization of an individual in industrial society. Lear's death indicates that the dramatist does no longer reckon

with the possibility of non-violent solution to the problem.

The play highlights' Bond's humanistic philosophy that, "aggression is an ability but not a necessity." (4) The brutal execution of a worker accused of sabotage sets the tragic mood of the play. The play focuses on the view that the nature and interaction of the social and personal circumstances become the leading elements of an action. However, people may have good intentions but they adopt violent means to attain those goals which further lead to war.

Moreover, violence is a symbol of dictatorship and is often connected to power. Bodice's speech in scene 6 of Act 2 when she is defeated reflects exactly the above argument: "O you are cruel when you get a little power ..." (II.VI.75)

The assumption that, "Power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely"(5), is true in Lear's case too. For example, in the first scene, Lear accuses someone of killing the worker without any proof: "I shall give evidence. He killed a workman on the wall that alone makes him a traitor. But there's something else suspicious about him". (I. i. 17) According to Bond autocratic regimes too are the best medium for violence. He argues that the more power you have the more violent you are likely to be. In fact in Lear people who attain power become automatically as violent as the predecessor even though they have good ambition as their roots. In the preface to the play, Bond expresses that: "Our society has the structure of a pyramid of aggression and as the child is the weakest member, it is at the bottom,

"Don't most people believe they have a right, even to duty, to use crude force against children as part of their education?"(6)

Lear's daughters are the reflections of Lear's past parental influence as they betray him without any moral values. Bodice and Fontanelle the two daughters of Lear react against his arbitrariness by saying that, "if you kill this man it will be an injustice ...It's silly and makes so much out of nothing". (I.i.18)(Lear)

In *Blasted*, Sarah Kane represents the incidents of rape to highlight, exacerbate and solidify the unevenness of power distribution between men and women in the modern world and provides a new dimension to a newly emerging social problem of the male rape. In some respects the situation facing male rape victims today is not so different from that which faced female victims about two centuries ago.

The play reveals much broader social, cultural, and political factors surrounding the rape that we are used to, as well as the new counter discourse that would provide for us the terms to recognize and confront sexual violence as practice victimizing both male and female.

*Blasted* is about many things, such as war, gender issues, the dysfunctional society etc. There are four different acts of rape depicted in the play. The audience is more interested in the explicit representation of the rape scenes. The story line develops in such a way that the ugliest rape in the play happens to the male character Ian, which may be misleading to the reader. Cate is not physically present at the scene of Ian's rape. The dramatist veils the actual rape of Cate. In general in case of spouse abuse or marital violence, the victims of sexual abuse

are females and assailants are the males. The first rape of Cate occurs in the time of peace, all subsequent events occur in the context of warfare. The war emphasizes the importance of power. The rapist is the man in uniform with a gun which represents absolute dominance of the strong over weak.

The play is set in a hotel room in Leeds, and the dramatist doesn't provide any contextual information about the location and the circumstances of the war. One critic has treated *Blasted*, "as a response to the shocking rage of inter-ethnic violence in former Yugoslavia." (7) The dramatist's own commentary on the play and on the war is significant here. She intuitively assumed that, "there could have been a cultural tradition that accompanied the very possibility of the emergence of rape camps." (8) However, rape has always been an unfortunate and inevitable by-product of war.

Dubravka Ugresic suggests that the war simply activated what has always existed in the male mindset. Both Kane and Ugresic have similar views in this regard. According to Ugresic, "the role of women in the Balkans in wartime was to lose homes, children, husbands and be raped." (9)

Kane stated, "My intention was to be absolutely truthful about abuse and violence. All the action in the play has been carefully plotted and dramatically structured to say what I want about war; the logical conclusion of the attitude that produces an isolated rape in England is the rape camps in Bosnia. And the logical conclusion to the way society expects men to behave in war." (10)

A close analysis of the characters and the scenes of rape in the play demonstrate war, gender and rape together in a room in a Leeds hotel where the soldier rapes Ian as woman. Cate is the most obvious victim; she suffers from the epilepsy, is unemployed, possibly retarded, sucks her thumb throughout the play and is abused by Ian, a much older man. Ian's character oscillates between fear and aggression, love and hate. He is repeatedly abusive to Cate, 'Pakis'; 'retards', 'lesbos' and women in general. Tip that wog when he brings up the sandwiches", he cruelly remarks to Cate about the room service (p3) (*Blasted*)

Ian is insensitive to women as a serial killer; he slaughters British tourist Samantha Scarce saying that, "It was her fault she was not worth the space go talk about." (12-13) (*Blasted*) Up to the bomb explosion, the dramatist presents a diseased male identity having wounded form of masculinity, "anatomized celebrated before being brutally punished." (11) The third character in the play, the soldier is another victim. In spite of his brutal violence, he is merely taking revenge for the girl he loved:

They buggered her; cut her throat. Hacked her ears and nose off, nailed them to the front door and ate her eyes (14)

He cries his heart out while raping Ian and blows his own brain out with the revolver during the night. The rape scene of Ian by the soldier is as follows:

Soldier: "Turn over, Ian

Ian: Why?

Soldier: Going to fuck you.

Ian: No

Soldier: Kill you then.

Ian: Fine.

Soldier: See. Rather be shot than fucked and shot.

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 them and rapes him eyes closed and smelling Ian's hair. The soldier is crying his heart out. (p 49) (*Blasted*)

However, from the soldier's words it is apparent that his violence towards Ian is not the first one of his list of committed by him towards civilians. Having tears in his eyes about the brutal scenes he was a participant of:

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. (p 43) (*Blasted*) Yet another example of brutal rape of Cate about which we come to know through stage directions presents a horrifying picture. She returns with "blood seeping from between her legs". (60) (*Blasted*)

Abusing women in front of their men is the most satisfying act, turning women's bodies into the battlefield of revenge. Rape is used to punish women's families, male relatives or fellow countrymen or serves as a political tool of ethnical cleansing, as in the particular case of Yugoslavia.

By punishing them enemy obviously wants to indirectly punish her husband, neighbour, male friend and son. This is the social space and context that Cate leaves behind when she escapes from the hotel room, putting Ian into the position of endangered feminine.

The soldier has no name in the play. Symbolically he stands for a universal figure of a

soldier embodying all sorts of military atrocities, group rapes, mass killings and mass transportations of refugees in cattle trucks.

Harold Pinter in his plays has laid stress upon menace, horror, estranged family relationships, and nervous breakdowns, dehumanization of an individual, violence and absurdity of human conditions.

*A Slight Ache* highlights the tension between the couple Edward and Flora.

The wasp episode in the beginning and the violent interrogation between Edward and the match-seller at the end of the play hinge at the tension of the play. The male counterpart maintains an attitude of hatred and cruelty towards his wife Flora which indicates unhealthy relationship in their marriage. The sudden appearance of a wasp at the breakfast table heightens the tension and violence of the play. It appears to be an external menace for Edward and enhances his mental tension. He violently and cruelly kills the wasp with Flora's help. He reacts, "bite? What do you mean, bite? Keep still." (P.171) (*A Slight Ache*) Flora forbids Edward from killing the wasp but Edward repeatedly attempts to kill it. He scalds it, blinds, puts in the marmalade jug and ultimately succeeds in killing it. After killing the wasp Edward feels relaxed but Flora finds it an awful experience. Thus the wasp episode brings out Edward's attitude of hatred, violence, cruelty and bitterness both towards his wife as well the wasp.

Whenever Edwards feels under tension he feels suffocated. The psychic tension gains momentum when he utters "Aaah my eyes". When Flora asks him to wash them, he violently rebukes her to 'keep away'. The later part of the play highlights physical violence. The match-seller's constant standing at the gate makes Edward restless and suffocated. He frantically and violently calls Flora 'a lying slut' and asks her to get back to her 'trough'. In the second interrogation with the match-seller, Edward goads him violently and charges him of corrupting his house and garden. He himself sneezes, feels feverish, gets a cold and a germ in his eyes and expresses his bewilderment in

his utterance 'my eyes', 'my eyes' and falls down helpless.

Pinter's comment in an interview made on his short story *The Examination* is significant to illustrate the point that violence is associated with power:

Expression of the question of dominance and subservience, which is possibly a repeated theme in my plays. I wrote a short story a long time ago called 'The examination' and my ideas of violence carried on from there. That short story dealt very explicitly with two people in one room having a battle of an unspecified nature, in which the question was one of who was dominant at what point and how they were going to be dominant and what tools they would use to achieve dominance and how they would undermine the other person's dominance. A threat is constantly there; it's got to do with this question of being in the uppermost position, or attempting to be. (13) In *The Homecoming* violence has been used as the most important tool of exerting power by male predators within the household. Power itself being the ability to dominate, control and exert authority over others, violence is a physical form of this. It often takes the form of displaying force, use of violent language, an element of threatened and unlawful action. The play begins with the conflict between Lenny and his father Max having been insulted by Lenny Max threatens him with his stick: Lenny why don't you shut up, you daft prat?

Max lifts his stick and points it him. (p 23) (*The Homecoming*)

Lenny attacks his father on the territory of his domestic role and violently abuses him as dog's cook. "Why don't you buy a dog? You are a dog cook. Honest, you think you are cooking for a lot of dogs." (p. 27) (*The Homecoming*)

Max calls Lenny a 'Bitch' and 'a raving lunatic' and threatens him with his stick. Lenny further attacks his father to know his legitimate origin. In Act II Max informs us about his family in violent manner and calls himself 'a lousy father.'

A crippled family, three bastard sons, a slut bitch of a wife don't talk to me about the pain of childbirth - I suffered the pain, I've, still got the pangs

- when I give a little cough my back collapses - and here I've got a lazy idle bugger of a brother wouldn't even go to work on time. (p 63) (*The Homecoming*)

Lenny tries hard to establish a dominant position in relation to Ruth with his two stories of his aggressive behaviour towards women He tries to shock her by boasting of his familiarity with an underworld of corruption and violence. He tells the story of a diseased girl which is full of violence.

"It was on my mind at the time to do away with her, you know, to kill her and the fact is, as the killing go."(p 47) (*The Homecoming*) Max maintains cruel attitude towards his son Teddy for whom his return to his childhood home with his wife is unwelcome, full of insults and abuses. Max greets his daughter-in-law as 'tart', 'whore', 'a prostitute' and, 'a stinking pox-ridden slut'. Max: Who's this?

Teddy: I was just going to introduce you.

Max: Who asked you to bring tarts in here?

Teddy: Tarts?

Max: Who asked you to bring tarts in this house? (P.57) (*The Homecoming*)

As there is no real mother figure within the household, the men have lapsed into a way of life in which they can show no affection to each other, instead, they insult each other as 'bitch' and 'slag'. In *A Night Out*, Albert Stokes' nagging mother doesn't allow him to go out even in an office party.

This constitutes almost an act of discretion and rebellion. Albert manages to attend the party. At the party suspicion fastens, on Albert, the situation becomes distinctly uncomfortable, and he flees. After return his mother receives him with a flood of reproach and abuse. He loses his temper, grabs an alarm clock and begins to hit his mother with it, He hears her scream and rushes into the street, convinced that he has seriously hurt, perhaps even killed her. Albert's aggression against his mother and then the tart corresponds to Stanley's attack on Mag and Lulu in *The Birthday Party*. Albert raises his hand against the tart because she turns out to be exactly as nagging as his mother.

In the play *The Dwarfs* the dramatist focuses on the identity crisis of three young friends and their



deteriorating friendly relations leading to nervous breakdown. Len suffers at the hands of Mark and Pete and thinks he is being used by Mark, he attacks him verbally. "You are a snake in my house." (*The Dwarfs*) He further frightens Mark, "You're frightened that any moment I'm liable to put a red hot burning coal in your mouth." (p 100) (*The Dwarfs*) Pete threatens and warns Len to remain faithful. "Make yourself useful, for Christ's sake, as you are, you are just a dead weight round everybody's neck... who else have you got? (P. 109) (*The Dwarfs*) Pete's dream about a horrible girl in tube station presents rotten image of violence: I was with the girl on the platform ...there was some sort of panic. When I looked round I saw everyone's faces were peeling, blotched, and blistered. People were screaming, booming down the tunnels when I saw that her face was coming off in slabs too, like plaster. Black scales and stains. The skin was dropping off like a lump of meat...What's my face like? Is that why she is staring? Is that rotting too? (PP. 101-102) (*The Dwarfs*) Thus violence is predominant in the plays of Harold Pinter. In early plays there is too much use of verbal violence. The atmosphere of menace and terror permeates in his works like Kafka.

Kafka's fiction is characterized by existence of an invisible guilt, a prevailing sense of ambivalence and the impossibility to obtain knowledge from the omnipotent sources. The mainspring of menace and violence in Pinter is usually the outside forces which are latent and invisible. In Pinter's violent dramatic world the individuals are subjected to an unreasonable treatment of torture, imprisonment and dehumanization.

#### CONCLUSION

The British Psychologist Adam Phillips speaks of 'injured, detached horror', which he believes comes as a result of being gutted with image of human suffering. However, violence places keener demands on human psyche. Depiction of violence in theatre serves as an indiscriminate weapon; it provides knowledge of human body's vulnerability, of heartless aggression, cruelty and insensibility. It could also be a pernicious seduction that attracts the artists, dramatists as well the audience.

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