



Normalizing The Unthinkable: Cultural Violence In Sarah Kane's Dramatic Universe

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Abstract: Sarah Kane's plays *Blasted* (1995), *Cleansed* (1998), *Phaedra's Love* (1996), among others confront audiences with stark portrayals of rape, mutilation, torture, cannibalism, and psychological collapse. This study employs Johan Galtung's theory of cultural violence, defined as elements of culture that legitimize direct or structural harm, to argue that Kane renders the "unthinkable" disturbingly ordinary within her dramatic worlds. By situating extreme brutality within casual language, media-shaped indifference, blurred boundaries between private and public life, and forms of love inseparable from cruelty, Kane reveals how violence is already embedded in social consciousness as inevitable or unseen. Through close readings of the primary texts alongside critical perspectives on In-Yer-Face theatre, feminist theory, and trauma studies, this paper demonstrates that Kane's dramaturgy operates as an intentional act of confrontation. Her work compels audiences to acknowledge their own cultural complicity in systems that permit violence to persist. In this way, Kane's drama serves both as a diagnosis of normalized atrocity and as a provocation, urging a moral reckoning with the pervasive violence of late twentieth-century Britain and its broader implications.

Keywords: Sarah Kane, cultural violence, Johan Galtung, In-Yer-Face theatre, *Blasted*, *Cleansed*, rape culture.

I. INTRODUCTION

Johan Galtung defines cultural violence as "any aspect of a culture that can be used to legitimize violence in its direct or structural form" (Galtung 291). In other words, cultural beliefs, ideologies, language, religion, art, science, and media can function as mechanisms that justify or normalize violence. Cultural violence makes direct violence physical harm inflicted upon bodies and structural violence inequality embedded within political, social, and economic institutions appear acceptable, natural, or at least unavoidable. It provides the moral and symbolic framework through which cruelty becomes rationalized. Violence no longer shocks the conscience; instead, it is absorbed into everyday life as something ordinary or inevitable. Sarah Kane's dramatic world operates precisely within this framework. Her plays expose how cultural violence prepares society to tolerate, excuse, and even reproduce brutality. The shocking acts that occur on her stage—eye-

gouging, forced cannibalism, institutional rape, torture, and gender-reassignment surgery imposed as punishment—are not presented as isolated horrors. Rather, they emerge as extensions of already normalized social attitudes. Kane does not frame these acts within comforting moral explanations, nor does she offer redemptive closure. There is no clear lesson, no reassuring narrative arc that restores order. Instead, violence becomes the dominant language of human interaction. Her theatre confronts the audience with the disturbing realization that such brutality is not an aberration but a reflection of the culture from which it arises. Kane began writing in the mid-1990s, a period marked by the Bosnian War, graphic media coverage of atrocities, and the lingering social consequences of Thatcher-era Britain. Televised images of ethnic cleansing, concentration camps, and systematic rape circulated daily, creating what many critics described as a climate of desensitization. Violence was no longer distant; it entered living rooms through news broadcasts. At the same time, neoliberal policies had intensified social inequalities, producing forms of structural violence that remained largely invisible but deeply entrenched. Kane recognized that the brutality seen abroad was not disconnected from the violence embedded within domestic society. When *Blasted* premiered in 1995, it provoked immediate outrage. A *Daily Mail* headline famously condemned it as “disgusting filth.” Critics accused Kane of sensationalism and gratuitous cruelty. Yet Kane consistently rejected these interpretations. She argued that the rape depicted in a Leeds hotel room was inseparable from the mass rapes occurring in Bosnia. For her, the personal and the political were not separate spheres. Domestic abuse, war crimes, and institutional brutality shared the same cultural logic. By placing these forms of violence side by side, Kane dismantled the illusion that atrocities belong only to distant battlefields. Instead, she revealed how everyday misogyny, racism, and power structures create the conditions in which large-scale violence becomes possible.

This paper argues that Kane normalizes the unthinkable in order to expose its prior normalization within culture itself. Her dramaturgy does not create violence; it reflects and intensifies what already exists. By removing traditional moral framing, she denies the audience the comfort of distance. In conventional drama, violence is often justified through plot motivation or redeemed through resolution. Kane refuses such devices. There is no catharsis that purifies suffering. There is no narrative closure that reassures spectators of moral order. Instead, the audience is forced to confront violence in its raw, unresolved form. Kane’s theatrical techniques further reinforce this effect. She frequently employs direct address, compelling spectators to become implicated witnesses rather than passive observers. Her fragmented structures disrupt linear storytelling, mirroring the psychological fragmentation caused by trauma. Stage directions are often visceral and uncompromising, demanding the physical representation of acts many playwrights would leave implied. This refusal of euphemism is central to her aesthetic. By insisting on visibility, Kane challenges the audience’s complicity in cultural systems that sanitize or obscure suffering. Kane’s theatre does not aim to shock for its own sake. Rather, shock becomes a strategy to break through cultural numbness. By presenting extreme acts without sentimental mediation, she compels audiences to recognize how desensitized they have become. The discomfort produced by her plays is intentional. It disrupts passive consumption and demands ethical engagement. Spectators cannot simply dismiss what they see as fiction; they must confront their own relationship to the cultural narratives that legitimize violence. Moreover, Kane destabilizes conventional distinctions between victim and perpetrator. Characters often occupy both positions simultaneously, revealing

how systems of power entangle individuals in cycles of domination and suffering. This complexity prevents simplistic moral judgments and instead directs attention toward broader structures. Violence is not reduced to individual pathology; it is shown as systemic, sustained by cultural myths about masculinity, nationalism, love, and authority.

2. Literature Review

Sarah Kane has generally developed along three major critical trajectories: the aesthetics of “In-Yer-Face” theatre, psychoanalytic interpretations of trauma and subjectivity, and feminist or queer readings of gender and sexual violence. While these approaches have produced substantial insights into Kane’s dramaturgy, they often stop short of situating her work within a broader theoretical framework of structural or cultural violence. This study builds on existing criticism but shifts the focus toward an underexplored dimension: the systematic staging of cultural violence as conceptualized by Johan Galtung. The first critical axis situates Kane within the tradition of In-Yer-Face theatre, a term popularized by Aleks Sierz in his influential study *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (2001). Sierz identifies Kane as one of the most prominent figures of this theatrical movement, arguing that her work deliberately confronts audiences with extreme representations of sex, brutality, and psychological breakdown. According to Sierz, In-Yer-Face theatre “assaults the audience,” not merely to shock but to provoke ethical reflection and moral awareness. In this reading, violence functions as a theatrical strategy: it destabilizes spectators, forcing them to confront uncomfortable truths about complicity, apathy, and desensitization. Kane’s *Blasted* (1995), in particular, is often cited as emblematic of this confrontational aesthetic, collapsing the boundaries between domestic abuse and civil war to demonstrate the proximity of private and public violence. However, later critics have nuanced this interpretation by tracing the evolution of Kane’s dramaturgy. Graham Saunders, in *About Kane: The Playwright and the Work* (2009) and subsequent studies, emphasizes the stylistic and thematic transformation that occurs across her brief but intense career. Saunders argues that Kane’s early plays rely heavily on graphic physical violence, whereas her later works—especially *Crave* (1998) and *4.48 Psychosis* (1999)—shift toward linguistic fragmentation and interiorized suffering. In these later texts, violence is no longer staged primarily through spectacle but through language itself: fractured syntax, repetition, silence, and disembodied voices become the vehicles for expressing psychic rupture. Saunders thus interprets Kane’s development as a movement away from sensationalism toward a distilled poetic minimalism, where brutality is embedded in form rather than explicit action.

The second major axis of Kane scholarship centers on feminist and queer analyses of gender and sexual violence. Critics in this tradition interrogate how Kane represents rape, masculinity, vulnerability, and the instability of gender identity. Esma Biroglu and other feminist scholars have noted that *Blasted* complicates conventional representations of sexual violence by staging male-on-male rape, thereby disrupting the expectation that rape is exclusively a crime committed by men against women. Yet Biroglu also argues that the play ultimately reaffirms rape as an “engendered practice”: regardless of biological sex, the victim is symbolically feminized through the act of violation. In this sense, rape operates as a mechanism of power that enforces hierarchical gender structures, revealing how domination is culturally coded as masculine and submission as feminine. Similarly, D. Luback employs Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity to

interpret Kane's dramaturgy. From this perspective, gender is not a stable identity but a repeated performance sustained by social norms and the threat of punishment. Luback contends that Kane's portrayal of cruelty exposes the fragility of these norms by dramatizing the violent consequences of failing to conform. In *Blasted* and *Cleansed*, characters are subjected to extreme physical and psychological coercion, suggesting that patriarchal systems maintain themselves through fear and repetition. Kane's theatre, therefore, does not simply depict violence; it reveals how gender itself is constituted and policed through violent enforcement.

The third significant strand of criticism adopts a psychoanalytic framework, interpreting Kane's work through the lens of trauma, depression, and the fragmented self. Scholars such as Mahameed and Zin read Kane's violence as both intensely personal and broadly social. Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, they describe her dramaturgy as a confrontation with what might be termed an "internal and external Hydra": a multi-headed force of suffering rooted in individual psychic pain yet simultaneously reflective of collective trauma, including war, displacement, and systemic brutality. From this angle, Kane's plays are expressions of unresolved psychic wounds, dramatizing the cyclical return of traumatic memory. The war that erupts in *Blasted*, for example, is often interpreted as an externalization of Ian's internal moral decay, blurring the distinction between psychological breakdown and geopolitical catastrophe. While these three critical traditions—In-Yer-Face aesthetics, feminist/queer theory, and psychoanalysis—have illuminated important aspects of Kane's theatre, they tend to focus primarily on either formal innovation, gender politics, or subjective trauma. What remains relatively underdeveloped is a sustained engagement with the concept of cultural violence as theorized by Johan Galtung. Galtung distinguishes between direct violence (physical harm), structural violence (systemic inequality embedded in institutions), and cultural violence (the symbolic frameworks—religion, ideology, language, art—that legitimize and normalize violence). Cultural violence operates by making direct and structural violence appear natural, inevitable, or justified. Although one recent conference abstract (ICPL 2024) briefly gestures toward applying Galtung's model to *Blasted*, there is currently no comprehensive study that systematically examines Kane's dramaturgy through this lens. Most critics acknowledge the presence of brutality but do not fully theorize the cultural mechanisms that enable it. Kane's plays repeatedly dramatize not only acts of violence but also the discourses that excuse, aestheticize, or conceal them. In *Blasted*, for instance, racist language, misogynistic jokes, and journalistic cynicism create an environment in which violence is normalized long before it becomes physically visible. In *Cleansed*, the institutional setting suggests how authority structures transform cruelty into a method of discipline and purification. In 4.48 *Psychosis*, medical and religious language intersect to frame suffering within systems that both diagnose and perpetuate despair.

This paper seeks to fill that critical gap by reading Kane's theatre as a deliberate staging of cultural violence. Rather than viewing her work solely as shock theatre, feminist provocation, or autobiographical confession, this study argues that Kane exposes the symbolic and ideological structures that sustain brutality. Her dramaturgy reveals how language, gender norms, nationalism, and institutional authority collaborate to legitimize suffering. Violence in her plays is not random or merely sensational; it is embedded in cultural narratives that render it thinkable and permissible.

3.Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in textual analysis and close reading of dramatic literature. The primary objective is to examine the representation of violence in selected plays by Sarah Kane through a critical and theoretical lens. The research is interpretative in nature and focuses on analyzing themes, language, structure, and dramaturgical strategies rather than employing quantitative or empirical methods.

3.1 Primary Texts

The principal materials for this study are drawn from Sarah Kane: Complete Plays (Methuen, 2001). The plays selected for detailed analysis include *Blasted* (1995), *Cleansed* (1998), and *Phaedra's Love* (1996). These works were chosen because they exemplify Kane's exploration of extreme physical and psychological violence, her radical theatrical aesthetics, and her engagement with themes of love, power, and destruction. Each play is treated as a self-contained dramatic text while also being examined in relation to Kane's broader dramatic vision. Close reading serves as the central analytical method. This involves a careful and systematic examination of dialogue, stage directions, imagery, symbolism, characterization, and structural elements. Particular attention is given to moments of rupture, fragmentation, and shock that characterize Kane's dramaturgy. The analysis considers not only what is represented but also how it is represented through language, silence, repetition, and theatrical space.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

The interpretation of the selected plays is informed by key theoretical perspectives. Johan Galtung's concept of "Cultural Violence" (1990) provides a framework for understanding how violence becomes normalized and legitimized within cultural systems. Galtung's theory helps situate Kane's dramatic violence within broader social and ideological structures, highlighting the ways in which brutality is embedded in language, institutions, and everyday life. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990/2006) informs the analysis of gendered power relations, identity construction, and the performativity of bodies in Kane's drama. Butler's theoretical insights are particularly useful in examining the destabilization of traditional gender roles and the ways in which violence intersects with sexuality, desire, and bodily vulnerability.

3.3 Analytical Focus

The selected plays are analyzed through four primary analytical categories:

3.3.1 Linguistic Normalization of Violence

The study examines how everyday speech patterns—casual obscenity, racist language, media discourse, and conversational detachment—contribute to the normalization of violence. The language used by characters is analyzed to determine how brutality is embedded in ordinary communication. Particular attention is paid to how Kane uses repetition, abrupt tonal shifts, and colloquial speech to blur the distinction between casual conversation and violent threat.

3.3.2 Blurring of Private and Public Violence

The research explores the structural collapse of boundaries between domestic spaces and political conflict. For example, in *Blasted*, the hotel room setting transforms into a war zone, symbolically merging personal abuse with civil war. This methodological lens investigates how Kane destabilizes spatial and moral distinctions, suggesting that private cruelty reflects broader systems of political and institutional violence.

3.3.3 Entanglement of Love and Violence

Another central focus is the complex relationship between love, desire, and destruction. In *Cleansed and Phaedra's Love*, acts of brutality are intertwined with expressions of affection, loyalty, or longing. The analysis considers how Kane challenges romantic conventions by portraying love as inseparable from suffering, sacrifice, and power. This thematic investigation highlights the paradoxical coexistence of tenderness and cruelty.

3.3.4 Absence of Moral Framing

Unlike traditional drama, Kane's plays rarely provide clear moral guidance or resolution. This study examines the deliberate absence of authorial judgment or didactic commentary. The lack of moral framing compels audiences to confront violence without interpretative comfort. The methodology therefore considers ambiguity, open endings, and the refusal of catharsis as significant dramaturgical strategies.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Linguistic and Media Normalization of Violence in *Blasted*

In *Blasted*, Sarah Kane constructs violence not as an isolated event but as something embedded within everyday language, media discourse, and interpersonal relationships. The play opens in a hotel room in Leeds, where Ian, a middle-aged tabloid journalist, engages in racist, sexist, and xenophobic speech. His language is saturated with prejudice and casual cruelty. Importantly, Ian reports on war atrocities professionally, yet he speaks about them with emotional detachment. War exists for him as a spectacle—something consumable, narratable, and distant. This linguistic normalization of violence is central to the play's structure. In the first half, the violence appears domestic and intimate: verbal humiliation, coercion, and rape. Ian's abuse of Cate initially seems confined to a private sphere. However, when the Soldier enters in the second half, the play abruptly shifts into a war zone. The hotel room is bombed; the private space collapses into a battlefield. This transition is intentionally jarring. Kane eliminates the boundary between "home" and "war," suggesting that the logic underlying both is the same. The Soldier recounts atrocities from the Bosnian War—rape, torture, and murder—with the same flat, journalistic tone that Ian previously used. His statement, "I've seen it all before" (Kane 33), echoes Ian's emotional numbness. This repetition demonstrates Johan Galtung's concept of cultural violence: violence becomes normalized through discourse and representation. Media language conceals structural violence by framing atrocities as distant events rather than systemic realities connected to everyday power relations.

Another significant aspect of *Blasted* is its gendered representation of rape. Cate's rapes are rendered through poetic and metaphorical imagery—flowers, blood seeping into the floor—rather than explicit stage directions. In contrast, Ian's rape by the Soldier is depicted graphically and directly. This asymmetry is crucial. As critics such as Biroglu and Saunders argue, the staging reflects the cultural silencing of female victimhood. Female suffering is aestheticized or displaced into symbolism, whereas male victimization is presented in brutal clarity. At the same time, Kane challenges the cultural construction of rape as a "feminizing" act. Ian's rape destabilizes patriarchal assumptions about masculinity. The audience is forced to confront male

vulnerability, exposing how rape functions not only as physical violence but as a mechanism of power and humiliation embedded in gender ideology. Thus, *Blasted* reveals how direct violence emerges from linguistic, cultural, and structural conditions that make such violence conceivable and acceptable.

4. 2. Institutional and Performative Violence in *Cleansed*

Blasted exposes the normalization of violence through media and domestic structures, *Cleansed* moves into the terrain of institutional control. The setting—a former university transformed into a torture facility—symbolizes the corruption of knowledge systems. Education, which should represent enlightenment and intellectual freedom, becomes a site of surveillance, punishment, and bodily mutilation.

Tinker, the central authority figure, performs experiments on the characters with clinical detachment. His actions—amputating limbs, orchestrating forced gender reassignment, staging psychological torture—are carried out not with rage but with bureaucratic calm. This detachment intensifies the horror. Violence becomes procedural, routinized, and justified through institutional logic. Grace's transformation into her dead brother Graham is one of the play's most disturbing sequences. On one level, it represents an act of love—Grace wishes to embody Graham to preserve him. On another level, it is a punishment inflicted within a system that polices identity. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity provides a productive lens here. Butler argues that gender is not innate but constructed through repeated acts and social enforcement. In *Cleansed*, Tinker enforces heteronormative repetition through violence. Bodies are disciplined into conformity. Yet paradoxically, queer desire persists and even intensifies under oppression.

The relationships between Carl and Rod, and between Grace and Graham, illustrate how love resists institutional erasure. Even as Carl is mutilated—his hands and feet cut off—his declarations of love continue. The infamous stage direction in which rats carry away Carl's severed feet literalizes institutional erasure. The body is fragmented, consumed, and removed, as if difference itself must be eliminated.

The title *Cleansed* is deeply ironic. Cleansing implies purification, healing, or redemption. Instead, the institution purges difference, queerness, and emotional attachment. Violence masquerades as correction. Here again, Galtung's framework is relevant: structural violence operates through institutional systems that legitimize coercion, while cultural violence manifests through medical and psychiatric discourses that pathologize non-normative identities. The repeated fusion of love and violence in the play is particularly unsettling. Phrases such as "I love you now" are spoken simultaneously with acts of mutilation. Kane refuses to separate affection from brutality, suggesting that even intimacy can be infiltrated by power structures. Rather than offering redemption, the play portrays love as something that must survive in the midst of systemic destruction.

4. 3. Mythic and Familial Normalization in *Phaedra's Love*

In *Phaedra's Love*, Kane adapts Seneca's classical tragedy but removes its mythological grandeur. There are no gods intervening, no elevated poetic speeches justifying fate. Instead, the play presents a bleak, contemporary landscape marked by apathy and moral emptiness. Hippolytus is portrayed not as a noble, chaste hero but as a detached, cynical figure who spends his time watching violent pornography and masturbating. His indifference to Phaedra's obsession reflects emotional paralysis rather than virtue. By stripping away the mythic framework, Kane situates the tragedy within ordinary human dysfunction. The climax—Hippolytus's

public evisceration by a mob and Theseus's suicide—occurs amid casual, almost banal dialogue. The violence is grotesque but strangely unceremonious. Incest, false accusation, regicide, and self-destruction unfold without divine explanation. This banality is significant. Violence no longer requires mythological justification; it emerges from familial entitlement, sexual frustration, and social decay. Kane thereby exposes cultural violence embedded in patriarchal and dynastic structures. Phaedra's desire is criminalized; Hippolytus's misogyny is normalized; Theseus's authority is unquestioned until chaos erupts. Without gods to blame, responsibility rests entirely with human institutions and relationships. The tragedy becomes a study of how violence is perpetuated through inherited systems of power.

4. 4. Violence Without Catharsis: Kane's Broader Dramatic Universe

Across Kane's dramatic oeuvre, violence is never presented as cathartic in the Aristotelian sense. Traditional tragedy aims to evoke pity and fear, leading to emotional purification. Kane rejects this structure. Her plays deny closure, reconciliation, and moral resolution. In *Blasted*, the final image of Ian and Cate in the ruined hotel room, with rain falling indoors, suggests ongoing devastation rather than recovery. In *Cleansed*, mutilated bodies remain on stage, suspended between survival and annihilation. In *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis*, violence shifts from physical to linguistic and psychological fragmentation. Language itself disintegrates, reflecting mental anguish and existential despair. This refusal of closure prevents audiences from comfortably "processing" violence and returning to normalcy. Instead of catharsis, spectators experience disturbance and ethical discomfort. Kane forces confrontation rather than release. By doing so, she resists the theatrical tradition that aestheticizes suffering and allows audiences to feel morally satisfied. Through this strategy, Kane dramatizes Galtung's "triangle of violence" in real time. Direct violence—rape, mutilation, murder—appears shocking, but it is always rooted in structural systems (media, institutions, family hierarchies) and cultural narratives (sexism, nationalism, heteronormativity). The plays demonstrate that direct brutality is only the visible tip of a larger system of legitimized harm.

5. Discussion

The analysis reveals that Kane's theatre does not merely depict violence; it interrogates its normalization. In *Blasted*, violence is mediated through journalism and gender ideology. In *Cleansed*, it is institutionalized and bureaucratized. In *Phaedra's Love*, it is stripped of myth and embedded in familial entitlement. Across her oeuvre, violence is shown as culturally produced and structurally sustained. By refusing catharsis and aesthetic comfort, Kane compels audiences to recognize their complicity in systems that tolerate or ignore suffering. Her dramaturgy dismantles the illusion that violence is exceptional or external. Instead, it reveals violence as woven into language, institutions, and everyday life. Thus, Kane's work powerfully illustrates that direct violence erupts not spontaneously but from already legitimized cultural and structural foundations. Her theatre becomes not simply a representation of brutality, but a radical critique of the conditions that make brutality possible.

6. Conclusion

Sarah Kane's theatrical world presents the unbearable not to sensationalize suffering, but to reveal how deeply violence is already woven into ordinary life. The brutality staged in her plays does not appear as an interruption of normality; instead, it emerges as something disturbingly familiar. Through stark language, cyclical structures, and intimate emotional entanglements, Kane demonstrates how acts such as wartime sexual violence, domestic abuse, institutional cruelty, and rigid gender control are quietly absorbed into cultural consciousness. By stripping away comforting narrative distance, she forces audiences to recognize that these horrors are not exceptional aberrations, but conditions societies have learned to tolerate, excuse, or ignore. Kane's dramatic method denies viewers the safety of detachment. Her work resists metaphorical softening and instead insists on confrontation. Violence in her plays is often delivered in plain, almost emotionless language, which paradoxically intensifies its impact. This stylistic choice mirrors the way real-world violence is frequently reported, processed, and normalized—reduced to headlines, statistics, or fleeting images in relentless news cycles. In a contemporary world saturated with media exposure, where outrage is momentary and empathy often exhausted, Kane's theatre remains urgently relevant. She challenges audiences to move beyond passive witnessing and to question the cultural habits that make ongoing suffering seem inevitable.

II. Acknowledgment

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my research guide for their constant support, insightful guidance, and invaluable suggestions throughout the course of this research. Their encouragement and academic expertise played a crucial role in shaping this study and deepening my understanding of contemporary drama and trauma narratives. I am also thankful to the Department of English for providing a stimulating academic environment and the necessary resources for the successful completion of this work. The intellectual discussions and continued support from the faculty members have been immensely enriching.

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