

Existentialism and Absurdism in Contemporary British Theatre: An Analysis of Kane's Selected Plays

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A thesis submitted to the Department of English and Humanities in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts in English

The Department of English and Humanities
Brac University
September 2020

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

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2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
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Approval

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Acknowledgement

My earnest gratitude goes to the amazing teacher and mentor Ms. Anika Saba, who has always been there for me. From her, I have learned how to grow enthusiasm and passion for my study. I would like to thank her for all the stimulations and guidance that motivated me to work on my favorite topic. Without her help, I could not understand what I profoundly love to read and work on. She patiently and repeatedly found out all the mistakes and amended them. If not for her, it was not possible for me to understand a complete study on Twentieth-century British Contemporary Plays. I would also like to mention Ms. Nandita Sen, whose deliberate motivation and caring helped me to focus more on my thesis.

I must mention Joy, Nubaira, Ishmam and Aunt Sabina Rahman, for being in my life.

Thank you Ammu, Abbu and Bhaia for loving me.

Abstract

This dissertation is an opportunity to explore Sarah Kane's selected plays that unveil violence and absurd scenes which were never shown before in the British theatres. The paper aims to connect Kane's selected contemporary plays with Absurdism and Existentialism highlighting how a modern man can behave under an excruciating situation and suffers from existential crisis. It will majorly focus on Kane's *Blasted*, *Cleansed* and *4.48 Psychosis* to examine the notions of violence that exhibit existential and absurd mannerisms. The purpose is to show that these violent and absurd characters are in fact the depictions of the modern man fighting with his own dejection. Of many aspects, the thesis majorly analyzes that even though in the Kane's selected plays, the characters encounter unrestrained violence, these characters do not lose hope to survive and continue their lives under any utmost situation experiencing the meaninglessness of human lives. The connection between Kane's plays and existentialism and absurdism as philosophies will illustrate the representation of the purposeless modern man's despair in the twentieth century. The thesis will also focus on how Kane's plays are influenced by her psychological issues and how she represents her convictions on anguishes by the characters of the plays who use violence to express their internal disillusionments.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The first time I was introduced to Sarah Kane was in a course called “Modern British Drama” at BRAC University in Bangladesh. As we, the undergraduate students were not familiar with onstage violence, the whole classroom felt disgusted reading Kane’s first play *Blasted* (1995). Most of us interrupted the instructor exclaiming the play as “disgusting”, “terrifying” and “insane”; however, Kane’s *Blasted* contrived an exhaustive establishment within me and thus, I have been greatly influenced by Kane’s use of violence. Her plays repudiated space between the readers and divergent style of contemporary plays. Kane is a twentieth-century English playwright who is known for her unique way of writing contemporary plays. In her plays, she mostly wants her audiences/readers to understand modern human psychology that involves in surreal and absurd things under the pressure of external forces of the human world. Ken Urban, in his article titled "An Ethics of Catastrophe: The Theater of Sarah Kane" included Kane's words describing what she meant through her writing that "What I can do is put people through an intense experience. Maybe in a small way from that you can change things" (36). Even though she faced many criticisms after *Blasted* (1995), from 1995 to 1999, Kane’s plays showed her audiences divergent styles, which immediately became famous in Europe. Myles Weber while reviewing Sierz's book *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Theatre Today* says that "The young authors Sierz finds most compelling constitute a small group of provocative antagonists who smash taboos, mention the forbidden, and create discomfort. Their language is fast, sharp, direct, and filthy; their characters 'talk about unmentionable subjects, take their clothes off, have sex, humiliate [one] another, experience unpleasant emotions, become suddenly violent'" (863). She wanted her audiences/readers to learn from her intense writing in which she tried to portray the existential crisis of modern man, something that her predecessors such as Beckett and Pinter have done too, but she brought undisguised violence attached with it, rarely seen on the British stage. Her unusual plays gave

the British theater a new beginning in which playwrights could experiment with violence and anger to create a different kind of awareness about human behavior. Through her aberrant writing skills which started to dominate the British theatres of the 1990s, Kane became one of the noteworthy figures of In-yer-face Theatre.¹ In my thesis, I will analyze three of Kane's five plays, namely *Blasted*, *4.48 Psychosis* (2000) and *Cleansed* (1998) concerning existentialism and absurdism, and connection between Kane's psychological issues and the disturbing characters and scenes.

i. Life of the Playwright

Sarah Kane was born in Brentwood, Essex, and raised by Evangelical parents. During her childhood, she was an obedient Christian. However, she began to repudiate religious beliefs and instead concentrated on studying Drama at Bristol University. After graduating in 1992, she went to finish her MA course at the University of Birmingham and she was profoundly engrossed in the playwriting course which was taken by one of the most ingenious playwrights of the post-1960s generation, David Edgar. Throughout her academic life, she was not interested in university courses as she was more intrigued by the plays of Harold Pinter, Edward Bond, and Howard Barker. When she was in Birmingham, she was determined to write plays and took it as her profession. While still an MA student, Kane wrote the first forty-five minutes of *Blasted* and it was staged as a workshop performance. After that she went to London and started working at Bush Theatre and by then she finished writing the whole play. Mel Kenyon was present when half of the play was performed in Birmingham and she told Kane that she should work in Royal Court Theatre. Hence, after writing the play, Kane was determined to stage it, and finally in January 1995, the play was directed by James Macdonald. Even though the audience number was less than 2000, due to

¹ In-yer-face theatre was a style and it gradually became a movement of British theatre in 1990. See Aleks Sierz's *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (2001) for an extensive analysis of this movement.

showing the direct violence on the stage, it soon became the most controversial British work of the decade. "Respected newspapers, TV programs, trashy tabloids, all relished describing their disgust at this play and speculating about the 'sick' twenty-three-year-old female author who wrote 'this disgusting feast of filth,' as Daily Mail's Jack Tinker not-so-subtly put it" (Urban 36). Though the play was facing many condemnations in London, it was becoming more prominent in Europe and thus, European theatres welcomed and appreciated Kane's prolific plays. Within a few years *Blasted* became one of the most momentous and acclaimed plays of British theatre. Her plays commenced to become largely esteemed in other countries and two of her plays won awards for the Best Foreign Language Play in Germany. After writing five plays and creating one short film called *Skin* (1995), at the age of 28, the young playwright committed suicide in February 1999. After her death, she and her plays again became one of the commended topics of the decade. "Recognizing Kane's status as the most-talked about, least-seen British playwright, the Court decided to consolidate her work and make it available to a much wider audience" (Urban 26). This gave the audiences/readers the latitude to see/read Kane's plays again, critics started to rethink about their criticisms and the followers of Kane got the chance to celebrate her writings. Kane's last play *4.48 Psychosis* was firmly taken by the followers and critics which was first performed after one and half years of her death on 23rd, June 2000. She wrote this play to demonstrate her depression due to which she woke up every morning at 4.48 am and had unbearable psychological breakdowns.

ii. Existentialism and Absurdism

One of the major concerns of my thesis is how existentialism is portrayed through violence in Kane's plays. I believe that this can profoundly be found in her contemporary plays. Existentialism is a philosophical theory or approach that shows an individual's existence in the world through his/her work. Almost all contemporary writings have a connection with

existentialism to describe the condition of modern man and his circumstances. The writings which do not show the glance of this philosophy are for human consolation that is for the people who do not want to observe the profound reality of the world. As a literary term, to define existentialism, one must analyze modern man's despair. To portray the present condition of modern man in literature, playwrights started to create characters in their plays who were neither good nor bad, but these characters were portrayed as struggling people without any kind of goal in their lives. Robert Cardullo, in his article titled "Experimental Theatre in the Twentieth Century: Avant-gardism, the Absurd, and the Postmodern" adds that "Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre wrote such plays as *Caligula* (1945) and *The Flies* (1943) to dramatize the tenets of their philosophy" (351). After the two world wars, people in art and literature started to question classical literature which did not have any connection with the present world that was profoundly changed. People started to lose their faith from gods or god and started questioning whether there was truly any reason behind their lives or not. Thus, existentialism began to rise as a cultural movement in Europe. "Existentialists like Albert Camus argued that human beings are, individually, responsible for making themselves what they are, and that without making a free and conscious choice before taking action, one cannot truly be said 'to exist' as a human being" (Cardullo 351). Therefore, the existentialist is a person who believes that he/she is responsible for what he/she truly is and everything happens for his/her exertions. People who had lost the faith in god after the horrors of the two world wars started to have existential crisis as they unexpectedly started to observe the dreadful condition of the world. To portray the existential crisis, the plays started to include the characters which did not use any verbal language to express their emotions about something. Instead of expressing their emotions, they tend to continue their regular lives by suppressing emotions. In order to demonstrate the true situation of a modern man of the twentieth century, playwrights like Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter started experimenting

with the elements of existentialism in their plays. These playwrights wrote plays that did not have any direct connection or in other words did not follow the classical/conservative way of plays. Influenced by these playwrights, Kane started to write plays and most of the characters of her plays do not know their exact position in their lives, they do not have any faith in god or nature, their psychological conditions have affected their bodies so much that they have become both mentally and physically weak, they do not value their lives and do not find logic in doing anything.

Another major theme that I will analyze and connect with Kane's plays in my paper is absurdism. "The decline of religious faith was masked until the end of the Second World War by the substitute religions of faith in progress, nationalism, and various totalitarian fallacies. All this was shattered by the war" (Cardullo 351). To give the true image of modern man in theatre, most of the playwrights started to make plays which were different from the conventional plays. The word "Absurd" is derived from the Latin word "Absurdus" which means inharmonious or out of tune in a musical context. Adolph H. Wegener, in his article titled "The Absurd in Modern Literature" describes that the word "absurd" means "out of harmony with reason or propriety; irrational, incongruous, senseless, stupid, silly, ridiculous" (151). In contemporary literature, absurdism can be defined as an internal conflict of the human mind in which a person focuses on how people should react, what are the proper ways of behavior, and is there truly any use or importance of that kind of behavior. In other words, absurdism is a human struggle to find something in someone's life and ends up knowing or having nothing. When this technique is used in writing, a character shows the quality of absurdism by doing something humanly impossible to reveal the fear or hatred towards something. This mostly comes unintentionally from a character to show the suppressed human emotion. "Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, Hildesheimer, Grass, Pinter, Albee, and Gelber, to mention a few, question the whole state and destiny of man, proclaiming the irrationality and

apparent meaninglessness of existence, defying the absurdity of life by its very affirmation" (Wegener 151). Martin Esslin was one of the famous theatre critics who coined the term "Theatre of the Absurd" in his book *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1962) and playwrights who were known by the term "Absurdist" such as Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter, and Gelber were thought to be the members of this. These playwrights express the true emotion of the modern man who is too tired to express what is killing him inside and that is why he is out of harmony with reason and propriety. Influenced by the previous absurdist, Kane started writing her plays at the end of the twentieth century. Even though existentialism and absurdism are not new ideas in theatre, I believe that Kane's plays have shown another level of their use that moves the audiences psychologically and makes them think about their existence and absurdity overwhelmingly. Three of the plays *Blasted*, *Cleansed*, and *4.48 Psychosis* comprehend characters that show absurdism through violence due to the psychological disturbances.

iii. Chosen Texts

In *Blasted*, I believe that three of the characters have the qualities of existential crisis. At the beginning of the play, both characters Ian and Cate seem to be meeting to give one another comfort in a disturbing situation due to the war. However, the relationship between Ian and Cate has been changed under the terrifying condition just like their minds have changed drastically. Both characters remain without any aim or do not want to improve their condition by trying to survive instead they accept what have happened to them. From my viewpoint, these scenes of the play give the audience many hints that these two characters have existential crisis and that is why they are behaving and doing absurd things. Another major character who does not have any specific name rather he is called as the Soldier also suffers from existential crisis due to the negative external forces of the war. In *Cleansed*, I believe that the same features of existential crisis are discernible even though the play has a fully

different context and setting. In this play, Kane chose a university as her setting and when the audience/readers start to watch/see the play, they are given enormous intimations that the university is turned into some kind of bizarre asylum where the dominator Tinker also plays the role of a drug dealer. Even though all the characters are physically and mentally tortured by Tinker, they do not intend to escape. Grace is one of the major characters of this play and her brother's clothes become more important to her after entering into the university. The audiences/readers can see the features of existential crisis through Grace as she starts losing connection with the outside world like the other members of the institution and she also starts thinking herself as her brother by removing her existence as Grace from her mind. Similarly, *4.48 Psychosis* shows the characteristics of existential crisis even though the play does not have any specific character names. This play is thought to be the confession of Kane's mental condition to both herself and her audience. By looking at her plays and her psychological condition, it can be said that she also faced some existential crisis in the last years of her life.

iv. Purpose of the Thesis

The purpose of the thesis is to analyze three of Kane's plays, namely *Blasted*, *Cleansed* and *4.48 Psychosis* by examining them through the lenses of existentialism and absurdism and also explore the interrelatedness between Kane's psychological conditions and her produced threatening characters and scenes. The paper is divided into distinct chapters including this brief introductory chapter, literature review, methodology, the textual analysis that will emphasize on Kane's three plays relating them with existentialism and absurdism, an analysis focusing on violent characters and scenes which are influenced by Kane's psychological disturbances and, finally, a conclusion.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The thesis will majorly focus on two topics. Firstly, it will show the analysis of Sarah Kane's three plays in relation to existentialism and absurdism. The rest will highlight the explorations on Kane's violent characters and acts that she originated reflecting her psychological conditions. In order to accomplish these two tasks, I have divided this chapter into four sections. The first section provides the information of significant philosophers and their works that helped to establish and spread existentialism and absurdism as philosophies. The second section of my literature review features contemporary British playwrights and their plays which have the characteristics of existentialism and absurdism. Both sections consist of some articles on existentialism and absurdism. The third section explores some of the articles that focus on Kane as well as her plays which are also useful for my research. Finally, in the fourth section, my point of departure is arranged where I have elaborated reasons why I have chosen Sarah Kane and her three plays as my thesis topic.

i. Existentialism and Absurdism as Philosophies and their Pioneers

The existing literature on existentialism cannot proceed without the Danish philosopher Søren Aabye Kierkegaard who is known as the first existentialist philosopher. His works mostly suggest readers to live as a "single individual" and highlight the significance of individual choice and commitment. Kierkegaard has written extensively on both Christian Ethics and psychological works on human emotions and feelings. His early works were written under different pseudonyms to explore different complex problems and give them idiosyncratic viewpoints. Kierkegaard's novel *Either/Or* (1843) is considered as one of the fundamental books on existentialism. It is published in two volumes portraying two "life views" which are aesthetic life view and ethical life view. Aesthetic life view portrays the experiences of music, seduction, drama, and beauty focusing on an individual's pleasure and existence. On the other hand, the ethical life view explains about serious events of human

life such as moral responsibilities, critical reflection, and marriage. In both ways, one can go too far in these spheres and can lose his/her observations of the true self. Kierkegaard wrote the novel focusing on individuality and how to live a life. Some of the themes of his philosophical works concerning individuality, alienation, death, anxiety, and despair worked as foundations of the twentieth century's existential philosophy.

Another nineteenth century's German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche is known as the second founding father of existentialism. At the age of 24, he became the youngest person to achieve the position of a classical philologist at the University of Basel. He suffered most of his life due to his health problems and also faced many psychological breakdowns before his death. Unlike other philosophers, he gave unbiased thoughts on god and statement that "God is dead",² notably in *The Gay Science* (1882). At a point, his approach to the present world was that everything is meaningless as life lacks purpose. Like Kierkegaard, he was also celebrated among the twentieth-century philosophers. His analysis regarding the existence of an individual will be helpful in my research.

Undoubtedly, another prominent name in the history of existentialism is Martin Heidegger who was highly influenced by previous philosophers Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. His ascendancy on French philosophy was initiated when existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre started to follow his works. Heidegger's works scrutinize the existential concerns and question how to live "authentically", which means the integrity of an individual in a politically and technologically developed and dangerous world. *Being and Time* (German: *Sein und Zeit*) (1927) is one of his most prominent books that is followed by the mid-twentieth century's existentialists.

² The phrase "god is dead" describes Nietzsche's idea that the modern world through enlightenment has rejected the possibility of the existence of any god. See *The Gay Science*, especially section 108 and 125, for a penetrative analysis.

Another French philosopher Jean-Paul Charles Aymard Sartre is one of the key figures in the mid-twentieth century's existentialism and Marxism.³ Although he declined the honor of getting Nobel Prize or any official awards, in 1964, he was honored by Nobel Prize in literature. His *Being and Nothingness* (1943) supports the philosophical characteristics of existentialism. Heidegger's previous book *Being and Time* inspired Sartre to analyze and develop existentialism. The book is highly praised and is regarded as one of the finest non-fiction disclosure of the twentieth century. In the book, Sartre develops the idea that "existence precedes essence",⁴ introduces the readers to a new philosophical impression "bad faith" and explores the sights of nothingness.⁵ Sartre divides the beings into two categories: unconscious being (en-soi, being-in-itself) and conscious being (pour-soi, being-for-itself). Both of them are opposite as being-in-itself is stable and cannot change and being-for-itself is changeable through its' consciousness. Being-for-itself has the conscious mind to change in the present and future, so the person gets the ability to determine his/her essence. Through consciousness, being-for-itself gets the idea of nothingness that determines the value or essence.

Adolph H. Wegener, in his article titled "The Absurd in Modern Literature" describes how the philosophy as well as literature was changed due to world wars. Readers and audiences started to believe in words of Kierkegaard, Marx, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche as the Western world could not succeed by removing unemployment, reining capitalism, controlling nationalism and it was also failed to spread democracy (Wegener 150). Wegener states that playwrights like Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, Pinter, and others started to question the

³ Marxism is an economical and political theory that helps to form the structure of communism in society. It was created by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, and other philosophers of the mid 20th century started to follow it.

⁴ Notion that is created by Jean-Paul Sartre. It breaks the traditional belief that essence of a man is given to him by god/gods and he says that by consciousness, one can determine own value and meaning of life. See *Being and Nothingness* for an insightful analysis.

⁵ Philosophical concept that is created by Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. This means an individual approves false values and false identity to live life by adopting the beliefs of others and society.

meaninglessness and absurdity of modern man's existence. As the "absurd" movement spread mostly on every western part, this could be called a "cosmopolitan movement". Even though the word "absurd" has a meaning in the musical context, in literature it means "out of harmony with reason or propriety; irrational, incongruous, senseless stupid, silly, ridiculous" (Wegener 151).

The first name that comes after the word "absurdism" and absurdist philosophy is the French philosopher Albert Camus. In 1957, he won Nobel Prize in literature at the age of 44. Although he is considered to be an existentialist, throughout his life Camus directly rejected the title and focused on developing absurdist philosophy. His works on absurdism started with his philosophical essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). Camus was inspired by previous philosophers like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche and their different views on absurdism and individuality. In his essay, he portrays the situation of the Greek mythological figure Sisyphus who was sentenced to the punishment of pushing a boulder up on the mountain without any break, even though the boulder rolled down every time he had to push it up. He compares the absurdity of an individual's life with Sisyphus's punishment. Though human life has a lack of meaning and full of absurdity, man always seeks the meaning of life. Robert Cardullo, in his article titled "Experimental theatre in the twentieth century: avant-gardism, the absurd, and the postmodern" describes that how the theatre changed after the two world wars and philosophies as well as plays were focused more on experimentation. Cardullo also adds that individuals are responsible for their own lives and purposes.

The second prominent name of the mid-twentieth century's absurdist philosophy is Martin Julius Esslin who wrote the 1960s' the most influential theatrical book *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1962). Esslin is a British dramatist, producer, and critic who is best known for his coined term "theatre of the absurd". He created this term for the classification of European playwrights and their plays that focused on existentialism and absurdism which became

largely popular after World War II. Their works mainly focused on what happens when human existence loses all meaning and purpose and the world seems to be a meaningless place. Esslin's book mainly shows a "framework of reference" that includes the works of playwrights declaring them as parts of the theatre of the absurd. He writes regarding the characteristics of the theatre of the absurd:

The Theatre of the Absurd is thus part of the 'anti-literary' movement of our time, which has found its expression in abstract painting, with its rejection of 'literary' elements in pictures; or in the 'new novel' in France, with its reliance on the description of objects and its rejection of empathy and anthropomorphism. (Esslin 21)

Esslin listed both known and unknown playwrights who started to write and stage plays that greatly focused on the meaninglessness of the modern man and world.

ii. Absurdist Playwrights and Their Plays

The end of world wars in the mid-twentieth century metamorphosed both the philosophy along with literature and theatres. The first playwright's name that comes while scrutinizing the relevance of existentialism with British theatre is Samuel Beckett. His works show audiences/readers about the conflicts and dilemmas of modern man. Most characters in his plays seem to be lost and confused in the meaningless world where they do not execute anything to improve their positions in lives or to find the meanings of it. In 1969, Beckett won Nobel Prize in Literature, and also was selected as Saoi of Aosdána in 1984.⁶ His first play *Waiting for Godot* (1953) is considered to be one of the finest and acclaimed plays concentrating on both themes existentialism and absurdism. Two major characters of the play represent existential crisis of modern men. Beckett also portrayed how modern man suffers

⁶ Saoi is an Irish word, literal meaning "wise one". It is the highest honor given by Aosdána to the artists. At the ceremony, the Saoi gets a Torc (spiral of gold) from the hands of the president of Ireland. Aosdána is an Irish association of artists. It was created in 1981 by the Arts Council of Ireland.

from conflicts between following the spiritual and religious beliefs and supported existential philosophy that encourages discovering the meaning of life by the support of personal experiences. Martin Esslin, in his 1960s most influential book *The Theatre of the Absurd*, profoundly talks about Beckett and *Waiting for Godot*. In his book, he says that the conventional theatres and plays like *Waiting for Godot* do not have any exact plot and when someone tries to find the exact plot or story behind the plays “such attempts can be doomed to failure” (Esslin 40). Esslin writes:

Waiting is to experience the action of time, which is constant change. And yet, as nothing real ever happens, that change is in itself an illusion. The ceaseless activity of time is self-defeating, purposeless, and therefore null and void. The more things change, the more they are the same. That is the terrible stability of the world. (46)

This play shows the audience how modern man suffers into the world without hope, purpose, and stability of life when he finds everything in the world meaningless.

Additionally, Harold Pinter wrote many plays on existentialism and mostly absurdism. Pinter dedicated more than fifty years to his writing career and he is known as one of the most influential modern dramatists. He is also a Nobel Prize winner in literature. Pinter was highly influenced by Beckett’s works. Esslin, in *The Theatre of the Absurd*, describes Pinter’s one of the finest plays *The Birthday Party* (1958), which portrays the absurdity of modern man due to meaninglessness. Esslin confirms that this play portrays how a modern man searches for security and also shows modern man's secret angst and perturbation; the cruelty of the world which often remains within false "bonhomie" and fanatical ferocity; the tragedy that is created through the misunderstandings between people on different states of consciousness (Esslin 236).

Further, British playwright Tom Stoppard is considered to be in the eleventh position out of the hundred most powerful people in British culture of 2008, according to The Daily

Telegraph.⁷ His work depicts human rights, censorship, political freedom, and profound philosophical issues of society. Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966) is an existential tragic comedy and absurdist work of the twentieth century.⁸ The play exploits two minor characters of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1599-1601) and shows how the two characters wait for the arrival of their deaths. Just like the minor characters do not have any major roles in any play, these two major characters of Stoppard intend to pass their time by doing minor things like asking questions, imitating, and staying silent for long periods. Unlike other major characters of different plays, these two men do not involve in anything significant or important as their fate is already decided in *Hamlet* that they do not have anything to do in their lives. Bruce Waters, in his article titled "Existentialism in Contemporary Literature" elaborates that the basic characteristics of modern man. He adds that modern man remains like a struggling disoriented "thing" and does not have an exact goal in life. Even though he has conflicts, he has no language and that makes him silently cry rather seeking help or solution (Waters 89). Waters also states that modern man has existential crisis that cannot be described without including "loneliness, anguish, despair, anxiety and estrangement" (88). Both Stoppard and Waters want their audience/readers to understand the condition and traits of modern man who suffers from existential crisis.

Furthermore, English playwright Edward Bond is thought to be one of the most important living dramatists. Bond is considered to be very controversial due to showing onstage violence. *Saved* (1965) is one of his unique plays that portrays the cruelty of the world, absurdity, sexuality, and also violence. The play depicts the dreadful psychological condition of a modern man reflecting absurdism. Previously, in the time of Beckett and Pinter, stage violence or psychological issues of modern man were not shown transparently.

⁷ The Daily Telegraph is a national British newspaper in London, since 1855.

⁸ Literary humorous genre of dramatic literature. It is often used to focus on the sufferings of man and important issues by making people laugh through absurd scenes.

However, Bond started to write and stage plays which are cruel for being explicit and violent. *Saved* consists characters who do not even hesitate to kill a baby brutally in a public park which delineates the power of cruelty of the modern world over innocence.

iii. Articles on Sarah Kane and her plays

American playwright Ken Urban, in his article titled “An Ethics of Catastrophe: The Theatre of Sarah Kane” describes that how Kane became widely popular because of the play *Blasted*, even though she was “little understood” in her own country (36). He also suggests that *Blasted* was a “wake-up call” to critics as well as the audience of the 1990s for accepting the changes of British contemporary theatre. Even though it was an extreme movement of the theatre, like the “Angry Young Men”,⁹ it did not lose the focus from “political and aesthetic concerns” (Urban 37). This article has been highly used in the paper.

Furthermore, Annabelle Singer, in her article titled “Don’t Want to Be This: The Elusive Sarah Kane” adds descriptions of Kane’s plays, how critics and journalists responded to Kane’s use of onstage violence and also analyzes her portrayal of violent acts and characters. Singer states that she does not think that Kane’s plays are the product of her mental illness. Singer also attached Kane’s agent Mel Kenyon’s statement, “The only thing I ever wondered about was whether the connection made with the outer world was becoming less and less, therefore she was having to dig deeper and deeper to create” (160-161). Because of her fight with severe depression and "suicidal despair", Kane was losing connection with the outer world. However, Singer never thought that Kane was "crazy" and adds that some may find Kane as "crazy" because they cannot understand Kane's way of thinking (166). This article has been used in Chapters 3 and 5 more extensively.

On the contrary, Myles Weber’s reviewed article on Aleks Sierz’s book *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (2001) negates both Sierz's statements on In-ye-face theatre

⁹ "Angry Young Men" is a phrase of the 1950s to promote John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*(1956). It is coined by the Royal Court Theatre.

and other playwrights who focused more on onstage violence, sexuality, and brutality. Weber states that Sierz finds these plays "thrillingly alive" and "experiential" (863). Weber suggests that when intimacy, rape, and violence are shown onstage, audience's focus tends to shift from plays' characters to the actors. Thus, the characters and themes are forgotten by the audience/readers and Weber also states that the 1990s playwrights are equally misguided (864).

iv. Point of Departure

While authors like Urban, Singer, Sierz and Weber have written about Kane's plays, none have particularly connected the notions of existentialism and absurdism with her plays. In addition, there is no work on the relation of the violent characters and acts with Kane's existential issues. This is where my work will start and therefore, the paper will attempt to address this gap. Even though there are distinguishes between Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Camus's and Beckett, Pinter, and Stoppard's works, there are many analysis and books regarding their traits of existentialism and absurdism. However, research is scarce on Kane's plays and her psychological issues that helped her to create such violent characters and scenes. Even though many critics like Myles Weber think that Kane's plays' are extremely violent and absurd, in many countries her plays are being taught as the controversial contemporary plays. There for in order to focus more on the 1990s' British contemporary theatre, Kane's works need to be comprehensively explored. This is the utmost ambition of my thesis.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The paper will adopt the qualitative content analysis method to do both textual and biographical analysis. In the literature review, important figures and their works on existentialism and absurdism as philosophies were shortly described. However, here, I have briefly highlighted how philosophies on existentialism and absurdism amended over different periods. Furthermore, biographical analysis has been done to unveil Kane's psychological condition that influenced her to create violent characters and scenes which depict violence. Since the research on Kane's biography and her plays is scarce, I have included some articles that partly describe the attachment of Kane's psychological condition with her plays.

i. History of Existentialism and Absurdism as Philosophies

Existentialism is a philosophy that emphasizes the purpose of human existence in a meaningless world. With the help of prominent philosophers, existentialism became a philosophy as well as a movement in the western part of the world. The term "Existentialism" was pioneered by writers and philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. However, the roots of this philosophical movement can be traced back to the works of Soren Kierkegaard in the nineteenth century. Kierkegaard's works highlighted the essence of human lives' purposes and different ways to live life. Kierkegaard's major theme of work and his passion was Christianity, but he did not portray his affection towards Christianity romantically or religiously. He was more concerned about what it meant to be a Christian individual. However, he felt that the world's religious values, ethics, and Christian responsibilities had been changed through time. Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* (1843) focuses thoroughly on human existence. According to Kierkegaard, there are two ways of living a life. The first way of living life focuses more on emotion, seduction, and pleasure. Here, one does not find any meaning within the regularity of monotonous life and lives in the moment

by focusing more on himself/herself. “Of all ridiculous things in the world what strikes me as the most ridiculous of all is being busy in the world, to be a man quick to his meals and quick to his work” (Kierkegaard, n.p). Another way of living life is by focusing more on moral responsibilities that need to be done to live in a society. This part of the book contains the morals and ethics that are more valued by human beings and influences to take the responsibilities of lives seriously. This ethical view of life does not find meaning through aesthetics like music, seduction, pleasure, and beauty. The ethical view demonstrates that aesthetic view’s “psychological interest lacks seriousness and is more like hypochondriacal curiosity” (Kierkegaard, n.p). Thus, Kierkegaard, through his works developed a new philosophy that started to question the existence and purpose of life and created the idea that the individual is responsible for what happens with him/her.

Besides, the German existentialist Friedrich Nietzsche took existentialism to the next level by originating the phrase “God is dead” in most of his writings where he focused more on human existence without god in a meaningless world. Nietzsche is considered to be an unsystematic thinker due to his unique style of writing and giving descriptions of his philosophies. He profoundly analyzed and developed this idea in one of his early books named *The Gay Science* (1882). This book is considered to be one of his finest works where he elaborated about human existence implementing the appendix of songs, poems as well as prose sections. In section 108 of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche writes that “New struggles.- After Buddha was dead, his shadow was still shown for centuries in a cave-a tremendous, gruesome shadow. God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown. -And we-we still have to vanquish his shadow, too” (167). Through writing this section, Nietzsche started to celebrate his produced phrase "god is dead". He also adds its explanation in section 125 which Nietzsche named "The madman". By mentioning "god" in his statement he meant the god of the Christian

world. However, in a profound philosophical sense, he also meant the whole realm of spiritual beliefs which were positioned beyond the reality of the world by the traditional philosophies. In section 125, Nietzsche writes about a mad man who ran towards a market place with a lantern in a bright morning to search for the god and the mad man asked everyone if god was hiding from them or he was afraid of mankind; however, everyone mocked at him and the mad man gave an anguished reply that mankind had killed the god and there was no use of churches and prayers as there was no god (181-182). Thus, after Kierkegaard, Nietzsche produced books and thoughts that facilitated the future existentialists to think and proceed with the characteristics and profound meanings of the mid-twentieth century's existentialism.

After the two pioneers of existentialism Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger started writing books after the World War I highlighting characteristics of existentialism. When in the nineteenth century, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche produced their works for general men, Heidegger started promoting his works academically and formally in the twentieth century. He elaborated some traits of existentialism through the description of Dasein in his works,¹⁰ notably in *Being and Time* (1927). Heidegger's philosophy on existentialism became more vibrant when the mid-twentieth century existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre and others got influenced by his works. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger shows the concept of being in a modern world. Although Heidegger did not finish the book, it analyzes the concept of being, the meaning of being a being, the significance of our rectitude, and an individual's place in the world and among the other beings.

After Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre is one of the leading figures of the twentieth-century French existentialism. Sartre developed existentialism by adding additional terms, especially "Bad faith" and "Authenticity". Inspired by Heidegger's *Being and Time*, Sartre

¹⁰ Dasein is a German word and in English, it means to "be here" or "present".

produced one of his admirable works *Being and Nothingness* (1943). In the book, Sartre scrutinizes "bad faith" that occurs when an individual is influenced by others and society and thus, the individual starts to follow values that are false to him/her. The false values that come from the others and society hamper the individual to live an authentic life that could be chosen by him/her. In the book, Sartre states that "To be sure, the one who practices bad faith is hiding a displeasing truth or presenting as truth a pleasing untruth. Bad faith then has in appearance the structure of falsehood. Only what changes everything is the fact that in bad faith it is from myself that I am hiding the truth" (49). Sartre describes that beings can be divided into two forms which are Being-For-itself and Being-In-itself. For-itself is the being that can find all sources of the meaning of life and world through the consciousness and on the other hand, In-itself is the unconsciousness that is unable to change the meaning of life or world. In-itself perceives everything that is visible to it and does not try to alter it and thus, it conceals itself from the authenticity of life. Authenticity is a term in existentialist philosophy that is described by Sartre and it exists when an individual's action cannot be affected by the society, others, or materialistic world. He concludes his book stating that it is important for the individual to focus on himself/herself more than anything. Sartre adds that "This fundamental project must not of course refer to any other and should be conceived by itself. It can be concerned neither with death nor life nor any particular characteristic of the human condition; the original project of a for-itself can aim only at its being" (564).

Absurdism is another philosophy that I will be focusing on in this chapter. Even though the development and popularity of absurdist philosophy started when Albert Camus wrote his prominent book *The Myth of Sisyphus*, it was originated in the nineteenth century by Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard scrutinizes that an individual undergoes absurd when

he/she creates his/her existential crisis.¹¹ However, the idea of absurdist philosophy started spreading in the western world when Camus rejected some of the existentialist terms and concentrated on absurdism. Even though the absurd refers to a state in which an individual has the conflict between what he/she thinks and beliefs about life and inability to find any meaning or purpose of human life and world, absurdist philosophy explores more exceedingly on fundamental nature of the absurd and how an individual should respond to it while consciously facing the meaninglessness of the world. Camus was deeply influenced by the nineteenth-century philosophers, respectively Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. In his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus states that life remains without genuine meaning and thus, it is necessarily absurd; however, an individual will always seek the meaning. Camus compares the condition of modern man with Sisyphus who was punished to do the same work repeatedly, even though there was no meaning of doing it. The desire to live in the world and hatred towards death made Sisyphus a hero of the absurd. He elaborates Sisyphus' condition without meaning and adds that "His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing. This is the price that must be paid for the passions of this earth" (Camus, n.p). Even though one cannot understand the full meaning of existence, he/she will not stop seeking the meaning of everything. Camus also adds in his preface of the essay that the purpose of *The Myth of Sisyphus* is to contemplate whether life has any meaning or not. While examining the notion, an individual might feel suicidal; however, even if one starts to disbelieve god and his existence, suicide is not legitimate (Camus, n.p). Thus, existentialism and absurdism as philosophies started to spread in the western world and the world started to sense that no god could save them from the meaninglessness. From my reading of Sarah

¹¹ Kierkegaard, in his *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849), slightly shows the traits of the absurd which is propagated upon the existentialism that is created by an individual.

Kane's plays, I had realized that Kane's characters represent the characteristics of the hopeless modern man that profoundly reflects both philosophies.

ii. Biographical Research on Sarah Kane

In Chapter 1, I have given a straight overview of Sarah Kane's life events. However, there is a lack of research in the academic field regarding Kane's personal life, psychological issues, and her plays as she was active as a playwright for a limited period from 1995 to 1998. Her plays did not have much recognition in London, even though they were celebrated in other countries of Europe. From the age of seventeen, Kane started to question her religious beliefs and gradually, rejected the Christian lifestyle and notions. This immensely impacted her faith in humanity. Annabelle Singer, in her article titled "Don't Want to Be This: The Elusive Sarah Kane" adds Kane's statements regarding her belief in Christianity:

Until the age of seventeen, I sincerely believed I had nothing to fear in death and the Second Coming would occur in my lifetime. I wouldn't even have to die physically . . . I committed the unforgivable sin, which is knowing that God is real and consciously deciding to reject Him. I believed in God but not in the lifestyle that Christianity demanded . . . I made a conscious decision to reject God and gradually my belief subsided. According to the Bible, I am now utterly damned. (141)

Kane believed that the institution of Christianity or any god could not filter the good from the bad.

She suffered from severe depression for many years and was twice hospitalized at Maudsley Hospital in London. While facing psychological issues, Kane did not stop writing and continued focusing on her plays. She worked in a touring theatre company, known as Paines Plough which worked for promoting new playwrights. Kane actively supported and encouraged other playwrights and writers at Paines Plough. She also worked at the Bush

Theatre as a literary associate. In her writing days, she wanted her readers/audiences to feel the intensity of mortality that guided her to change her perspectives on life. Hence, "Kane expected the theatre to take on the largest topics: mortality, morality, human connection, and human suffering" (Singer 142). In order to demonstrate the inner conflicts of the modern man, she used violence in her plays. Her psychological condition also impacted on her writing, notably in her last play *4.48 Psychosis* that also depicts violence at the end of the play through confessing the psychological vulnerabilities. At the age of 28, Kane committed suicide two days after taking an overdose of prescribed drugs by hanging herself with her shoelaces in a bathroom of King's College Hospital in London. *4.48 Psychosis* was staged after her death and many critics thought that Kane wrote the play as a suicide note. Furthermore, Singer discusses audiences' reactions who watched the play *4.48 Psychosis*:

[O]n the opening night of *4:48* after the production all the journalists came together in the bar. The discussion: What Exactly Was It About? None of them wanted to say a bad thing-did they understand it . . . one wonders. Well apparently their joint conclusion and even now the most popular choice-"a 70 minute suicide note". (160)

Even though her works were not completely a product of her mental illness, they slightly show how Kane was distressed due to the chaos of the world. This notion of the connection between Kane's psychological condition and her violent characters and scenes is further discussed in Chapter 5.

Chapter 4: Textual Analysis

i. Existentialism in *Blasted*

A. Was I ill? Have I got well?

Who was my doctor? Can you tell?

Oh. my memory is rotten!

B. Only now you're truly well.

Those are well who have forgotten. – Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

While dissecting existentialism, one must question himself/herself about his/her existence and meaning of human life. Even though Kane never disclosed that she was determined by the existential notions, I believe that her plays indicate the impressions of existentialism; but, in an ardent and divergent manner. The oddities of Kane's characters and scenes endure through the onstage violence and absurdity. In *Blasted*, the audience/readers can perceive the process through which the characters' minds become corrupted due to external violent forces of the world.

Ian is one of the major characters who is racist, homophobic, misogynistic, alcoholic, dyspeptic, and suffers from severe health issues. He deliberately drinks and smokes, even though he discerns that these are deleterious for him. Bruce Waters states while scrutinizing characteristics of existentialism that "Where there is nothing- there is nothing to be serious about; this was the wisdom of Kierkegaard and is repeated in Sartre. K's essential tragedy . . . is in the universal detachment" (92). I believe that Ian realizes that he has nothing to be agitated as anytime he can die due to the war. This gives him the power to drink, smoke and perpetrate absurd things even though he knows that everything will dismantle him. He

frequently undergoes uttermost chest pains and "It looks very much as if he is dying. His heart, lung, and kidneys are all under attack, and he is making involuntary crying sounds" (Kane 23). He loathes living life and does not care for his health issues; on the other hand, when he discerns that death is near, he becomes crestfallen. In scene two, Cate points the gun towards him and he becomes frightened and endeavors to stop Cate (Kane 25). The war has made Ian's mind deviant and encountering the war closely has erected him matured enough to abominate his existence. Although Ian knows his situation will be aggravated gradually, he craves to live. I believe that Ian shows characteristics of existential crisis as he covets to live even after losing meaning, purpose, and peace of his life. Both the war and committing unscrupulous activities make him question his standard of life and existence in a place where death is an effortless process. Though Ian fears death, he continuously begs Cate to kill him after he is being raped and blinded by the soldier as he finally realizes that death would be a tranquil escape from this brutal world (Kane 51-52). Each of the horrendous things engenders Ian repudiate god and he contemplates that it is fatuous to believe in god and that nobody can rescue him. When Cate tells him that the baby is dead, he calls him "Lucky bastard" as it does not have to encounter all these remorseless events of the world (Kane 54). The affliction makes him preterm his existence and the audiences notice him to masturbate, defecate, and finally, eat the baby. Even though he experiences these appalling events due to the war, he is helpless to revamp his situation in which he is scarcely alive. This poses a prodigious question on the existence of human life through Ian's situation.

On the other hand, Cate demonstrates characteristics that are completely opposite to those of Ian. She is the only female character in this play and her innocence portrays the simplicity of human existence which is deliberately transformed and scourged by the negative forces of the world. Cate does not have a sophisticated understanding of human life and she cannot think about distressing realities because of her naivety and therefore, she experiences

fits every time she gets uncomfortable in her reality (Kane 25). I believe that Cate intends to ignore some events, even though it is impossible while being conscious. She starts behaving like a baby as “she sucks her thumb” when she tries to feel comfort and security (Kane 58). Moreover, from not eating meat to eating a full sausage, feeling disturbed by hearing any slang to calling Ian a "Stupid Bastard" and not wanting to have sex with Ian to being raped in a warzone, Cate's purpose and meaning of life have been brutally amended. In the beginning, she is confident about what she is going to do with her career; however, her existence has been destroyed by being raped and tortured by men. At the end of the play, audiences can see Cate walking normally, eating bread, drinking gin, wrapping herself with a sheet due to cold, giving food to Ian, and finally, sucking her thumb again even though she knows that her existence might get vanished in the war. She does not even focus on her ". . . blood seeping from between her legs" (Kane 57). Anything at this moment of the play does not affect Cate because she has lost all hope, purpose, meaning and she knows that she cannot escape from the reality. This character supports that *Blasted* is profoundly connected to existentialism as it attaches real-life intense experiences without giving any hope like other conventional plays or novels. Like any other existentialist works, *Blasted* is not “distracted from distraction by distraction” (Waters 89).

The soldier is another important character who has lost his purpose and meaning of life in the battlefield as he has experienced the most extreme events of the war. Just like his name is not important in this play, his purpose and meaning of life are insignificant to him as his subconscious mind does not even know whether killing, raping, torturing, and participating in the war is truly important or not. When he rapes Ian, audiences cannot decide whether he is a bad person or not as he has experienced the most crucial events of the war (Kane 47). Soldier describes what he and others do in the name of fighting for his land:

All gone. Apart from a small boy hiding in the corner. One of the others took him outside. Lay him on the ground and shot him through the legs . . . They held the men while I fucked the women. Youngest was twelve. Didn't cry, just lay there. Turned her over and- Then she cried. Made her lick me clean. Closed my eyes and thought of- Shot her father in the mouth. Brother shouted. Hung them from the ceiling by their testicles. (Kane 40-41)

The soldier realized that death is a simple process in a field of war and thus, his existence too does not matter. He not only has forgotten his meaning and purpose of life but also does not give much importance to other people. He thinks about his dead girlfriend and rapes the victims and kills without hesitation. In the middle of the play, he gets up on the bed and urinates over the pillows to make sure that is his "territory" as if he is not a soldier but an animal that lacks the ideals and morals of a human (Kane 37). According to him "Gun was born here and won't die" (Kane 47). To escape from this reality, he shoots himself because he cannot bear any more violence.

According to Waters, "Among the categories that define existentialism one must include loneliness, anguish, despair, anxiety, and estrangement . . . I shall say that any literature is existentialist to the extent that it exploits these categories in exploring the condition of man" (88). Thus, I believe that the major characters succor *Blasted* to be a piece of existential literature that portrays the modern man and chaos in a noteworthy manner.

ii. Absurdism in *Blasted*

The main aspects of absurdism in *Blasted* remain within the violence and absurd behaviors of the main characters. Although previous Absurdist philosophy and absurdist like Camus did not support suicide after knowing the meaninglessness of human existence, I believe that Kane broke this notion as some of her characters desire peaceful escapes from the violence

and absurd things of this world. Kane also shows some of the notions through which in an extreme world, one can have the will to survive and hope. When the play begins, audiences/readers encounter normal conversations between former lovers Ian and Cate (Kane 3). Even though they are seeing each other after a long time, there is no happiness or affection. Both characters are traumatized due to the war. Ian never lets' go of his gun, rapes Cate, verbally abuses her, and eats the baby. On the other hand, Cate starts to suck her thumb whenever she becomes upset and bites Ian's genital, enters the room with someone's baby, goes out again, and then finally comes back after being brutally raped and acts as if everything is normal. Both characters do not exceedingly think about their lives. Cate does not know that to whom she had applied for the PA post and Ian does not bother for his former wife and son though he is in a dying condition. Wegener states:

In transcending the concept of time and space, cause and effect, form and content, the writers of the absurd re-establish an awareness of man's situation and project truths that reach a profound universality to express modern man's endeavor to come to terms with a world in which the dice are loaded against his ability to survive. (156)

People behave in absurdist manners when they are placed in uncomfortable situations and the audiences/readers can perceive this by analyzing both the characters Ian and Cate. One can criticize the play for being absurd; however, if any person is set into a similar situation as Ian or Cate, he/she would do the same absurd things.

The soldier is another major character in *Blasted* who is devilishly broken and traumatized. He has even more experiences of violence than the other two characters and thus, his thresholds of pain and misery are larger than the other characters. Unconstrained accessibility to the external world transforms the soldier into someone who cannot think or behave like a person. I strongly believe that he has faced the continuous cruelty and violence

of war through which he discovers the meaninglessness of everything. He gets on the hotel bed and urinates to mark the room as his territory, elaborates unembellished reality of war, thinks killing and raping innocents are normal errands, rapes Ian thinking of his dead girlfriend who was also raped and killed by other soldiers, sucks Ian's eyes out and eat them, and finally kills himself. Although the soldier acts like a purposeless animal, he describes each event of war in an elaborate manner. I believe that he remembers everything what he has done to others and he realizes that he has to participate in all these as long as he is alive. Even though absurdist philosophy does not support suicide, this character brings peace through killing himself as he understands that there is no purpose or future for him except killing and torturing people. Albert Camus, in his *The Myth of Sisyphus* discusses the relation between an individual and suicide and states that "It is confessing that life is too much for you or that you do not understand it" (Camus, n.p). The soldier commits suicide after turning into an animal that has no purpose, meaning, sensibility, and straight mind to provide something good in the world. Thus, Kane portrays how people can be changed in different circumstances and lose their normal way of thinking in the modern world; however, this does not support suicide as Kane portrays other two characters Ian and Cate that in their most splintered reality, they do not sternly think about killing themselves. Camus states:

A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and this life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity. (Camus, n.p)

This makes me believe that Kane's *Blasted* can be contemplated as an absurdist work of the 1990s that depicts modern man's despair.

iii. Existentialism and *Cleansed*

When examined through the lens of existentialism, it is found that Kane's *Cleansed* is a skillfully written modern existential play. Like any other existential play, *Cleansed* does not have an exact plot that leads to a conventional conclusion. Unsolved problems and conclusions are aspects of the twentieth century's existentialism. These plays or stories can give modern man hope; however, they do not give solutions as the modern man is responsible for his actions. Moreover, differences between the 50s, 60s, and 90s existential plays can be analyzed through the intensity of despair and violence. Existentialism has evolved in theatres from Samuel Beckett's prodigious and admired existential plays to Harold Pinter, Edward Bond, and Tom Stoppard's experimental and quirky plays. Thus, I support the notion that Kane's plays portray the progressions too.

There are seven characters in *Cleansed*; however, the story is mostly revolves around the five main characters namely Tinker, Carl, Rod, Grace, and Robin. All the characters except for Tinker have come to the setting which is called the "university" but seems like a concentration camp that has been turned into a torture house. Each character might have divergent reasons for coming; but, their purpose of coming and staying in the institution becomes amorphous. Tinker plays both roles of a drug dealer and doctor. The purpose of this character is not clear as Tinker instructs that he can and want to help the patients; on the other hand, Tinker is the one who gives the order to abuse and torture the innocent patients who are psychologically disturbed. At scene one, he tells Graham that "I'm a dealer not a doctor" (Kane 1). Tinker overdoses Graham who dies at scene one. Furthermore, at scene six, he tells the dancing woman that "I'm a doctor" (Kane 16). Tinker does not know whether he is a doctor or a drug dealer as at different times, he acts differently. He is purposeless and this gives the power to do anything that he wants. Sartre states while describing the importance of existence that "Nothing can ensure me against myself, cut off from the world and from my essence by this nothingness which I am" (39). Tinker differs from Sartre in terms of his

beliefs on the significance of existence and thus, I believe that Tinker encounters existential crisis.

Similarly, I believe that Grace is another character who shows characteristics of existential crisis while staying in the institution. From the beginning of the play, Grace does not worry about her brother's dead body or how he has died rather she concentrates on her dead brother's clothes (Kane 7). Grace, after wearing Graham's clothes, starts behaving and talking like Graham as if her own identity does not matter to her or the outer world. "Grace dresses in Robin/Graham's clothes. When fully dressed, she stands for a few moments, completely still. She begins to shake. She breaks down and wails uncontrollably. She collapses" (Kane 7). The relationships of her reality do not matter to her anymore. She does not contemplate twice before desiring to stay in the institution and an incestuous relationship has occurred between Graham and Grace. The existence of her dead brother is not abolished in her memory as she attempts to keep him alive by acting like him and hallucinating. Thus, even though Grace tries to secure Graham's existence, she is unable to protect her own. Here, Kane portrays both the beauty and pain of human existence delineating that "Though Grace looks like Graham, he is still a separate person, a person to be mimicked, a person who can confess, a person who makes love. He has his own secret memories of thinking of" (Singer 153).

From my viewpoint, three other characters are Carl, Rod, and Rabin who do not show direct existential mannerisms; however, these characters do not unveil any interest in the outer world, do not intend to do anything to improve their situation in the institution and have fully submitted their selves to Tinker whom they think is the savior. On the contrary, Sartre states that "I have to realize the meaning of the world and of my essence; I make my decision concerning them without justification and without excuse" (39). These indicate that Carl, Rod, and Robin do not have any purpose and gradually their life becomes meaningless due to

the violent and abusive procedures of Tinker. Bruce Waters elucidates modern man's characteristics in literature by adding that "Modern man, as reflected in contemporary art, appears not as good or evil, but as a struggling lost thing with no goal, and with 'no language but a cry'" (89). I believe that these three characters' aspects represent the situation of the struggling lost modern men. According to Singer, "Unlike *Blasted*, the violence runs in one direction: Carl and Grace are victims of violence but never the perpetrators. Their love, which keeps their hope alive, also keeps them from fighting back, from realizing the injustice of their situation" (Singer 149). This adds to the conclusion that even though the play flows by the violence, unusual situation, and despair, Kane also wants her audiences/readers to find hope in a modern world where anything unusual or twisted can happen.

iv. Absurdism and *Cleansed*

Like other absurdist plays, *Cleansed* puts forth numerous questions that lead to suspect each of the characters and setting of the play. There are suspensions everywhere in the play as the audiences/readers encounter curiosity to perceive that what do the characters want? Why everyone obeys and considers Tinker as a Doctor? Why the setting is peculiarly created? Who is the true dominator/ruler in this play? *Cleansed* does not give any direct answer to all these questions; however, in the end, hope is there through the love of two characters Grace and Carl. Although the play exemplifies the meaninglessness of life, it does not fail to portray hope and continuity of life even in an unfavorable setting. I believe that this supports absurdist philosophy that suggests modern man tries and seeks the meaning of existence though one cannot succeed.¹²

Another absurdist notion is the violence that Kane used as a tool to continue the play from the beginning. Tinker helps Graham to overdose and die, an unseen group of men beat

¹² The meaninglessness of human existence, see *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

Carl and push a pole into his anus, Tinker cuts off Carl's feet and tongue, he makes Carl swallow Rod's ring, rats begin to eat Carl's body parts, invisible men beat Grace, Tinker cuts Rod's throat and burns his body, Robin commits suicide, etc. The play is full of violent acts; however, I believe that Kane tried to portray that how a person can live in uttermost violence and also want to survive through love and hope. Singer elaborates the beauty and horror of Kane's implemented pain:

Pain is an individual experience-enter representation. The pain that is suffered by one is unknown by another. Only by communicating pain does come believable and therefore real. In this way, experiencing pain becomes divider between the one who suffers and others who do not, who must be convinced. (152)

Tremendous pain helps the characters feel and hope to continue their lives. I believe that even though the procedure seems absurd, violence is used to make the characters go through extreme pain so that they intend to live better lives by understanding other's pain.

Other notions of absurdism in *Cleansed* are apprehensions between characters and dehumanization in excruciating situations. At scene four, Tinker tortures Carl by pushing a pole into his anus (Kane 11). The immediate stress of Carl portrays that his life is at risk and if Tinker wants, then he can easily kill Carl. Carl does not have any control over his body, reality, or even his emotions at this time. Physical violence pressurizes his human morals to ask Tinker to stop and do the same to his lover Rod (Kane 11). Carl chooses to save himself instead of saving his lover. Moreover, Tinker creates a situation in which Robin gets pressurized and he becomes so traumatized that he has wet himself (Kane 34). Tinker creates these environments in which characters go through extreme stress even though he does not kill anyone directly. Grace is the only female character in the play and she also turns herself into a man who wants to be like Graham. Grace succeeds to become like Graham by

systematic dehumanization and to go through this process, she has to remove her identity as if her existence is not significant.

I believe that like the suffering of innocent people in the world is meaningless, Kane's *Cleansed* depicts characters who are tortured and killed mercilessly which are also meaningless. Even though the process is shown in an absurd manner, the play can be related to the modern world.

v. Existentialism and Absurdism in *4.48 Psychosis*

4.48 Psychosis is Kane's last play and it is considered to be the suicide note as this play scrutinizes despair and melancholy of human existence through the major character. The major character seems to be in a major dilemma whether he/she wants to commit suicide or not and at the end of the play, the character decides to obliterate his/her existence (Kane 33). From my point of view, even though this personal play portrays severe depression, it can be considered to be an eccentric piece of existential literature. The character states that he/she has a solitary manner of understanding the life due to having severe mental issues. He/she has tried diligently to escape from the despair by seeking help from friends and doctors (Kane 27). However, nobody could save him/her. He/she considers understanding life through observing it having severe depression as the light which gives clarity; this clarity is needed before disappearing. "Remember the light and believe the light / An instant of clarity before the eternal night" (Kane 3). The absurd encounter leaves the individual devoid of any hope, so much so that his/her mortality seems to him/her insignificant and meaningless; so he/she wants to end the suffering. "I have become so depressed by the fact of my mortality that I have decided to commit suicide" (Kane 4). The character strives to continue his/her existence by depending on numerous doctors who could not help him/her instead they have made him/her dependable on high doses of anti-depressants and other prescribed drugs. "Okay, let's

do it, let's do the drugs, let's do the chemical lobotomy, let's shut down the higher functions of my brain and perhaps I'll be a bit more fucking capable of living" (Kane 14). These do not help the patient rather the side-effects are intensified. "Symptoms: Not eating, not sleeping, not speaking, no sex drive, in despair, wants to die" (Kane 16). Dilemmas of the patient directly portray that her present condition is worsened by the experiments of the doctors and now, he/she does not feel human aspirations and purpose for continuing the existence. "There's not a drug on earth can make life meaningful" (Kane 14). Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* portrays a madman who thinks that god is dead and there is no significance of religious institutions as god cannot save the humans (181). However, this gives an authority to the modern man to choose his purpose and meaning of life. In the process of understanding this philosophy, one can be doomed in great despair and suffers from existential crisis. I believe that the character of *4.48 Psychosis* goes through the same procedure; however, cannot achieve the great advantage of existence as he/she suffers from mental health issues.

Additionally, *4.48 Psychosis* does not have specific characters, a setting, or any stage direction. The motifs or ideas of the play are scattered like the psychological issues of the patient. I believe that *4.48 Psychosis* can be read as an absurdist literature, as from the perspective of the major character "Body and soul can never be married" (Kane 8). Even though the body is strong, the soul is unsettled and perturbed due to the chaos and meaninglessness of the world. There are long silences, confessions of a mental patient, use of serial sevens,¹³ disappointments on existence, repetition of dialogues, a list of prescribed drugs, and at the end of the play, lack of words to explain the depth of the situation. Though the major character wants to commit suicide, he/she does not do so; in the end, he/she focuses more on the disappearance of existence rather concentrating on committing suicide (Kane 35). Removing a meaningless existence is more significant than escaping from the world by

¹³ Serial sevens is a clinical test to check the mental function of a patient. It is implemented by doctors for understanding the level of concentration and memory.

committing suicide. Even though there is a lack of academic researches on Kane's 4.48 *Psychosis*, ambiguous dialogues, scattered thoughts of the major character, and idiosyncratic structure denote the senses of absurdism in the play.

Chapter 5: Kane's Psychosis and Her Plays

Through Kane's writings, she questions the unimpeachable human existence in a chaotic world that was dominated by the existential and absurdist playwrights, notably Beckett, Pinter, Stoppard, and Barker. As a teenager, she realized that any kind of religious institutions could not solve the violence and chaos of the modern world. The stance enthusiastically burgeoned when Kane started studying playwriting at the University of Birmingham and progressively, she determined play writing as her vocation. While perpetuating her playwriting, Kane endured severe depression; however, she did not stop writing. She willingly admitted twice into the Maudsley Hospital that is a British psychiatric hospital as she wanted to escape from her thoughts; but, could not abscond from depression. After staging *Blasted*, Sarah Kane became a conspicuous name in the British theatre, but all her works were misunderstood as they portrayed hazardous violence and absurdity of the modern world. Urban states that "Rather than distinguishing right from wrong, the core of all moralistic enterprises, or conversely, flirting with a cynical amorality, where anything goes, Kane dramatizes the quest for ethics" (37).

According to Annabelle Singer, the readers/audiences of Kane can be divided into two groups. The first group does not connect Kane's plays with her psychological condition and the other group believes that Kane's plays are connected to her mind (Singer 160). I strongly believe that Kane's psychology partly influenced her to create something unique as she profoundly thought about existence and world when she was suffering from intense depression. Her different way of seeing the world came after she started analyzing her existence as "she was having to dig deeper and deeper to create" (qtd. in Singer 160-161). While scrutinizing *4.48 Psychosis*, it is observable that this play conveys the message of a mental patient who does not trust medical treatments and doctors anymore, because they have not succeeded in solving his/her psychological issues as they promised before (Kane 27).

Here, I would like to argue that through the character, Kane exceedingly elaborated about her psychological condition as this play was written at 4.48 am when Kane woke up having severe depression. Even though audiences observed this as “a 70 minute suicide note”, it is more than that as this can be a part of the modern existential literature that has disparate structure, style, no stage directions, and nonspecific characters (qtd. in Singer 160). Moreover, *4.48 Psychosis* is highly personal as Kane wrote this play in her darkest hours facing severe depression. I believe that Kane’s incompatible psychology influenced her writing partly through which she could describe her explorations of everything in a divergent manner. In *4.48 Psychosis*, the patient adds that “I know. I’m angry because I understand, not because I don’t” (Kane 27). It is more painful to understand something profoundly and the patient has taken the risk of understanding and now this is going to make him/her suffer and angry for a long time. Kane’s agent, Mel Kenyon stated in an interview that “I pretend that [4:48 Psychosis] isn’t a suicide note but it is. It is both a suicide note and something much greater than that” (qtd. in Urban 42). However, there are no adequate academic researches on whether Kane directly described her feelings as a mental patient or not. From my viewpoint, Kane wrote *4.48 Psychosis* to express her true psychological issues.

Similarly, *Blasted* was written after Kane saw the news on the television based on Bosnian war.¹⁴ She understood that conventional descriptions could not delineate a meticulous picture of chaos. Her frame of mind was changed due to the ongoing violence and through her writings she tried to depict concepts like mental illness, war, trauma, absurdity of life etc. Kane’s view on *Blasted* before writing:

At some point during the first couple of weeks of writing [in March 1993] I switched on the television. Srebrenica was under siege. An old woman was looking into the

¹⁴ International armed conflict which was going on in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It started in 1992 and finished by the end of 1995.

camera, crying. She said, 'Please, please, somebody help us. Somebody do something.' I knew nobody was going to do a thing. (qtd. in Singer 147-148)

Kane intensely experienced and analyzed the modern world and started having psychological issues. However, she did not stop writing and she worked most of the nights even though she was undergoing severe depression.

Hence, I believe her psychological condition impacted positively on her writings to create plays that are extraordinary. Even though the research on Kane is scarce, I wholeheartedly feel the connection between Kane's unsurpassed mental illness and her plays.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

In essence, Sarah Kane's plays, notably *Blasted*, *Cleansed* and *4.48 Psychosis* are as turbulent as their titles. These plays successfully portray distinctive characteristics of a twentieth century's modern man; however they are mostly misunderstood by the audiences/readers for all the uttermost violent characters and scenes. Behind the absurd and violent characters and scenes, Kane represents the purposeless modern man who has lost every hope to understand the meaning of his life; but, the characters like Ian and Cate from *Blasted*, Tinker, Grace, Rod and Carl from *Cleansed* and the unnamed character from *4.48 Psychosis* show the utmost desire to survive and live while they are being deliberately attacked by the external forces of meaningless world. In these plays, Kane unreservedly exhibits the notions of existential crisis and absurdism which indicate that these plays can be granted as the modern existential and absurdist plays. The research and study have been done in hopes that the readers can examine Kane's plays through the lenses of existentialism and absurdism and discern that Kane's plays also express the hopes to survive even under the relentless violence. The research also indicates that there is connection between Kane's psychological issues and her plays which does not make the plays less noteworthy. To conclude, it is apparent that Kane's plays do not only demonstrate the notions of violence, but they also give the readers/audiences hope to survive in their lives in a world that lacks veracious meanings.

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