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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

A Tale of Two Women: A Feminist Study of Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love*

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Article History: Submitted-22/01/2021, Revised-19/02/2021, Accepted-23/02/2021, Published-28/02/2021.

Abstract:

Violence against women has no definite forms and shapes. It is not limited within the physical boundaries but extended to the unlimited psychological, moral, material and sensual to sexual levels. From the classical age to the modern age, there is no remediation and elimination of that kind of prevalent and pre-existing problem that causes suicide as well as death. Sarah Kane's play "Phaedra's Love" (1996) represents extreme brutality of sexuality and reveals the naked soul of the naked body. The play tells a tragic tale of two women Phaedra and her daughter, Strophe and how they are raped by the king Theseus and his son, prince Hippolytus. Kane through the characters of her play shows the living ways of the modern world that is guided by the desires of mankind. She feels the lack of morality and religious ethics of the modern life. Yet she exhibits the world as it is, not what it would to be. Kane unlocks the hearts full of darkness of desires where we can see Phaedra's unlikely unrequited love for her step son Hippolytus leads her to commit suicide. Apart from that the play is replete with familial rape, domestic violence, vengeance, violent degradation and destruction of a royal family. This paper will endeavour to reconsider the value of the relationships and will trace the issues related to the violence in order to find out the possibility of any different perspective.

Keywords: Violence, Elimination, Degradation, Destruction, Solution.

A wife destroys her husband,...

the earth is watered with

blood and great leaders

are defeated by lust.

Rape's a joke and love and

Laws both fade away.

(Caryl Churchill, Thyestes)

Sarah Kane (1971-1999) was a twentieth century British playwright. She is known for her five plays such as "Blasted" (1995), "Phaedra's Love" (1996), "Cleansed" (1998), "Crave" (1998), "4.48 Psychosis" (2000). The contemporary modern life, its way of living and the relationship of mankind are portrayed by Kane. Her characterization and presentation seem real and true not artificial or fictional. She takes life like characters from our real society. Kane's plays are replete with love, lust, rape, violence, vengeance, torture, exploitation, oppression and marginalization of women, cruelty or brutality of sexuality, suicide as well as death. "Phaedra's Love" is not exceptional from the lists. Kane revises the classical drama of Seneca's "Phaedra" with subtle changes and differences in order to reinterpret it from modern perspectives. This paper will explore the issues of violence of the familial relationships, reasons behind this exploitation or vengeance, and also will detect the solution to eliminate any kind of violence. This paper will widen our insights and knowledge to visualize the darkness of women's position in the family and society beneath the lamp of masculine hegemonic patriarchy.

The condition of the state and the condition of the country depends on the status and position of women. But women are always considered as inferior and lesser or second sex. A feminist reading of the play will help to expose the patriarchal politics of gender distinction and to challenge the heteronormative matrix and also to undermine cultural assumption about gender. It will examine the underlying, masked and invisible causes of sexual discrimination. The reasons behind this disparity are the cultural construction of gender, naturalization of heterosexual relationship, gender distinction or categorization, sexualization of gendered subjects, formation of hierarchical or binary opposition, imposition of assumptive ideologies on women. All aspects of society and culture encourage women to internalize their own inferiority until it becomes psychologically rooted. Even the marriage system or institution works as an instrument for the hegemonic hetero-patriarchy to perpetuate women oppression that reinforces sexual inequality and binds women to domesticity. John Stuart Mill in his "The Subjection of Women" asserts that "The object of this Essay is to explain as clearly as I am able the grounds of an opinion which I have held from the very earliest period when I had formed any opinion at all on social or political matters,... That the principle which regulates

the existing social relations between two sexes – the legal subordination of one sex to the other – is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement....” (Mill, 373) This paper will focus on the exploration and interrogation of the existing institutionalized practices in order to demonstrate different possibilities and perspectives.

“Phaedra’s Love” deals with the issues of violence against women, sexual coercion, mutilation, disastrous emotions of love, degradation of social, moral values and destruction of a royal family. The setting of the play and the structure of the royal palace indicate the cause of the violence and oppression. And at the end, we get to know the effect or violent destruction of it. At the very beginning of the play, we can see the prince Hippolytus, son of king Theseus engages himself in compulsive sex, lies, around watching violent Hollywood films and eating hamburgers, and masturbates into his dirty socks repeatedly without any pleasure. The violent nature of the film reveals his masked brutal desires or animal instincts. Hippolytus represents the modern lifeless life of the mankind, barrenness and nothingness of it. The play presents a heap of broken images of the ways of the world. The nature of the prince signifies the nature or condition of the family, the state as well as the country. Once his stepmother, Phaedra the queen asks him –

Phaedra: What are you watching?

Hippolytus: News. Another rape. Child murdered. War somewhere. Few thousand jobs gone. But none of this matters...

Phaedra: Why don’t you riot like everyone else?

Hippolytus: I don’t care. (Phaedra’s Love, 74)

Hippolytus is a perfect representative of a contemporary corrupted, spoiled and lusty leader. That is why the fate of the family and country is at stake.

Hippolytus is guided by his desires or inner brutal instincts that brings him into the threshold of death and destruction. He treats women as sexual objects or commodities including his stepmother, Phaedra and stepdaughter, Strophe. Once Phaedra tries to remove his inner conflict, traumas or tensions by providing him birthday presentation along with pleasant conversation. But Hippolytus only seeks for sex –

Phaedra: You only ever talk to me about sex?

Hippolytus: It's my main interest.

Phaedra: I thought you hated it. (Phaedra's Love, 77)

According to the French feminist Simone de Beauvoir, in order to perpetuate patriarchal ideology, men marginalize or victimize women that increases the issues like inequality, oppression, women's inferior or subordinate position in the society, objectification, commodification, peripheral status as well as violence against women – “she is for man a sexual partner, a reproducer, an erotic subject – an Other through whom he seeks himself” (The Second Sex, 90). Hippolytus' beastly passion enforces him to rape his stepmother and molests his stepsister. A perpetrator does not live apart from us but rather lives inside our home and society or within us. Phaedra's affection for her stepson becomes the reason of her destruction. After all this happening, that traumatizes Phaedra physically and psychologically. That is why she finds no alternative way to live her life but rather commits suicide.

Patriarchy always privileges masculinity over femininity and treats woman more as a woman rather than human. The reasons behind these deep-rooted problems of our society regarding violence against women are the way of naturalization of woman's sex and suffering, gender construction as per the difference of the body, and the process of categorization of masculinity gender as superior and feminine gender as inferior. In that perspectives, Judith Butler points out in her book “Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory and Psychoanalytic Discourse”, ‘If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity’ (Butler, 334). So, gender is not a fixed or stable identity but a entity through a process of becoming. Because it is produced by a repeated performance that gives birth to the theory of performativity. In “Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity”, Butler claims that “Can we refer to a ‘given’ gender without first inquiring into how sex/gender is given, through what means? And what is “sex” anyway? Is it natural, anatomical, chromosomal, or hormonal, and how is a feminist critic to assess the scientific discourses which purport to establish such ‘facts’ for us?... Are the ostensibly natural facts of sex discursively produced by various scientific discourses in the service of other political and social interests?... This production of sex as the prediscursive ought to be understood as the effect of the apparatus of cultural construction designated by gender” (Butler, 10-11). That is

to say violence against women on the basis of this kind of assumptive or biased conceptualization is a condemnable phenomenon. The politics behind the gender distinction is to perpetuate patriarchal hegemonic ideologies. Hippolytus always takes women for granted to satisfy his sexual pleasure that brings a violent destruction of the royal family as well as his own death.

The cult of true womanhood remained hinged on the image of woman as docile, dependent, fragile and homely etc. Woman is represented as weak, subordinate, meek, and vulnerable to be victimized by art, literature, myths, and films. Even the ideologies imposed upon women are partial and extremely gender biased. The relation or relationship is not naturally constructed but rather there is politics or power mechanisms behind every formation of social, familial and any institutionalized relations of the disciplinary society. The reasons of women violence and the issues related to it are more a political and power mechanical process. Michel Foucault in his “The History of Sexuality : volume1 asserts that “...the notion of sex brought about fundamental reversal; it made it possible to invert the representation of the relationships of power to sexuality, causing the latter to appear, not in its essential and positive relation to power, but as being rooted in a specific and irreducible urgency which power tries as best it can to dominate; thus the idea of ‘sex’ makes it possible to evade what gives power its power; it enables one to conceive power solely as law and taboo” (Foucault 154-155). In order to perpetuate women oppression, society formulates hierarchical or binary opposition such as man /woman, father/mother in terms of societal disciplines, rules and equilibrium. According to Michel Foucault “...the disciplines have to bring into play the power relations, not above but inside the very texture of the multiplicity,... to this correspond anonymous instruments of power, coextensive with the multiplicity that they regiment, such as hierarchical surveillance, continuous registration, perpetual assessment and classification.” (Discipline and Punish, 209). To the patriarchal system, father is the head of the family who possesses power to control and regulate it as per his will. It privileges masculine gender over feminine that seems a destruction of one category for the establishment of the other. In this patterning, woman always remains as other and subaltern. In “Castration and Decapitation’, Helene Cixous insists, “Man/Woman automatically means great/small, superior/inferior...means high/low, means Nature/History, means transformation/inertia. In fact every theory of the culture, every theory of society, the whole conglomeration of symbolic system- everything that is, that’s spoken, everything that’s organized as discourse, art, religion, the family, language, everything that seizes us, everything acts us – it is all

ordered around hierarchial opposition that come back to man/woman oppositions. (Cixous, 279)

As the story proceeds, we are getting familiar with the character of the king, Theseus. He is the head of the royal family as well as the country. In the last two scenes, we can see his appearance or presence. Kane's characterization of Theseus classifies the hierarchical opposition such as king/ countrymen, appearance/reality and man/woman. His disguise signifies his inner beastly nature. Because Theseus takes disguise to kill his son Hippolytus who is the perpetrator of his mother's rape, and also to rape and cut the throat of his step daughter, Strophe who defends Hippolytus. Strophe is doubly victimized or raped by her stepfather Theseus and stepbrother Hippolytus. Both the king and the prince commit the same unforgivable sins of rape and murder. They are guided by their desires, lust, insensitiveness and royal power. That makes them perpetrators. Their beastly passion leads them into the threshold of their own death and destruction. In this way the leaders of the royal family are defeated and destructed, and the royal palace is watered with blood. Michel Foucault in his "The History of Sexuality: volume 1" states that "Power over sex is exercised in the same way at all levels. From top to bottom, in its over-all decisions and its capillary interventions alike, whatever the devices or institutions on which it relies, it acts in a uniform and comprehensive manner; it operates according to the simple and endlessly reproduced mechanisms of law, taboo, and censorship: from state to family, from prince to father, from the tribunal to the small change of everyday punishments, from the agencies of social domination to the structure that constitute the subject himself, one finds a general form of power, varying in scale alone" (Foucault 84-85).

A feminist reading of the play exposes and explores the politics of rape which is not about sex and assault but an act of violence. That is to say rape is all about power, and woman as being rapable is a social, not a biological position. This accomplished rape becomes not only a male prerogative but man's basic weapon of force against women. The feminist theorists reveal the political purpose or motivation in the phenomenon of rape to dominate women and to keep them in a state of fear. To contextualize the act of rape, Susan Brownmiller in her "Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape" states that "[a] world without a rapists would be a world in which women freely without fear of men. That some men rape provides a sufficient threat to keep all women in a constant state of intimidation, forever conscious of the knowledge that the biological tool must be held in awe for it may turn weapon with sudden swiftness borne of harmful intent" (Brownmiller 209). To elucidate

further, Brownmiller claims that “we cannot work around the fact that in terms of human anatomy the possibility of forcible intercourse incontrovertibly exists. This single factor may have been sufficient to have caused the creation of a male ideology of rape. When men discovered that they could rape, they proceeded to do it” (Brownmiller 13-14). Feminists address the root causes of violence against women and expose the political nature of rape, different ways of understanding bodies, politics and power dynamics.

Besides all of these spoiled and corrupted characters, Kane’s inclusion of the character of Priest is highly remarkable. Kane expresses her views regarding the unfaithful and immoral nature of mankind. She questions the blind and false practice of the institutionalized religious precepts, rituals, rites and moral code of conduct in order to reform it according to the different contexts. Kane insists on the honest and remorseful confession, as well as true faith on God in terms of spirituality. For that reason, Kane leaves her characters on their own fate according to the context of their personal experience, works and deeds of life. Albert Gérard in his book “The Phaedra Syndrome – Of Shame and Guilt in Drama” explains: “Such a situation compounds adultery with incest. It brings into play the fundamental psychological motivations of love and honour, sex and vengeance. It exemplifies the utter disruption of natural order and moral hierarchies. It almost inevitably compels author and reader alike to pass moral judgement and to take sides in the context between natural impulses and ethical precepts...” (58).

Meanwhile, Kane also talks about the death of the morality or spirituality of the modern world. Modern men equate material, masculine power of their own with the omnipotent, infinite power of God. That is why they pay no heed to the need of moral precept in their journey of life just like Hippolytus in this play –

Hippolytus: ...God certainly is merciful. If I were him I’d despise you. I’d wipe you off the face of the earth for your dishonesty.

Priest: You’re not God.

Hippolytus: No. A prince. God on earth. But not God. Fortunate of all concerned...
(Phaedra’s Love, 96)

Kane points out that man is guided by free will and desires that lead him towards degradation and destruction. She feels the lack of moral and spiritual guidance of a modern man that can bring him back to the path of redemption and correction. Here we can see how

much Priest tries to awaken Hippolytus' sleepy sense of morality and responsibility. But all his efforts remain in vain:

Priest: Do you know what the unforgivable sin is?

Hippolytus: Of course.

Priest: You are in danger of committing it. It's not just your soul at stake, it's the future of your family – ... Your sexual indiscretions are of no interest to anyone. But the stability of the nation's morals is. You are a guardian of those morals. You will answer to God for the collapse of the country you and your family lead. (*Phaedra's Love*, 94)

The concluding part concludes with the possibilities of solutions regarding the elimination or eradication of violence against women. Sarah Kane points out clearly the consequences of the violence and the fatal social, moral degradation of our society and personality. "*Phaedra's Love*" works as a window to visualize the pain and suffering of women in order to reform our societal norms, ideologies, perspectives, and our way of looking into this sensitive matter. If we really want a peaceful world, we need to educate the public on this above concerned issues and to reduce society's tolerance towards violence against women. This paper will stir questions that lead us to eradicate gender distinction through empowering women, changing ideology, reforming judiciary system, deconstructing stereotypes, eliminating hierarchical or binary oppositional relations, and challenging the naturalization process of gender-based violence. This paper will help us to contemplate on the violence against women, the issues related to it and the feminist theoretical possibility that affords room for social and political change.

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