

Conflicted Characters: A Study of Sarah Kane's 4.48 Psychosis

Dheyaa Hameed Thabit¹, Zainab Fadhil Rashid², Tabarak Sadiq Ali³

¹Assistant Lecturer, Wasit University, College of Education for Human Sciences

²Assistant Lecturer, Wasit University, College of Education for Human Sciences

³Assistant Lecturer, Wasit University, College of Education for Human Sciences

Abstract: *4.48 Psychosis is Sarah Kane's final and striking piece before her passing. Since it is a theatrical depiction of depression and suicide, some critics interpret it as a suicide note. However, if the reader pays close attention and reads between the lines, he will discover that the play is actually about examining the complexities of mental health and the human psyche. This play tackles issues and challenges associated with an identity crisis that impact an individual's interactions with their community. In this study, identity crises will be highlighted as a key theme in 4.48 Psychosis. By examining the ways in which cultural norms and expectations contribute to the development of identity crises, as well as the internal conflict and confusion that accompany them.*

Keywords: Sarah Kane, suicide, mental health, identity crisis, conflict

Humans have all, at some point or another, questioned their identity and have all had moments where they felt unsure about who they really are, or about how they fit into the world around them. Maybe they felt pressured to act in a certain way, or felt lost in a sea of possibilities. Maybe they felt unrecognized by others, or perhaps it was a moment of where one no longer recognized the person staring back in the mirror, no longer had a sense of their own wants and needs. It's a feeling of alienation, and when such feelings persist for a prolonged amount of time, it can be said that they are dealing with a crisis of identity.

Humans often think of their own identities as stories too. To be someone is to have a story, to have past experiences, character traits, to have goals and aspirations. It's not just that humans desire this for themselves on an individual level, it is also a collective issue. In their social interactions, they continuously fall back on what feels like a mandatory act of self-identification through storytelling. Humans tend to feel more at ease when someone offers a coherent story, and when others can offer one in return. A coherent story implies an authentic identity, this does not mean that one has it all figured out, but merely that one knows themselves well enough for others to get to know them too, and to feel comfortable with them in their presence. And so it is understandable that if they struggle with their identity, they risk significant social consequences as well. If one does not have a coherent story, if one does not know who they are, and are being vague or overly reclusive about themselves because of it, people will likely find it more difficult to connect with that person too, which in turn will probably only worsen their self-doubt and feelings of alienation. So a crisis of identity is no small matter, and has serious consequences not only for the way humans feel about themselves but also for the way they fit into the world around them.

4.48 Psychosis is a narrative about those who are mentally sick and experiencing an identity crisis finding acceptance in a cruel world where such thing is hard to be found and if it was found, then it is after a long mentally draining struggle.

(Kristeva, 1982, p. 5). The play covers a lot more ground than "just suicide"; for example, it takes a lot of time (as most of her other works) discussing love and relationships, as well as addressing a variety of social and religious themes and offering a "not so subtle" critique of mental health care centers. Even the "ill-fated" time stamp of 4.48 gradually shifts its meaning during the play, raising questions about and perhaps even providing solutions to the meaning of existence. Kane embraces all of these subjects in his unusual but passionate use of theatrical form.

Kane selected a precise time stamp, 4.48, to be included in the play's title. Some claim that was the period of "the early morning hours when Kane wrote, when she felt the most sane, though these were also the hours when she appeared the most insane to others" (Singer 161) As David Greig notes in the introduction to Kane's Complete Plays, for some, this may have been the time when Kane frequently woke up and worked on her play. Some even believe that this is the time when most individuals commit suicide and when suicidal impulses are at their peak.

In *4.48 Psychosis*, the theatrical portrayal of depression and suicide illustrates the shattered nature of the postmodern subject and the difficulty of representing the identity as a unified logical unit, represented through character. It is overwhelming to express oneself or to find the true ultimate identity one has to be eventually in the modern world because the mind and the soul are always shattered because of certain reasons as it is seen in *4.48 Psychosis*. "4.48 Psychosis, a play written as a poem that portrays a psychological descent into madness and suicide." (Armstrong, 2014, p. 38)

"4.48 Psychosis in which a character becomes more an expression of emotion than the outward manifestation of psychology and social interaction" (Saunders, 2002, p. 88). It is not that a character has been left out; but rather that its conception differs considerably from what it typically represents. The loss of a definable object—something that

exists but cannot be understood through language—is another fundamental theme of this drama.

Kane's most notable play *4.48 Psychosis*, has gotten as much attention as her first *Blasted*. She wrote it shortly before she passed away. Three fragile and contradicting textual identities, each representing a voice, further dilutes the dramatic effect. *4.48 Psychosis* was viewed in reviews as a dramatized suicide note, but later, balanced assessments avoided biographical criticism, exposing a deep apprehension about reading literary works that dealt with insanity and the subject's collapse (Kovaceva, 2017, p. 30).

4.48 Psychosis is a collage of thoughts, feelings, psychiatric tests, symptoms, diagnoses, monologues, dialogue fragments, pharmaceutical subscriptions, suicide plots, and observations. Regarding the dialogues, we are not told if they are intended at her or at a clinical physician. In any case, the main character is a suicidal patient who want an end to life (De Vos, 2011, p. 127).

Since psychosis is commonly understood to be a lack of feeling connected to reality, the play's central paradox is that the speaker thinks it to be the exact opposite: "At 4.48 / when sanity visits / for one hour and twelve minutes I am in my right mind" (1. 20) and dreads the daily life, which is chiefly about medication and experiments with her brain: "When it has passed I shall be gone again, a fragmented puppet, a grotesque fool" (1. 20) She can only be in touch with her true self and think back on her circumstances at night, when she is not under the influence of doctors or drugs. According to the play's reasoning, suicide is the right decision.

Throughout Kane's work, there are constant tensions and mutual destruction between different sides, such as between reason and emotion, sanity and insanity, and body and mind. In *4.48 Psychosis*, for example, speaking consciousness overcomes character to the point where the play loses control of the actuarial body, despite the character's illness. The speaker experiences her mind, not her body, as a dark, old, Gothic-style structure, and her consciousness takes up one of the rooms, but the "truth" symbolized by the abject cockroaches is concealed in the very ceiling, and they are let out in a moment of clarity (light) (Kovaceva, 2017, p. 31).

Kane's recurrent use of language in all of her plays, her referencing of historical events, and her modern retelling of ancient texts are all signs of an identity crisis.

*I don't imagine
(clearly)
that a single soul
could
would
should
or will*

*and if they did
I don't think
(clearly)
that another soul
a soul like mine
could
would*

*should
or will
irrespective (1. 15)*

This crisis can be seen in the characters' memory loops in *Crave* and *4:48 Psychosis*. The final source of this crisis is Kane's propensity to create characters who, throughout the course of each play, must reconcile their own traumatic experiences and the traumatic effects of these experiences as they navigate social alienation, personal violence, and violation (Armstrong, 2014, p. 22). These characters are themselves suffering from traumatic splits with their own memories and experiences.

The play offers a powerful critique of the mental health care system and a very realistic portrayal of the mistakes that both medical professionals and patients in mental hospitals regularly make. A voice in *4:48 Psychosis* expresses concern that she would become an "old lady living on the street for getting [her] name" (1. 12), a terrifying prospect that a big section of Britain's underclass experiences (Armstrong, 2014, p. 185). "Internal exploration of Kane's desperate state of being" is how Steve Earnest characterizes the play (qtd. in Chramosilova, 2013, p. 29). *4.48 Psychosis* creates a picture that is in harmony with reality, yet it is always a distortion of reality.

An intense desire to unite form and substance is evident in *4.48 Psychosis*. In a free form, texts of all types that are no longer separated into monologues and dialogues must come together in a psychotic condition. These texts include prescription drugs, bible verses, diagnoses, mental examination results, and more. Dramatic writing has blurred even the most fundamental line between the text of a play and the stage directions. Kane presents the patient's character and her issues through giving out a list of all the things that have been troubling or hurting her. This may serve as a response to the physician's required, but unsaid in the play, "How are you feeling today?" during the initial examination. The answers of the character would be like "I am sad" "I am fat." "I would like to kill myself." All of these show the readers the feelings that the character is struggling with and how such thoughts are controlling her mind even through sometimes they cannot be true.

Furthermore, it's still unclear how many characters there are—that is, if characters can even be said to exist at all, because the psychotic's undifferentiated nature has replaced individual identities with speech fragments. It gets harder to tell an actor from a character as these things don't have names either. Words disappear into thin air, taking with them all facts about the symbolic world. The entire act is clouded in uncertainty and tainted with bland speech (De Vos, 2011, p. 137, 138).

Wrath and rage are very strong feelings that, in some situations, may give one's actions more force "depression is anger..." (1. 35). There is no question as to the kind of despair the play's speaker is experiencing. Sarah Kane's melancholy takes the form of a progressively worsening depression that ultimately renders all creative and artistic endeavors impossible. She finds it very difficult to maintain the necessary distance from depressive imagery throughout

her regression. Stated differently, her melancholy impairs the creative process. She is unable to escape this cycle, and over time, she gradually loses the capacity to use the experience in both the creation of art and—more importantly—in her attempts to restore a harmony that she was deprived of as a child. (Cermak & Zabrodska, 2007, p. 112, 113).

Her ego's boundaries are broken by depression, rage, and despair, which pull her down even deeper and make it impossible for her to reestablish them. "*I will drown in my dysphoria/ in the cold black pond of my self/ the pit of my immaterial mind.*" (1. 8) She's too deep, and her anguished voice can only be heard when her "... *legs are empty/ Nothing to say/ And this is the rhythm of madness,*" (1. 19). However, it's too late to listen and comprehend with empathy. She finds the circumstances in which she finds herself horrifying. Practically speaking, Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* is "a solo symphony" (1. 30) about a battle against a mental disorder, a patient's journey through hospitalization, and perhaps even a bit about Sarah Kane's own journey as a damaged self-identity. (Chramosilova, 2013, p. 28).

Kane primarily employs the technique of shock through language that is harsh and nihilistic while yet offering the spectator an immersive theatrical experience. Because it is impossible to portray a person as a coherent whole or as a coherent logical unit, the play makes a connection between the postmodern fragmented subject and the play (Buchler, 2008, p. 87).

The obviously cynical perspective on relationships, human nature, and the cosmos suggests that it depicts a society that is emotionally detached and materialistic. The jumbled language, which is occasionally unconnected to any cohesive thought, emphasizes the protagonists' postmodern breakdown and alienation while hinting to potential future identity problems (Buchler, 2008, p. 89).

Kane explicitly uses cruelty in *4.48 Psychosis* to create a cohesive and entire image of the human self—a selfhood that, however, must ultimately result in suicide. Since it challenges readers and viewers to move beyond conventional paradigms and classifications like gender, race, class, and sexuality, Kane's definition of selfhood is unquestionably post-human (Peters, 2016, p. 7, 8, 18).

In addition to being a symptom of depression, Kane's play addresses issues and challenges related to an identity crisis that affects how each person interacts with their larger community. As part of the speakers' crises, the play also depicts the extreme and violent character of the lover's speech, as demonstrated by the sentences that follow, which are said by one of the play's voices. The parts of the play that depict a conversation between a doctor and patient emphasize the worry and annoyance that come from not being heard. *4.48 Psychosis* is evidence of the mind's complete separation from itself during a crisis. (Waddington, 2006, p. 220, 281).

4.48 Psychosis is a realistic depiction of a mentally ill person that raises questions about where the boundaries

between sanity and insanity and reality and imagination should be drawn. wherein the identity issue emerges via them (Strnadová, 2008, p. 10). "*4.48 Psychosis*, depicts a world with a diminished sense of human contact and more importantly humanity" (Buchler, 2008, p. 97).

Conclusion

Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* depicts melancholy and suicide as postmodern issues, emphasizing how identity is fragmented and how challenging it is to convey it as a unified logical unit through characters. It highlights the overwhelming nature of expressing oneself and finding the true ultimate identity in the modern society. Furthermore, it presents the reader with a full vision of both the internal and external struggles of people with mental illness and traumatic experiences, as well as their problems with fragmentation, dissociation, depersonalization, and selfhood, which stand in for the postmodern man's dilemma. Experiencing all of this results in identity lose.

Kane's play, *4.48 Psychosis*, addresses her sadness, a progressively worsening depression that shatter the borders of her ego, and she is unable to reconstruct them. Kane's play is a solo symphony, concentrating on her struggle against a mental disorder, her journey through hospitalization, and her own journey as a shattered self-identity. The play delves into the themes of depression, rage, and despair, making it an emotional examination of the human condition.

Despite the challenge of depicting a person as a coherent logical unit, Kane connects postmodern fractured issues with the play using harsh language and nihilistic techniques. Additionally, she employs jumbled language to portray a pessimistic perspective that presents a detached, materialistic society, emphasizing the protagonists' alienation and postmodern dissolution while also posing potential future identity issues.

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