

## *The Baby's Not for Burning: The Abject in Sarah Kane's Blasted and Helen Oyeyemi's Juniper's Whitening*

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### ABSTRACT

*Both Sarah Kane's Blasted and Helen Oyeyemi's Juniper's Whitening have frightening instances of theatrical violence which include infanticide. These instances are more overt in Blasted and are alluded to in Juniper's Whitening. This article interrogates the instances of infanticide within both plays, connecting the violence to the child abuse and farcical infanticide in The Punch and Judy Show. The figure of the child is examined from the perspective of a symbol of civilisation corrupted from within and the murder of the child through the lens of Kristeva's theory of abjection. The staged infanticide and the rapes present in both texts reflect shifting cultural norms in an increasingly multicultural Britain. The study of these two plays is both literary and dramaturgical; the casual brutality in Kane's play with the psychological and insidious motifs in Oyeyemi's work are compared with the motifs found in The Punch and Judy Show and then situated within the context of the In-yer-face theatre productions of the 1990s to the 2000s. In both plays, a sense of domesticity being a farce underscoring brutality, torture and infanticide is present.*

*Keywords: abiku; motherhood; in-yer-face; abjection; Punch and Judy Show*

### INTRODUCTION

Alex Siersz (2008) writes that the playwrights of the In-yer-face theatre of the 1990s in Britain transformed "the language of the theatre, making it more direct, raw, and explicit" (p.20). According to Sierz, these playwrights "introduced a new dramatic vocabulary" and "pushed theatre into being more experiential, more aggressively aimed at making audiences feel and respond" (p.20). One of the most iconic of these playwrights is Sarah Kane. Kane's *Blasted* created major waves in the British theatre world. More than one critic inclusive of Sierz has asserted that *Blasted* is the quintessential In-yer-face theatre play, and one of the plays that pushed this theatrical movement forward. The novelist Helen Oyeyemi, on the other hand, is rarely acknowledged as a playwright. In this article, Oyeyemi's play, *Juniper's Whitening*, is situated against the In-yer-face theatre movement, as it was contemporary to the dramatic work Oyeyemi produced. Both *Blasted* and *Juniper's Whitening* contain scenes or allusions to rape, domestic violence and infanticide and these elements are connected to the elements found in *The Punch and Judy Show*. The elements of rape, domestic violence, and infanticide have been present not just in British theatre and performance history, but also British literature for many centuries, from Punch's beating and throwing of the baby in *The Punch and Judy Show* to Jonathan Swift's savagely incisive *A Modest Proposal*.

This paper examines the ways in which Punch and Judy motifs which have been present within theatre history may be read in the two plays. In Kane's *Blasted*, a baby is produced after a litany of horrors which visually assaults the eyes of the reader (and audience), as almost an afterthought. The four characters of Ian, Cate, the Soldier as well as the Baby in *Blasted* may be read as corresponding to the archetypes within *The Punch and Judy Show*: Punch, Judy, The Policeman as well as the Baby. Kane's *Blasted* is one of the plays that gave in-yer-face theatre its name while Oyeyemi is known predominantly as a British writer of Nigerian descent, known best for her novels, *The Icarus Girl* (2005), *The*

*Opposite House* (2007), *White is for Witching* (2009), *Mr. Fox*(2011), and recently, *Boy, Snow, Bird*(2014). In 2002 Oyeyemi penned *Juniper's Whitening* which was subsequently performed at the Corpus Playroom Cambridge in 2004. The play is striking in that it brings the reader to a claustrophobic enclosure which mimics the culturally unsettling liminal space between life and death. The time frame of *Juniper's Whitening* brings it in close proximity not just to the plays of In-yer-face theatre, but also to the time when a corpus of criticism revolving around this movement was emerging. This play is read as being symptomatic of the same ethos which fuels the plays of post-War British drama from The New Wave to In-yer-face theatre, because it deals with that same struggle, of the hidden horrors behind the facade of domesticity.

Oyeyemi's play will be read against Kane's play primarily because in both works there are connected instances of brutality which are so extreme they can only be considered the abject. Both plays deal with the issue of rape, and with the subsequent death of a baby. The infanticide in both plays signifies the dissolution of the ideas and norms of family. In truth, this signifier has been almost continuously present within British theatrical history, from *The Punch and Judy Show* to Edward Bond's *Saved*. More specifically, the instances within both plays disrupt and unsettle the hegemonic concept of a family. The element of passive, slow-building violence in the relationship between the male and female protagonists, and the juxtaposition of the child problematises the issue of family within the context of contemporary female playwrights. Both plays take on trauma and an ontological rupturing of reality, taking the reader towards the hyper-real. These instances are transgressive, and dark, yet somehow endured through the centuries of *The Punch and Judy Show's* various manifestations.

Julia Kristeva (1982) writes that the abject is "related to perversion" in that the sense of abjection is "anchored in the superego" (p. 15). The abject is perverse, Kristeva writes, because it "neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them" (p.15). One may conjecture that the abject may be connected to the Burkean Sublime, particularly in relation to the horror and disgust which will afflict the audience when considering the manifestation of violence within these texts. The abject, Kristeva asserts, is connected to the superego, therefore, a text that deals with the abject is "necessarily implicated in the interspace that characterises perversion" (p.16). The abject is connected to In-yer-face theatre, and is implicitly contained within both of the playtexts interrogated in this article. The abject is also directly related to my reading of both plays in relation to *The Punch and Judy Show*. The scenes bring the reader back to the heart of humanity's collective fear, the death of an infant and the brutalising of a woman. The ways in which these scenes have been set up render the tragedy in a quizzical, sometimes casual light. It is the casual brutality which strikes, and horrifies the reader. This scene of brutality used to be greeted with laughs within *The Punch and Judy Show*, but in both plays the nature of the abject is highlighted by the stark reality, trauma and brutality underscored by the lines.

Jorge Berastegui Wood (2014) writes that trauma "is not only an individual experience; it has a social and historical dimension" (20). Wood's statement is apt in relation to the societal implications underscoring In-yer-face theatre. Graham Saunders (2008) argues that "the legacy of the in-yer-face dramatists has helped shape both definitions and trends in political theatre up until the latter half of the millennial decade," further adding that "their effect can be most closely discerned in the generation of new writers who have followed them"(p.8). Kane's play seems to work more towards the personal rather than the political; Oyeyemi's play is similarly positioned. I think it is significant that similar themes may be found in both works, and would argue that the near-contemporary norms of In-yer-face theatre have informed Oyeyemi's text. Sierz (2008) comments that "the name in-yer-face

theatre strongly suggests what is particular about the experience of watching extreme theatre – the feeling that your personal space is threatened. It gives a sense of that violation of intimacy that some forms of drama produce in the audience” (2008, p. 25). This is axiomatic with regard to the events that occur within Kane’s *Blasted*: the sense of being witness to a horribly intimate act which smashes across personal thresholds of acceptability which brings us directly into the realm of the abject.

### IN-YER-FACE THEATRE AND MULTICULTURALISM

The In-yer-face theatre movement of the 1990s to the millennial era was characteristic of its time not only because of the fact that British theatre seemed to have moved from the stance of the New Wave theatre, but also because of the increasing engagement with different cultures and current events. While still challenging hegemonic structures, the ethos of the movement seems to be an almost non-ethos, and this can be seen in Kane’s polemically ambiguous *Blasted*. Sierz (2008) comments that In-yer-face theatre is “political”, adding that it “emphasises the sense of rupture, a radical break, with the past” (p.25). However, in every generation of new playwrights there exists a rupture and a railing against the general order of things, so the question that begs to be asked here is whether the rupture within Oyeyemi’s play as read against Kane’s play is significant. Perhaps the answer lies in Sierz’s argument that In-yer-face theatre represents a return to the avant-garde, and is “fully resonant of the 1990s zeitgeist” (25).

Sierz (2005) previously lamented that it In-yer-face theatre was not dealing with more varied instances of social realism in millennial Britain, such as “global warming” and “mixed-race identity” (p. 61). What has in fact occurred within In-yer-face theatre is a flattening of experiences, the radical is class and culture based, but this radicalism is still part and parcel of the dominant paradigm. I argue that Oyeyemi’s writings subvert this paradigm. Hybridity whether from a genetic or cultural perspective has always been part and parcel of Oyeyemi’s writings. I therefore feel that the exclusion of her plays from the other plays of this period in British theatre should be addressed. Even if her plays are culturally ambiguous, the complexity behind that cultural ambiguity reflects the multiculturalism of Britain. *Juniper’s Whitening*, in its use of color metaphors, and in the tropes of splitting, very clearly highlights racial issues, the fear of colour, and a kind of supernatural passing. The motif of the returning child who was killed can be linked to both the Punch and Judy Show, and to the Yoruba motif of the *abiku*. The multiculturalism of Britain cannot be divorced from British Theatre or from In-yer-face theatre. Lynette Goddard (2008) muses that “most analyses of British black women’s performance frame it in terms of its oppositional potential, where it is positioned as a feminist response to subjugating images of race and gender” (p.3).

In her study on staging Black feminisms within the context of British theatre, Goddard (2007) questions and interrogates the conventional analyses which are problematised by shifting cultural norms. Michael Mcmillan (2006) on the other hand observes that the “idea of identity as a work in progress is reflected in the process of hybridisation and eclectic aesthetic desires found in the work of Black live art practitioners”(60). Mcmillan’s observation is timely and relevant in view of the work of younger hybrid playwrights such as Oyeyemi as well as Debbie Tucker Green. *Juniper’s Whitening*, which deals with the same themes of rape, incest and voyeurism came out a year before the In-yer-face theatre playwright debbie tucker green “stormed onto the British theatre’s new writing scene in spring 2003” (Goddard 182). green is a black playwright within the In-yer-face theatre movement whose plays tackle domesticity, abuse and voyeurism. green has been accepted as part of the In-yer-face theatre ‘canon’ while Oyeyemi

has not. Oyeyemi cannot neatly fit within this movement, primarily because the structure of the play is at once far more conventional and far more hybrid. Her play is also less overtly violent but it does deal directly with aspects of the abject as I will show in my discussions.

There are many connecting points with the elements found in Kane's *Blasted*, and this is primarily why I feel it is important to contextualise Oyeyemi's play against the In-yer-face Theatre because the plays of that era were active and ongoing during the time that *Juniper's Whitening* was first staged.

## FAMILY VALUES AND BRITISH MODERNITY

One of the key elements that have been a constant in contemporary British theatre is the family drama, which incorporates the confines of a domestic – often working-class – environment. Stephen Lacey (1965) writes that the plays of the New Wave movement became “one of the main forums in which hegemonic values could be debated and contested”(5); this legacy may be seen in seemingly differing plays from different periods in British theatrical history from the mid-twentieth century to the present. The essential triad of parents and child is at the heart of most mythic narratives. This triad is challenged and traumatised in the plays of post-War Britain, probably because the dissolution of the family unit goes hand in hand with the perceived dissolution in society.

The scene in Bond's (1966) *Saved* remains one of the quintessential examples of baby-killing as a symbol of theatrical violence against hegemonic ideals. In a pivotal scene within *Saved*, a baby is brutalised and then killed by a band of brutish gangsters who treat it much as one would treat a puppet or a plaything, saying that babies have “no feelin's”, rather like “animals” (p.67). Bond's *Saved* upsets the normalised idea of the family unit, because at its heart is a story about a woman who has a baby by one man, but who lives with her family and another man, a previous lover who refuses to be ejected from the home. To compound the lack of normalcy which is the playwright's attempt to unsettle the hegemonic idea of the family, the audience is provided a glimpse at the ultimate act of disruption within the context of a family, the brutal murder of its young. Bond's play is a highly claustrophobic drama set within a working class neighbourhood. The idea that a baby is without feelings draws the audience's attention to the fact that it is an idea, and not a baby that is being killed in this scene, the same way the suspension of disbelief within *The Punch and Judy Show* allows the audience not to be horrified at Punch's throwing of the baby out the window. The baby is not real, and is a puppet-like representation. What is real, is the child as a metaphor. The exaggerated quality of the baby within these theatrical proceedings takes on a farcical element in Kane's *Blasted*.

While each movement of Post-War British Drama seeks to rid itself of older tropes, the most basic motif remains. The casual brutality in the relationship at the heart of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* seems to find its moorings again and again in subsequent plays. Lacey characterised this evolving period of theatre as “social realism” (p.74) adding that

Social realist plays (and novels and films too) offered an alternative imagery that could be mobilised against the mythology spawned by the new prosperity and ‘embourgeoisement’; the working-class were reclaimed both for the theatre and more generally for a left-inclined intelligentsia, itself often of lower-class origin and with a particular investment in the social experience that preoccupied them.

To a certain extent, the element of disrupting the domestic process was pre-existing in *The Punch and Judy Show*, with the mock strife between Punch and Judy, the advent of the Policeman and the abuse of Baby which disrupts popular and acceptable ideals of a happy

family unit. I am interested in the manner in which this process has shifted from the moment of the New Wave theatre to In-yer-face theatre as well as how these seemingly disparate strands in British theatre have informed the norms surrounding both Kane's and Oyeyemi's plays.

### JULIA KRISTEVA'S THEORY OF ABJECTION

The abject, Kristeva (1982) says, is neither subject nor object, it is therefore "opposed to I", and carries with it negation and fascination. Kristeva (p.1) writes:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced.

There are many categories of the abject, ranging from nausea related to food, to filth/defilement. It is something that lies between the subject and the object and "opposed to I" refers to the state of Otherness, of alterity. More specifically, Kristeva writes that the abject (p. 4) encompasses "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (p.4). The abject therefore includes all things that lie "in-between, the ambiguous, the composite"(p.4), and may be read as including the disenfranchised. The abject then, this spectre of horror lies in the realm of that which is considered taboo. The marginalised Other falls within this category. The underclass, the non-White Briton, those who lie outside of the social order may be considered the abject in relation to the normalised middle classes. Related to this is the idea of transgression, because in transgression or taboos we see the abject in full force. As such, it is natural that abjection should be found in In-yer-face theatre, concerned as it is with the limits beyond what is permissible. The excesses of In-yer-face theatre rather inevitably brings to mind the abject and this may be read in tandem with the tropes found in *The Punch and Judy Show*. I am interested in exploring the ways in which the figure of the Other connect to the trope of the brutalised baby, and what such an inquiry might unearth about societal unrest and phobias in multicultural, twenty-first century Britain.

### HISTORICAL AND CRITICAL OVERVIEW OF *THE PUNCH AND JUDY SHOW*

This article investigates the possibility that the domestic violence and infanticide in both of the studied plays have roots in *The Punch and Judy Show*. Punch is a violent anti-hero who rails against the domesticity which seems to have plagued British men for centuries. The tradition of the *Punch and Judy Show* has existed in Britain for centuries. Michael Byron (1978), for instance, makes an argument for the relationship between this puppet show and older fertility and Mystery rituals (pp. 1-4). However, the devotional and occultic light in which these practices have been viewed, from the time of Eleusis to the Gnostic practices of the Albigensian Heresy take on a different light within the context of twentieth to twenty-first century cultural and social norms. Taken within this context, the senseless or psychological brutality within the plays signal an act of violence, not merely against the personal spaces of the spectators, but against hegemonic standards of acceptability.

More specifically, *The Punch and Judy Show* had its origins in the *commedia dell'arte* in which different archetypes of the human condition were performed by characters in mask. In this earlier guise, Punch was Pulcinella, and a figure of both comedy and the inherent

tragedy within brutality. The following script of *The Punch and Judy Show* (Byron, 1978, p.60) highlights the element of brutality that has been presented to the audience in different guises throughout the ages can be seen, intact, with its casual underpinnings:

Punch: Oh, Kissy, kiss, kiss. Oh! You little beauty. Oh! You little bit of jam. Now Judy, fetch up the Baby.  
Judy: Here's the little beauty.  
Punch: Throw him over to me to wipe his pretty little nose . . . Now go downstairs while I sing him to sleep. (Exit Judy)  
(Punch again sings "Goodbye, little girl, goodbye!" But the Baby wakes up and cries and Punch loses his temper and throws him out of the window.)  
Punch: Judy! Judy!  
Judy: Where's my Baby? Where's my Baby?  
Punch: He's fallen out of the window!

Byron (1978) observes that the theme of the Punch and Judy show is "derived from a prehistoric fertility ritual in which the two protagonists represent the New and the Old Year or Summer and Winter" (p. 1). This ritualistic element comes across in the various puppet shows to the extent of allowing for a suspension of disbelief. This may be seen in older, Hermetic traditions which were at the basis of the masques and mummer plays of Europe.

#### THE ARCHETYPE OF THE CHILD AND THE *ABIKU*

Carl Jung states that the archetype of the child is significant within human development. As part of a study he conducted along with Kerenyi on the myth and archetype of the Divine Child in the Eleusis Mysteries, Jung observes that the child "is an element of our psychic structure and this a vital and necessary component in our psychic economy. It represents or personifies certain instinctive data of the dark, primitive psyche, the real but invisible roots of consciousness" (p. 94). The importance of the child as either an archetype or a semiotic marker within our collective consciousness cannot be understated. The matter of casual brutality which may be found not just in *Blasted* but also in *The Punch and Judy Show* becomes puzzling. How and why is this acceptable and why is it a recurring motif in theatre?

The metaphor of the child in danger is both ageless and ontologically troubling. Jung states that "[a]bandonment, exposure, danger, etc. are all elaborations of the "child's" insignificant beginnings and of its mysterious and miraculous birth" (p. 102). He links the metaphor of an abused or abandoned child to the embodiment of "an agonising situation of conflict from which there seems to be no way out – at least for the conscious mind" (p. 103). Jung's definition, while related to both mythology and depth psychology is very relevant in the study of both plays, primarily because both invoke psychological disturbances as a result of trauma; in both claustrophobic dramatic enclosures, there seems to be no way out for the trapped, female protagonists.

Jung's definition of the metaphor of the child is connected with the Yoruba trope of the *abiku* in this paper. Timothy Mobolade (1973) writes that the *abiku* is "any child who dies and is reborn several times into the same family" (p.62) and this sets up the repetitive dialectic of death-rebirth-death present in *Juniper's Whitening*. Madeleine Hron (2008) avers that the motif of the *abiku* has "particularly haunted Nigerian authors"(p. 28) and this is abundantly clear in a reading of all of Oyeyemi's works, from her novels to her plays. If the child in danger is ontologically troubling, then the idea of a child being brutalised and murdered goes beyond those limits, taking the audience or reader into the realm of abjection.

The spectre of the dying child who returns only to die and be born again falls directly into the realm of the abject. Kristeva writes that (p.5) "there is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning,

language, or desire is founded”. This state of want is a primal state. When connected to the feminine, this may allude to the biological and cultural imperative towards reproduction.

#### CHILDREN AND REPRODUCTION FROM A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

Gerda Neyer and Laura Bernardi (2011) write that through a patriarchal “social contract”, childbearing and motherhood became the “core of women's nature” and that this meant that heteronormative relationships between the sexes were thereby determined through a “sexual contract ...which surrenders women's bodies and offspring to men and to society”. This feminist perspective of childbearing can be extended by looking at Mary O’Brien’s *Politics of Reproduction*. Shannon K. Carter writes that to O’Brien “that women’s biological reproductive functions provide women a monopoly over reproductive labor” (p 121). Carter’s study expanded on O’Brien’s theory by categorising the accumulated data under “(1) emphasis on labor/production, and (2) social integration” (p. 127). O’Brien’s thesis clearly wants to show that childbirth is a manner in which patriarchy is maintained, both through the labour provided by the woman, and the desire of the male to assert hierarchy. O’Brien’s thesis situates the child as an object of value and currency. Carter expands on this thesis by observing that reproductive labor is similar to productive labor in that the individual transforms the world through the creative process of producing a child (adding a new person to the world), and they reproduce themselves through the genetic and biological continuity present in the child “and that a woman’s “place in the continuity of the human species is confirmed through their reproductive labor” (p. 127).

Neyer and Bernardi (2011) point out that motherhood is a contested concept in feminism, and I would argue that it is a contested area in the plays being studied, with both instances of childbirth connected to rape, and culminating with the death of the child. Infanticide and baby brutality strikes at the core of normalised, hetero-normative assumptions of societal continuity and production. This value is eroded in theatrical tradition by scenes of baby brutality which have been further re-framed in Kane’s and Oyeyemi’s plays.

#### ANALYSIS

##### SARAH KANE’S *BLASTED*

Ian Ward (2013) writes that “violence is one of the distinguishing characteristics of Kane’s writings” and that rape is an oft-visited theme by Kane (p. 229). These are the aspects of Kane’s works which have placed her as a quintessential In-yer-face theatre playwright. Ward asserts that the violence in Kane’s plays is “pervasive” (p. 225), citing the ways in which Kane situates rape myths within the violence of each play. Kane deals with the subject of rape unflinchingly, and rather violently turns the tables on the rapist by having him raped. Siersz writes that “throughout *Blasted* Kane shows male and female psychology through simple, flinty, and laconic dialogue which has been compared to that of Edward Bond” (p. 328). The correlation between *Blasted* and *Saved* can therefore be made not just in the instance of brutality against a child but in Kane’s language choices, in repositioning the misogyny of the Angry Young Men plays within context of her own violent work.

In Kane’s *Blasted*, the rape is a pivotal part of the proceedings even though the act itself is not staged. Kim Solga (2007) writes that this elision is significant, and problematises the near-scholarly lack in studying the impact of rape on Cate (p. 347). Solga accurately points out that Cate’s violation is flattened into a metaphor (p.349), a brutality that cannot and should not be ignored. The play starts within a hotel room, where Ian has managed to convince his ex-girlfriend, Cate, to visit him. He is abrasive, paranoid and xenophobic,

attacking the servitor who brings him sandwiches, while trying to persuade his ex-girlfriend to remain with him. For reasons completely incomprehensible to the audience, she agrees. The next morning we are aware that she has been raped by Ian throughout the night, and these events have happened off-stage. Solga (2007) writes that this theatrical elision is significant as it raises “questions about the limits of our vision and the possibility that seeing and knowing are not necessarily coeval” (p.349). This lack of seeing is what connects Blasted to a similar elision which occurs in Oyeyemi’s *Juniper’s Whitening*. It is my opinion that these instances of abjection and trauma are passed over in the dramatic text precisely because they are events too terrible for the human mind to contemplate directly. It falls into that realm of that which is opposite to what we are, that of the abject.

The scene then shifts inexplicably from a hotel room in a British city to the horrors of war in Bosnia (p. 33), a spatial and ontological shift which suspends reality but heightens the horror of this claustrophobic drama. The appearance of the soldier brings home to the onlookers the fact that there is a different world outside the hotel room, which acts as a facade (p. 35). The element of waiting prior to this has the same effect as Pinter’s *The Dumb Waiter*, while the appearance of the soldier, as an intruder into this scene is similarly Pinteresque. Ian is brutalised by the soldier who rapes him and eats his eye while Cate (seemingly) hides in the bathroom. She later emerges with a baby, whom Ian eventually cannibalises. In the scene which is the most relevant to this paper, Cate leaves the Baby with Ian as Judy did with Punch (p. 53):

Cate	Got to get something for Baby to eat.
Ian	Won’t find anything.
Cate	May as well look.
Ian	Fucking bastards ate it all.
Cate	It’ll die.
Ian	Needs its mother’s milk.

Read out of context, this seems to be a dialogue between two adults in a normal relationship within a war-time scenario. Read within the context of the play where the scenes shift, it becomes terrifying. The *Punch and Judy* motif of leaving the baby with the father, who eventually abuses it, is present and provides a disturbing overlay over the rapes and the racism displayed by Ian. In the puppet theatre the audiences are invited to laugh, in this scene, the audience or reader is left reeling. Ian alternates between despairing, contemplating suicide as well as trying to get Cate to kiss him. The baby rather inexplicably, dies (p. 57):

Cate	<i>(Rocks the baby and looks down at it)</i>
Oh no.	
Ian	What.
Cate	It’s dead.
Ian	Lucky Bastard.

The death of a child within this context is seen to be a metaphor against the utter hopelessness of their situation in which there is no escape, similar to the circumstances of *Saved*, in which the child is “saved” from being brought up in a similar environment by its callous treatment by the young thugs. However, Kane compounds the horror of this death with a shocking cannibalism (p. 60):

*Ian tears the cross out of the ground, rips up the floor and lifts the baby’s body out.  
He eats the baby.  
He puts the remains back in the baby’s blanket and puts the bundle back in the hole.  
A beat, then he climbs in after it and lies down, head poking out of the floor.  
He dies with relief.*



But of course, Ian does not die; he comes back to life. Cate returns from selling sexual favours for food, therefore inviting more sexual abuse. The cycle starts anew (pp. 60-61). They are trapped within the hotel room in a bleak existence in which there is no hope for any sort of salvation (p. 61). This litany of over-the-top horror brings the horrors of war to the theatre but it also brings the viewer's attention to the extremities of human brutality. *Blasted* suspends laughter but manages to capture the same dynamics present within *The Punch and Judy Show*.

The elements aim to shock and to be over-the-top, but also aimed at not allowing the viewer to escape in the same manner *The Punch and Judy Show* allowed the viewer to escape. The viewer is brought directly into the horrors of war and existence. Where Oyeyemi's play inducts the reader deeper into a psychosomatic, almost supernatural loop of ritual, Kane externalises these brutish elements in a masque-like manner while still being politically unsettling.

This act of baby brutality occurs after he has effectively trapped, emotionally manipulated and raped his ex-girlfriend, Cate in a hotel room (p. 31) and after he is subsequently raped by a Serbian soldier, his eye eaten in an orgy of excessive violence (p. 49). It is the ultimate exemplification of theatrical violence against not just the audience but also to much-cherished bourgeoisie ideals that are brought to the theatre. It is a moment meant to shock, but this moment also lies at the heart of the deep irony and relationship between both British theatre and literature, with babies.

The horrific lack of empathy that leads to the brutalising of the baby in *Saved* may be juxtaposed with the horrific scene which is so extreme it is farcical within Kane's *Blasted* (60). The scene of baby-cannibalism evokes remembrances to Jonathan Swift's highly parodic depiction of an infant's usefulness to its parents in *A Modest Proposal* in which he suggests that the problem of poverty would be eradicated if people ate their young.

#### HELEN OYEYEMI'S *JUNIPER'S WHITENING*

*Juniper's Whitening* and *Victimese* were both written and staged when Oyeyemi was an undergraduate in Cambridge. Both plays may be viewed as exemplifications of psychological states of being, containing scenes of hyper-reality and to a certain extent, supernatural elements. *Juniper's Whitening* has, at its heart, a recurrent motif of murder and brutality. Beth is constantly killed and resurrected by her apparent partner, Aleph, and this is witnessed by Juniper, who lives with them. The connection between this and Beth's guilt at having murdered her child, Gimel, provides the viewer with a feminised perspective of the trauma of infanticide, an exemplification of what remains the abject to the feminine – rape, the death of a baby, and worst, the brutalisation of the baby. The difference is the psychological horror, the real guilt and the ritualistic repetition of violence, juxtaposed against the farcical scene of British domesticity. The motif of the dead child who returns again and again to haunt its family is called the *abiku* in Yoruba mythology. This motif is present in more than one of Oyeyemi's works, and is haunting present in the spectre of Gimel in *Juniper's Whitening*. The returning (un)dead child is a particularly powerful embodiment of the abject. Leila Rezaei Hezaveh, Nurul Farhana Low Abdullah, and Md Salleh Yaapar (2014) write that the abject "swings between the semiotic and symbolic, between chaos and order, between death and life" (11) and this is a particularly apt distillation of the Kristevan abject in *Juniper's Whitening*, as signified by Gimel, whom I read as being an *abiku*.

Caryl Phillips (2006) writes that the resurging interest in theatre amongst third generation blacks "comes directly out of a cultural trend which has seen young people becoming increasingly disinterested with literature or in any form of imaginative engagement with characters that live beyond their own worlds" (p. 45). Phillips avers that the creative

“energies of this new generation seem to be increasingly tied up in performance” (p. 45). It is perhaps inevitable that the young novelist Oyeyemi becomes part of this tradition, as different forces feed into the production of her texts and it may be argued that this cultural trend intersects with the forces of change that spurred the emergence of In-yer-face theatre. *Juniper’s Whitening* feels hybrid, containing not just European classical allusions, but also elements from Yoruba culture. The element of shock and horror, the supernatural dread and the unreality of the repetitive murdering of Beth, for instance, may connect the reader to the masques of the *gelede*, also connected to the motif of the *abiku*, the returning child. This intersects with the very British archetypes found within *The Punch and Judy Show*, the family unit of the pugnacious and sociopathic Punch, the much put-upon Judy and the much-battered Baby. Beth, much like Plath’s ‘Lady Lazarus’ awakes to be murdered again and yet again, is as trapped as the female protagonist of *Blasted*.

One of the complexities underlying a study of Oyeyemi’s play is the issue of hybridity and ambiguity. The play is ambiguous when it comes to race, it is hard to discern the race or culture of the characters within the play, and much of the supernatural elements within the play possess the markers of Yoruba ontology. These archetypal elements may be seen even in the starkness of *Blasted*, which has its precursor in Bond’s *Saved*. The text of *Juniper’s Whitening* is rich, laden with literary allusions as diverse as Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, to Sylvia Plath’s *Lady Lazarus* as well as T.S. Eliot’s *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. Reading the text can be disorienting, not because of the literary allusions but because of the painful scenes of domestic horror, the death of the child, the recurring murder of Juniper, all related to societal fears in relation to miscegenation. The abject, as portrayed in this playtext, is related to the inevitable concerns of intercultural theatre. The highly personal and psychologised *Juniper’s Whitening* engages with the invisible horror present within the walls of a domestic environment, confronting issues of skin colour, passing, and domestic horror.

Mcmillan (2006) comments that “black performance, given its ephemeral and oral nature, is itself a living phenomenon continually reinventing itself for the universe” (p. 61). Re-invention is one of the cornerstones of hybridity within both art and performance. Mcmillan’s observation is reflected in Oyeyemi’s work, particularly the rich, intercultural soil of someone who writes from the in-between place where cultures collide. The orality of Yoruba traditions meets the dense textual allusions to other works, as is evident in the following passage which very strongly draws from the *Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock* (p.23):

Beth	I have to kill him, Juniper. It’s all wrong because of him.
Juniper	Why?
Beth	It’s because of the bones. The ones that just won’t whiten; they make me dirty.
Juniper	Beth. For fuck’s sake, you can’t kill Aleph.
Beth	But he can kill me?
Juniper	It’s not like that; it’s not that he’s allowed -
Beth	Tell me, tell me all of it. You’re the only good one here. Tell me this – is it true that if you make someone die and they come out the other side, it doesn’t matter? I’m sure something clung to Lazarus. Something must’ve shone through him. It’s the bones that don’t stay white. Oh, God, you don’t understand – I can’t let myself become see-through.

*Juniper’s Whitening* references both Eliot’s poem and the play which the poem references, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. In *The Lovesong of J Alfred Prufrock*, the protagonist mulls over the banality of his existence by saying “I am Lazarus, come from the dead/Come back to tell you all/I shall tell you all” which elevates the figure of Lazarus against the dull servility of his existence. For Beth, she is denied even this luminescent prophecy, as she is stuck within a domestic nightmare. Her bones cannot shine, cannot turn white because that is Juniper’s province. This reflects that ontological place after death which Hamlet muses on in his soliloquy where one does not know ‘what dreams may come’. Oyeyemi represents this play

as a nightmare of banality, where death only leads to repetition. Within the purgatory of Oyeyemi's text, Beth cannot die, and yet is not allowed to live. This in-between place reflects the Dante-esque hell in which Kane's protagonists find themselves, in *Blasted*.

The pivotal event that is the cause of this loop brings us back to the heart of *The Punch and Judy Show*. A baby has been murdered, brutalised even. But this time, it is the work of a mother, or rather, a daughter who has been repeatedly raped by her father (p. 31) until she is impregnated.

Juniper (*hands over her ears, crying*)

No, no, stop it! I don't like the story, I DON'T LIKE IT.

Beth You know the end, I think. You know the end. She had a baby, but it made her mother very angry that she had one.

Juniper It's not a true story, though. It's not real.

Beth No, it's not. The girl hurt the baby, because the baby was the thing that made her parents hate her. Things shouldn't be that simple, but they are. The baby was a boy – she called him Gimel.

There is resistance on Juniper's part during the telling of the story which is the audience's first indication that Beth is really the part of Juniper that remembers; the trauma of being an infant-murderer as well as the rape has caused a deep, posthumous, psychosomatic rupture. The play begins with Juniper running away from what looks like either a murder or a rape, or both. As the audience is inducted into the gruesome, almost embarrassingly raw dynamics of life within the Gothicised household, they are made aware that all this springs from the deep trauma caused by the murdering of a baby (pp. 31-32).

Beth She started off small; she'd pinch Gimel hard when no one was looking, or she'd drop him on the floor, or she'd make him need her – she'd make him cry for ages and ages before she fed him.

Juniper (*weakly*) Please stop.

*Beth is crying.*

Beth Then one day, she burnt him. She had hair-tongs and she got them really hot. She couldn't stop burning him. She didn't really try to stop. No one else was at home, you see, and they wouldn't be back for hours. When the tongs cooled, she heated them up again. Juniper –

Juniper Oh, God.

The horror that Kane renders in an almost farcical fashion in *Blasted* is spelled out explicitly, in grisly detail within Oyeyemi's play, bringing home to the reader the abject in a way that neither *Saved* nor *Blasted* could or would. Beth has killed her baby, and this is why she is trapped within a household with her other self and a man who ritualistically murders her and then tends to her like a lover, pretty much the same way the Beth/Juniper entity was treated by her father (p. 31). I find it significant that the metaphor of burning is used within Oyeyemi's play particularly because it fits within both the archetypal violence within *The Punch and Judy Show*. There is a threat of Gimel's return, like the *abiku* of Yoruba beliefs. However, the element of repetition and hopelessness within a situation where one cannot die seems to be a recurring motif within both *Blasted* and *Juniper's Whitening*. Phobia, Kristeva writes (1982) “does not disappear” (p.38). Rather, it “slides beneath language” and transforms writing into “a language of fear” and of want (p.38). The desire for, and fear for a child is very much part and parcel of how the *abiku* is abject. While Kristeva does not write specifically of baby brutality, her discussion of horror and of the abject does encompass the Oedipal triangle, and birth trauma, which leads to the apprehending of fear (p. 33).

Oyeyemi's play is significant because it is bold enough to stare this particular flavour of the abject directly in the face, to give in a concrete and real name while situating it within a landscape which is a blend between the supernatural and the hyper-real. The extremity of the

narrated violence leaves nothing to the imagination, and yet, it is still a narrated violence as opposed to the performative and physical violence which occurs with *Blasted*.

Oyeyemi's works tap into deep patches of ontological trauma. The recurring death and guilt over infanticide may not fit squarely within the corpus of plays which make up the plot of In-yer-face theatre, but the age and proximity of Oyeyemi to these playwrights as well as the content of her plays makes it important that an analysis situating her is conducted. I argue that situating Oyeyemi within this continuum further contextualises the tragedy behind the supernatural narrative loops found within *Juniper's Whitening*, shifting the exploration of the social norms and impetus behind the play.

## CONCLUSION

The focus of this article has been the single nexus and instance of horror within claustrophobic scenes of domestic violence set in both plays. In both *Blasted* and *Juniper's Whitening*, the looming horror is framed by a scene of apparent normality and domesticity, which heightens the effect of the proceedings. The horrific instances of infanticide within both plays show a definite sea-change from the earlier, ritualistic and pageantry connected elements which led to *The Punch and Judy Show*. However, these elements have been used as a trope from the New Wave movement onwards to deal with the ideological fight against cultural norms.

The duality of transgression and transmogrification is part and parcel of a symbolic pageantry which allows its spectators and participants to acknowledge the hyper-reality of the events staged. This is possibly what inoculated the masses from being horrified at the depiction of brutality within *The Punch and Judy Show*. However, within the social context of the twenty-first century, the child, as the nexus of the modern household contains both its hopes and its horrors.

Within Oyeyemi's play, this struggle can be seen in the loop of domesticity that can never resolve itself or move forward, and in Kane's play, this struggle is rendered utterly null in the wake of horrific war conditions, as she brings the immediacy of the Bosnia-Herzegovina war struggles into a British hotel room. The resonances between the struggles in both plays tap into the inner motif of a contemporary consciousness which is still very much tied into that same struggle which was found in the plays of the New Wave theatre through to In-yer-face theatre.

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