

War and Violence in Naomi Wallace's In-Yer-Face Play *No Such Cold Thing*

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Abstract

The present paper aims at investigating themes of war and violence in Naomi Wallace's *No Such Cold Thing*. The play symbolizes a unique production of In-Yer-Face theatre that is pioneered by British Dramatist Sarah Kane during the last years of Twentieth century. Wallace's *No Such Cold Thing* manipulates the war initiated by United States of America against Afghanistan and the violence sequences of this war on Afghan individuals and American soldiers as well.

Significantly, human nature and its emotional intensity have always found a rich soil and effective mood of expression in drama. It is for this reason that drama in its various forms shares an essential factor with its spectator; the factor of admiration whether in theme, character, technique. This can be granted as a general rule in drama save one form that rebels against this rule and makes of the factor of disgust its common rule that is In-Yer-Face drama. The pioneer In-Yer-Face dramatists look at reality as deformed, handicapped, provocative and full of feelings of utmost pain and unjustifiable violence. In adopting such view they follow the same steps of Osborne, Beckett, Brecht, Artuad, and many other revolutionary dramatists, but In-Yer-Face dramatists add new dangerous and serious shocking theatrical extremes. They take the responsibility of translating the post-modern vicious reality on stage in the same painful and violent frankness of life itself, instigating inside the spectator fear, shock, rage and a heap of unresolved arguments. Hence, an In-Yer-Face play tends to be untraditional in the sense that the fear raised inside the spectator is different from the Classical fear of catharsis and purgation that are no more applicable to modern life and its new evils and complications. After all, the major aim of In-Yer-Face drama is to confront its spectator violently so as to react unconventionally:

This kind of theatre uses shock tactics to wake up the audience and to make it feel the scenes from the stage. The writers of this movement want to investigate the human nature and its barriers

and bounds; they try to question their foundation and sense. The other reason for this show tactics is searching for deeper meaning, an attempt to see just how far they can go. The authors try to challenge the traditional distinctions such as good and bad, right and wrong, normal and abnormal etc. these terms are normally out of the question for us and of course questioning them becomes easily unsettling.¹

In his article "Still In Yer-Face? Towards a Critique and a Summation", British theatre critic and the one who coined In-Yer-Face label Aleks Sierz justifies his choice of this term by three reasons:

1 It emphasizes the sense of rupture with the past, stressing what was new about the dramatic voices which were heard for the first time in the 'nineties. After all, the concept of new writing implies novelty rather than tradition.

2 It also suggests what is particular about the experience of going to the theatre and watching extreme plays – the feeling that your personal space is threatened. In other words, it powerfully suggests the relationship between play and audience.

3 Finally, the name is absolutely full of resonance of the *zeitgeist* of the 'nineties. It was often used about other cultural forms and thus it links theatre to the wider culture of that decade.²

By all means, In-Yer-Face drama is totally untraditional for "it questions the moral norms and efforts, the dominating ideas of what can or should be shown on stage. It also works with more primitive feelings, smashing taboos, mentioning the forbidden, creating discomfort."³ The major obsession of In-Yer-Face dramatists is with taking "the audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes it until it gets the message"⁴, to get through, in the literal sense of the word, every hideous detail in the face of the spectator/reader for sometimes what can be affronting, can be also fascinating.⁵ They intend to make any person feel the brutal outburst of what lies deep inside the human psyche hidden and forbidden, and eventually to rebel against irrational condition of life that instigates different human agonies, the matter which gains In-Yer-Face drama a global influence:

[w]hat characterized In-Yer-Face theatre was its intensity, its deliberate relentlessness and ruthless commitment to extremes...introducing audiences outside the narrow ambit of theatre to their highly individual accounts of the new sensibility. In this way, theatre has been an image factory, producing ways of seeing that affect the wider culture.⁶

Basically, In-Yer-Face plays do not allow their audience to sit, watch and contemplate; instead, they take the audience in psychological and emotional journeys to explore the hidden vaults of human psyche as it is the condition with the plays of In-Yer-Face pioneer dramatist Sarah Kane (1971-1999).

Kane's In-Yer-Face theatrical methodology is imitated by a number of dramatists such as the American dramatist Naomi Wallace's (1960-) one act play *No Such a Cold Thing* (2008). In this play, Wallace manipulates illusion skillfully to portray the dilemma of a country torn by civil and military wars in an In-Yer-Face play. The result of this dilemma is the continuous agonies and sufferings that reap young and old lives equally. In *No Such a Cold Thing*, Meena, a rebellion, and Alya, a conservative, are two teenaged Afghan sisters who seem to be separated by the effect of war caused by the United States invasion of Afghanistan on 2001. Meena expresses how she has left the country with her father to London. Now, Meena claims that she and her father have got back home to accompany both, her mother and sister to England. They want to get rid of the hell of war, and to start a new life in peace, a life that enables the two girls to have a prosperous future. Eventually, Sergio, a US military soldier in his twenties intervenes the scene and the strings of the play are solved gradually. Meena has never left Afghanistan, she, her sister, and Sergio are all dead in reality. The two sisters have been both killed while running in panic from American forces, and one of them, Meena, is killed by Sergio who is in turn killed a short while after by a landmine at the same location. The tragedy of the three becomes more painful as the illusion is removed and the aspirations of those young people are eliminated violently by death.

Agonies caused by war and violence are also active factors in Naomi Wallace's plays, especially her play about the war in Afghanistan *No Such Cold Thing* (2008), a title borrowed from George Herbert's (1593-1633) poem "the Flower" (1633) "in which the poet contemplates the process of one's ironic acceptance of mortality."⁷ Wallace uses an extract from the poem as the play's epilogue:

Grief melts away
Like snow in May,
As if there were no such cold thing.⁸

In *No such Cold Thing*, Wallace criticizes the great disrespect of humanity in the present time and how the power of the gun crashes the human spirits, values, and ethics. Moreover, in this play Wallace is not speaking of a civil war but of a military war whose damage is massive. Dealing with war and violence as major themes in plays like *The war Boys* (1993), *In the Heart of America* (1994), *One Flea Spare* (1995) *The Fever*

Chart: Three versions of the Middle East (2008) are part of Wallace's personal experience: "I'm interested in war and violence because in Kentucky, a state of violence and war inflicted on the majority of people through poverty and the class system."⁹ Additionally, in *No Such Cold Thing*, Wallace tackles what the whole world has experienced; the US invasion of Afghanistan which is supposed to be a salvation but it has turned to be another nightmare that has added much to the sufferings of the Afghans and the Americans as well. Of course as a woman this is considered a challenging experience to write about a "male experience" that is war, something which has rarely happened during the past decades: "women did not write about war because for a long time we were not supposed to write about male experiences."¹⁰ The male's monopolization of dramas that deal with war just because such a global experience has to be "white, male, and straight" seems an absurd idea to Wallace. As a matter of fact such attitude can not be granted a general rule because wars have a destructive effect on every individual involved in it so it is not lacking on a specific gender nor race or nationality more than the other. Besides, as a theme, war has been tackled many times by male and female dramatists, poets, and novelists evenly.

As an In-Yer-Face dramatist, Wallace elaborates the element of shock, disturbance and disgust to shake the audience's nerves. She seeks to complicate and trouble the mind of the viewer to understand her work properly. She does not see her plays as "[s]omething to give people answers. To disturb, yes, that what I'd like my work to do but to disturb people in a way that they would come back for more, questioning what really moves us forward."¹¹ Wallace's disturbance is based on gender, class, race, age, nationality, and sexual preference structures. She focuses on the human agony as the only product of all worlds' woes. In other words, she focuses on the individual his/her relation to society and nation:

An individual Wallace character needs to be seen as the embodiment of his maleness or her femaleness, his wealth and her poverty, his blackness or her whiteness, and so on. Wallace also endows her characters with an imagination that goes beyond the confines of social identity and that often reveals itself in lyrical stage gestures that express a world of possibility. She portrays her characters as resistance to demographic determinism by having them figuratively or metaphorically cross the border-or violate the boundary between one social identity and its opposite.¹²

According to Wallace, the individual is the gate to speak of personal, social, historical, national and international dilemmas. Alya, Meena, and Sergio are thus not merely three young people put through certain

complications; rather, they are the pure symbols of two different worlds, coming from two different places, but eventually they are united in the same world; the world of the dead: "the play is not about victims of war, but rather about imagination as agency. And how 'their' world and 'our' world are, in the same ways, the same world."¹³ Unfortunately, war, the revolving fashion of all times, does not segregate between individuals young or old, cruel or soft, victim or victimizer, war crashes and burns all like a flambeaus fire. This fire takes two forms in Wallace's *No Such Cold Thing*. The first is the horrible terrorism practices by the Taliban against the Afghan civilians who are forbidden their least human rights and thus they are left to suffer, or simply, they are killed for very trivial reasons as Alya speaks of what happened to a young lady in the village where she lives:

Alya: Fauzia was walking with her father to see family. It was two years ago. She had on her best shoes and they made a click, click, click. Not load but too load. The Virtue Police heard Fauzia clicking and they shot her.¹⁴

Moreover, Alya painfully recalls her life with her mother alone in the village:

We've been alone, Mother and I, and outside, the Taliban. We cannot leave the house. Mother had to stop her teaching; she is forbidden to work. Uncle Khan keeps us alive with scraps from his table. Our cousin Nargis laughed too load at the market and the police hit her and now she is missing three front teeth and is ugly. Girls are not allowed to go outside at all. I'm forbidden to learn to read and write. There is no one to collect the water. Uncle brings it.

(p. 323)

These lines summarize the great agonies of the Afghan citizens. Alya speaks of serious realistic facts and this is part of Wallace's manipulation of reality as history whose ghosts and themes must be recorded and reactivated on stage.¹⁵ Both Alya and Meena symbolize the crashed symbols of their people and their bitter reality that must be altered. Terrorism must be stopped because basically its agendas cannot be deeply rooted in minds of Afghan civilians. In other words, the Taliban rules are inconvenient according to the Afghans, especially the young generation whose feelings, emotions, and wishes are imprisoned in dark inner cages. This fact is witnessed thorough the following situation:

Meena: It's nothing. The streets are clear tonight. We'er safe. Alya, I have a secret too.

Alya: Tell me.

Meena: I've been held in the arms. Of a man.

(Alya slaps her sister's face. Meena touches the sting with her hand)

Alya: You are dirty. You are disrespectful. You shame me. You shame Father. Tell me more.

Meena: It was night. Dark. I couldn't find my way home, I got lost. Such a big city. I was tired and he put his arms around me, and carried me.

Alya: (*eager*) Did he squeeze your boobs?

Meena: Now you are dirty! No. He just carried me and then put me down again. His hands were warm. He touched my neck.

Alya: You've been touched by a man not of your family. That's death sentence for you here. Whore. Whore. I have missed you every hour. I smell your cloths to remember you. Your bed is quiet and your pencil cold on the table.

(pp. 324-5)

Once she hears her sister's words, Alya, the traditional girl behaves traditionally as she is molded by the Taliban community. Amazingly, her inner desires are instigated to know more of the man who holds her sister. She is "eager" to know of an experience she has never passed by. In this consideration she is not the traditional Alya, rather; she becomes a young lady who dares for the first time to speak freely. Alya thus with Meena look forward the day in which they will live a natural and normal life; they dream of the day they become able to remove the scrapes from their windows, hearts, and minds:

Alya: ... We'll come back here when we'er teachers?

Meena: Yes. And we'll teach in the daylight. And girls will be allowed to go to school.

Alya: Yes. And we'll scrape, scrape the paint from the windows.

Meena: And we'll open our doors, skip out anytime.

Alya: And we won't need a man to be with us...

Meena: And we can click and shout as loud as ...

Alya: cannons! And we can eat till our bellies are round...

Meena: as buckets!

Alya: And we'll have radio and singing.

Meena: and so many apples we can fill our mouths.

Alya: Till they burst!

(p. 325)

These lines consist of a Biblical hint which also reveals hidden desires. The apples the two girls talk about refer to the forbidden fruit, the one from the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden:

In Genesis 3.3 it is simply "the fruit". It would be enough to suit the biblical story that the "apple" is alluring and tasty, but in both Hebrew and classical tradition the fruit is associated with sexual love, which Adam and Eve discover, in

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some interpretations, after eating it. Apples are mentioned three times with erotic senses in the Song of Solomon; e.g., "As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons [young men]".¹⁶

Such sexual insinuation is a very In-Yer-Face in essence. At the same time, the "apple" reference shows how the two girls are eager to break all the shackles chucking them and their great will to destroy all taboos. They dream of attaining their freedom by which they can enhance their condition as humans. Unluckily, this dream turns to be the US military invasion of Afghanistan that is represented symbolically in the play by the character of Sergio, the young American soldier who interferes the play as the troops of his country interferes Afghanistan. As it is the condition of the two girls, Sergio also seems delusional. He wakes up with a sandbag as his pillow in a desert but he firmly argues that he is in his mama's house after he spends his night in a bar surrounded by friends and chasing chicks:¹⁷

(Sergio rubs his head and eyes)

Give me one of those jumbo-sized hot dogs I said last night they all laughed. Fuck you I said and your mother and your sister even if she is only ten the hot dogs were turnin' and turnin' the heat lamp burnin' them almost black and then. She was there, alone at the bar.

(He runs his hands out along what he thinks is a mattress)

And she was so pretty and her mouth was...Her hair was so...Her neck was so...What? What? I can't remember. Her hair was ... Her mouth was...And then she was gone.

(He suddenly feels the metal of the springs. He jumps up)

What the...fuck –

.....
Shit where are they? Where are they? (Shouts) Must have been one hell of a night hell of a night at Joe's Place.

(p. 326)

Sergio's speech suggests significant nostalgia for his home back in Indiana. After all he is a young man in his early twenties put in war. In many respects, Sergio is another victim of the political and military game of benefits that is called war. He wants to finish his school education, thus, he is enlisted in the American army to pay for his study expenses:

Alya: I don't think you are a good soldier.

Sergio: You watch your mouth. I did my service. Got a purple pulling a buddy out under fire.

Meena: You shouldn't lose your boots. It's a bad luck.

Sergio: Shit.

Meena: Don't you like being a soldier?

Sergio: I didn't say that. Army's paying me to finish school. I started last week. I'd lick their ass if they run out

of toilet papers.

(p. 330)

Like the criticism headed against Taliban, even criticism is headed to the American system that sends young individuals as wood to feed the fire of wars abroad. Of course this is part of Wallace's enthusiasm as an anti-war activist.¹⁸ She looks at theatre as a means to send political and social messages. She "claims that playwrights should not exempt themselves from dealing with the pressing politics of the time."¹⁹ Although she has begun her artistic career as a poet; she has concentrated more on drama: "Writing poetry is such a private enterprise and I felt that I wanted to collaborate-theatre is a more public forum."²⁰ Moreover, Wallace links between violence, war, and history because Wallace is unable to dissociate those three from each other. At the same time she is interested in the psychological outcome caused by violence, and the effects war exercises on any individual leading him/her to be violent: "I don't like violence on stage that is divorced from history or from society. Purely sensational violence in avoid is both sentimental and conservative. I'm interested in questions about how individuals are made violent."²¹

Such mixture of politics, sociology, and psychology is intermingled with illusion in *No Such Cold Thing*. Meena keeps on repeating that her father is waiting for her and her sister at the airport to leave the country away to England. Sergio insists that he is in his mother's house and not in a battlefield in Afghanistan. It is only the recurrent metaphors of Alya's 312 quills growing on her back causing her horrible pain and the three sandbags lying on stage that resolve gradually this illusion. Like Kane's *Blasted* blast, a blast also eliminates the life of those three youths. Surprisingly and disturbingly, the end of the play contains the end of those characters lives. Alya, Meena, and Sergio's dreams and aspirations to have good futures are blasted off. Because of their great fears of American troops and because of Sergio's fears that the two girls might be terrorists, Sergio, along with other soldiers, shoots at the two girls. While running terrified, Alya falls first on her back unable to move. Meena in turn lets her sister's hand keeps on running unaware of Sergio's warnings, thus he shoots her in the neck:²²

Alya: From where I lay on my back in the well I could see
around circle of sky above me. (*To Sergio*) And
then I heard you fire. And then I heard my sister –

Sergio: (*interrupts to Alya*) I gave her warning. I had to
stop her. I gave her half a dozen warnings. But she
kept on running. She dropped so fast to the ground. I
couldn't believe how fast she dropped. I knelt
beside her. I picked her up and carried her into the
shade.

(pp. 336-7)

Once he realizes his grave mistake, Sergio hurries to Meena attempting to save her life. Now it is the human life that counts, but unfortunately in this attempt Sergio loses his life by an explosive landmine:

Meena: I was alive? (*To Alya*) He says I was alive, Alya, so I didn't die. I didn't die!

Alya: You are alive, Meena. Right now. For a few more minutes. And I am alive for this same time.

Sergio: Hey. Hey. This is your shit, don't bring me into it. I got out. I got out.

Alya: Yes. You and your buddies get out. You get out so fast because the Taliban have circled back and Kubick, Tony, and Mike are with you and you're gunning the truck and spinning away from our village and then BANG, guess what?

Sergio: Guess what? Guess fucking what? I'm going back to bed. I ate a hot dog long as my leg last night.

.....
Alya (loud): Bang!

Sergio: I'm going back to sleep.

Alya (louder): Bang!

Sergio: I was out drinking last night. With Kubick, Tony, Mike, and. Kubick, Tony, Mike, and.

Alya: you, Kubick, Tony, Mike, and you. Hit a land mine. Your friends are unharmed but you fly up in the air, high, high and your boots fly off your feet, one with a foot still attracted and Uncle sees your boots lying a hundred feet from your body. He throws your boots in the well to hide them. He is afraid the village will be blamed. He doesn't even know I'm down there.

Sergio (threatening): You are a dirty girl.

Alya: Yes. At this very moment I am covered in dirt and slime at the botton of a well and I'm dying. And my sister Meena is in the yard and she is also dying. And you are lying on the road and Kubick, Tony, and Mike are leaning over you and you are dying.

(p. 338)

War, weapons, and violence are all hideous and repulsive means that can only give humans more agonies or vanishing their lives as if they never existed. The way Meena speaks to her sandbag that symbolizes her reveals an extreme sense of pain; Wallace makes the dead victims speak:

Meena: ... where is my body?

(*Alya hesitates*)

Where is my body?

(*Alya points to the medium sandbag*)

That's me?

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(Alya nods "yes". Meena stands over the bag, looking at it for some moments. Then suddenly she kicks it)

Get up.

(She kicks it again)

Get up!

(She kicks it again and again)

Get up, girl! You will live. You will be a teacher. Do you hear me? You are free now. You will travel. Get up!. You will write a brilliant paper on Faiz Ahmed Faiz. Get up! You will kiss a man. Get up. Get up! You will live! You will live!

(Meena kicks the bag till she is worn out, then she quits.

The three of them are silent some moments)

(pp. 339-40)

The illusion is resolved, showing a tremendous dilemma. The youth of those three young people is assassinated, yet they keep on hanging on life, the matter which increases senses of agony and compassion inside the viewer:

Meena: Soldier: (Sergio stands still)

Sergio: Yeah?

(The following is hard for Meena to ask but she makes herself ask it)

Meena: Am I pretty? (Beat) Were we pretty? My sister and I.

Sergio: You were just kids.

Meena: But if we had grown up?

(Sergio studies Meena some moments. Trying to figure out what she wants. Meena straightens her shirt, shifts her hair. Then they stare at one another)

Sergio: Well, I wouldn't have you kicked you out of bed, that's for sure.

Meena: Bastard. Thank you.

(p. 341)

Despite its condition as a tragedy of war, Wallace's *No Such Cold Thing* is significantly an effective play not only through the playwright's elaboration of present and historical events, but also through the romantic, revolutionary, and lyrical language. In addition to that, taboo words and expressions of swearing are used frequently for, in In-Yer-Face plays in general, swearing and taboo words become verbal acts of aggression, gaining much more powerful effect on stage. This combination assists the audience to get the message. Moreover, Wallace skillfully shows that war is the major reason of human non-stop agonies, and thus she uses illusion supported by powerful and effective language to show how terrible such reality is. This makes of illusion and reality two faces of the same coin, the coin of human agony.²³

NOTES

- ¹Olga Bolzek, *Sarah Kane's Role in In-Yer-Face Theatre*, (Norderstedt: Grin Verlag Gmbti, 2010), 4.
- ²Aleks Sierz, "Still In-Yer-Face? Towards a Critique and a Summation", *New Theatre Quarterly*, vol. 18, issue. 01, (February 2002), 17-24, 18-19.
- ³Irina Giertz, *British Drama of the 90s: In-Yer-Face Theatre*, (Norderstedt: Grin Verlag Gmbti, 2005), 2.
- ⁴Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2000), 4.
- ⁵Bolzek, 4.
- ⁶Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, xiii.
- ⁷Randy Gener, "Re-orientalism", *American Theatre: Critic's Notebook*, www.goldenthread.org/2010/atmar.pdf, (accessed on 10-11-2016), 45.
- ⁸George Herbert, "The Flower", www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/, (accessed on 10-11-2016).
- ⁹Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, 157.
- ¹⁰Ibid.
- ¹¹Ibid.
- ¹²Scott T. Comings "Introduction: the Discourse of the Body", in *The Theatre of Naomi Wallace*, eds. Scott T. Comings & Erica Stevens Abbitt, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 1-17), 9.
- ¹³Naomi Wallace, in *Acts of War: Iraq and Afghanistan in Seven Plays*, eds. Karen Malped (intro.), Michael Messina, and Bob Shuman, (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2011), xxi.
- ¹⁴Naomi Wallace, *No Such Cold Thing*, in *Acts of War: Iraq and Afghanistan in Seven Plays*, eds. Karen Malped, Michael Messina, and Bob Shuman, (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 323. All references to the play are taken from this edition. Henceforth; all subsequent references will be parenthetically cited within the text.
- ¹⁵David Krasner, *A Companion to Twentieth Century American Drama*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 547.
- ¹⁶S.V. "apple", Michael Ferber, *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 23.
- ¹⁷Peyton Alie, "No Such Cold Thing Emphasizes the Tragedies of War", *The Phillipian*, (May, 2015), www.philipian.net, (accessed on 28-10-2016).
- ¹⁸Comings, 9-10.
- ¹⁹Mireia Aragay and Pilar Zozaya, "Aleks Sierz", in *British Theatre of the 1990s: Interviews with Directors, Playwrights, Critics, and Academics*, eds. Mireia Aragay, Hildegard Klein, Enrich Monforte, and Pilar Zozaya, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, pp. 139-156), 147.
- ²⁰Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, 157.
- ²¹Ibid, 158.
- ²²Jean Randich, "Iraq and Afghanistan on Stage: Book Review", www.truthdig.com/arts_cultures/item/iraq_and_afghanistan_on_stage, (accessed on 29-10-2016).
- ²³Bolzek, 4.

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الحرب والعنف في مسرحية ناعومي والاس

(لأشياء بهذا البرود)

الخلاصة

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تقصي موضوعي الحرب والعنف في مسرحية الكاتبة الأمريكية ناعومي والاس (لأشياء بهذا البرود) ، التي تمثل نتاجاً مميزاً من نتاجات (مسرح الصدمة) لرائدته الكاتبة البريطانية (سارة كاين) ، وتسعى (والاس) في نصّها المسرحيّ هذا إلى توضيح تأثير الحرب التي شنتها الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية على أفغانستان ، وعواقب هذه الحرب ، المتمثلة بالعنف المتصاعد في أفغانستان وتأثيرها على المواطنين الأفغان ، والجنود الأمريكيين المشاركين في هذه الحرب على حد سواء .