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*Corresponding author:

Assist. Prof. Jinan Waheed Jassim

University: Mustansiriyah

University

College: College of Arts

Email:

jinanwj@uomustansiriya.edu.iq

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Staging New Wars: Representations of Violence and Conflict in Drama

ABSTRACT

The theatrical portrayal of the individual and war in a period of collapsing peace endeavors, as well as the dramatization of survival vs destruction which became the driving forces on the war stage, are the main topics of this paper. The 20th and 21st centuries have regressed into the nightmarish perpetual and indefinite predicament of warfare. War has ceased to be the exceptional state and has instead become "the primary organizing principle of society," as Giorgio Agamben's claims that the exception has become the rule. Ulrich Beck's World at Risk and Mary Kaldor's New & Old Wars (2005) are important works on modern conflict and civilization, in which they track the changing face of war in the last half century.

The new wars plays range from adaptations of Greek tragedies to dramas that portray civil wars, inner-state conflicts, and the politics of fear, to verbatim-based and documentary plays that try to depict the trauma of war and theatrical recreation of the process of testimony giving and public endorsement of mourning.

At the heart of this paper are questions like How can conflict be shown on stage? How do the plays investigate the role of sociological factors in shaping civilizations while simulating the sociological factors that lead to conflict and violence? In relevance to the age of globalization and its "New Wars" the paper also tries to demonstrate how these "New Wars" necessitate a new kind of drama about war.

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مظاهر العنف والصراع في المسرح

ا.م.د. جنان وحيد جاسم / جامعة المستنصرية / كلية الآداب

الخلاصة:

إن التصوير المسرحي للفرد والحرب في فترة مساعي السلام المنهارة ، بالإضافة إلى دراما البقاء مقابل الدمار الذي أصبح القوى الدافعة على مسرح الحرب ، هي الموضوعات الرئيسية لهذه الورقة. لقد تراجع القرنان العشرين والحادي والعشرون إلى كابوس حرب دائم وغير محدود. لم تعد الحرب حالة استثنائية وأصبحت بدلاً عن ذلك "المبدأ التنظيمي الأساسي للمجتمع" ، كما يدعي جورجيو أغامبين أن الاستثناء

وقائع المؤتمر العلمي السابع تحت شعار (العلوم الانسانية بين التحديات الراهنة والافاق المستقبلية) الذي اقامته كلية الآداب في جامعة

واسط بتاريخ 2023/7/1

أصبح هو القاعدة. تعد أعمال أولريش بيك "العالم في حرب" و"الحروب الجديدة والقديمة" لماري كالدير (2005) من الأعمال المهمة حول الصراع والحضارة الحديثة ، حيث ينتبعان الوجه المتغير للحرب في نصف القرن الماضي.

تتراوح مسرحيات الحروب الجديدة بين اعادة كتابة (وتحديث) المآسي اليونانية إلى الأعمال الدرامية التي تصور الحروب الأهلية ، وصراعات الدولة الداخلية ، وسياسات الخوف ، إلى المسرحيات الحرفية والوثائقية التي تحاول تصوير صدمة الحرب وإعادة التشكيل المسرحي لعملية الإلقاء بالشهادة وتأييد الحداد العام.

في جوهر هذه الورقة البحثية توجد أسئلة مثل، كيف يمكن عرض الصراع على المسرح؟ كيف تستكشف المسرحيات دور العوامل الاجتماعية في تشكيل الحضارات مع محاكاة العوامل الاجتماعية التي تؤدي إلى الصراع والعنف؟ فيما يتعلق بعصر العولمة و "الحروب الجديدة" ، تحاول الورقة أيضاً أن توضح كيف أن هذه "الحروب الجديدة" تستلزم نوعاً جديداً من الدراما حول الحرب.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الحروب الجديدة ، الدراما الحربية ، خصخصة الحرب ، السياسة ، ماري كالدير

Our modern states are preparing for war

without even knowing the future enemy.

Alfred Adler (web)

New and fast changes in the world and society required new lifestyles, new economy, new media and new kinds of war. War has been defined and explained in many different and even controversial ways. Hugo Grotius defined war as “the state of contending parties, considered as such” (18). Thomas Hobbes explains that “by war is meant a state of affairs, which may exist even while its operations are not continued” (Qtd in Grotius, 386). On the other hand Denis Diderot considers war “a convulsive and violent disease of the body politic” (Lippard *et al.* 2), a point which the Prussian military thinker Carl von Clausewitz affirms by stating that “war is the continuation of politics by other means” (44) He also sees it as “an act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfil our will” (*Ibid*).

War is as old as history itself. In a research on the numbers of war recorded so far, the statistics show that “around 14,400 wars have occurred in history, claiming the lives of some 3.5 billion people. Since 1815 there have been between 224 and 559 wars, depending on the definition of war that is used” (Sheehan, 212).

The term “new wars” was coined by the British academic Mary Kaldor to refer to a new category of war starting from the early 1990s. Her research on the new wars was initiated because of a new type of organised violence that appeared in Eastern Europe and Africa. In her book entitled *New and Old Wars: Organised Violence in a Global Era*, she compares these new wars with earlier wars in regard to their goals, the tactics of warfare and their financing (Kaldor, 2012). The same way Michael Sheehan compares the two by saying: “Just as earlier wars were linked to the emergence and creation of states, the new wars are related to the disintegration and collapse of states” (222). That means the new wars happen among what is called “third-tier” countries, which are extremely poor, and suffer from corruption problems where governments lack control over the state. The concept goes to Steve Metz who classifies the world’s countries as “first tier, second-tier and third-tier”. He places the third-tier countries in the middle of crises where the non-governmental armed forces are operating because the central government (which is either authoritarian or totalitarian) has lost control (Metz, 34).

Critics argue that the new wars “blur the distinction between internal and external, public and private, political and economic, civilian and military, and even war and peace themselves” (Holsti, 36–40). So sometimes many features of the new wars come to the front.

Most critics agree on few major qualifications to these new wars. The first one is the privatisation of war, as Kaldor explains, due to the weakness of the government’s authority, some entities emerge as the acting force in the new wars. They can be local warlords or mercenaries, criminal gangs, paramilitary groups, diaspora groups, in addition to the regular armies. They fight for their interests and to finance themselves, they usually get involved in illegal activities. Because they are not centralised they often work through a combination of confrontations and cooperations, sometimes with even opposing sides (Kaldor, 8). Kaldor gives the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina as an example of a privatised war, where regular army as well as local police, foreign mercenary groups, and paramilitary organisations (47).

The second qualification is related to intrastate wars which are domestic war that can be either civil wars that involve the government against a non-governmental group; regional-internal wars, which can be between the government of a regional sub-unit opposing a non-state group; or intercommunal wars which involve a fight between/among two or more non-government groups within the state (Sarkees, 2). The wars in Rwanda, Angola and Sierra Leone, are examples of intrastate wars.

New wars are generally waged for goals related to identity politics. Wars are not fought for ideological or geopolitical goals anymore, but in the new wars people fight to defend and preserve their identities, that are connected to globalisation itself. The individuals and societies of these countries relate their identities to the direct and indirect effects of globalisation , therefore they presume the right to establish their own state. A testimony of that is seen in the Bosnian war where identity became one of the fundamental issues where ethnic cleansing of Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats was one of the tools of that war (Kaldor, 2007).

One of the most prominent characterisations of the age of globalisation is the gradual decline of governmental authority that leads to the erosion of state legitimacy accompanied by destructive war economies (Brzoska, 20). This decline leads to mingling the public with the private authority. Which, according to Kaldor characterise these wars as “state un-building” wars (5). These wars disintegrate state authority to the extent, in some cases, they might be called failed states. What happened in Yugoslavia is a remarkable example of the state un-building feature of the new wars. A new nationalism that worked ferociously to disintegrate the state, was dominant in Yugoslavia towards the late twentieth century, unlike earlier nationalisms, whose aim was state building (Kaldor 87). Following the Yugoslavian war , seven states appeared in the area, and that affirms that the intrastate war led to the un-building of Yugoslavia.

Also, The new wars are characterised by the disappearance of distinction between the combatants and non-combatants. These wars alter the shape of violence, such as ethnic cleansing, mass expulsion , and genocide; which are methods that aim to spread fear among people, also utilized by the new wars as tactics of intimidation and suppression as.

The outcomes of these wars are impacted by the use of excessive violence. Kaldor emphasises this by saying that: “These are wars where the main targets are civilians and, of course, this is a situation where battles are just too dangerous, because of the equalisation of military technology, so the only way you can win is by killing innocents, or pushing out innocent people, as in Darfur” (7) These changes in the very structure of violence make changes to the kind of casualties too. While the victims of the old wars were military, victims in new wars are mostly civilians (Shaw, 55).

War economy is a major factor in the new wars, yet it is far from being centralised. The parties at war finance their forces by illegal means like looting , plunder, drugs and banditry, and trade in illegal goods. This is caused by state weakness and the recent social transformations driven by globalisation and liberal economic forces. Herfried Münkler refers to war principle “*bellum se ipse alet*” which means “war feeds war” emphasizing that war itself turned to be part of economics which ceased to be subject to political control or “political limitation. ... since these wars do not usually involve rapid and total mobilization of forces but slowly use them up on an ongoing basis, most of them last a long time and keep flaring up after temporary lulls (44-5)”, which requires continuous sources of finance.

Kaldor adopts this idea of the affinity of asymmetric combat and modern modes of financing in the New Wars, she also explains that they thrive

in the context of the disintegration of states (typically authoritarian states under the impact of globalisation). ... fought by networks of state and non-state actors, often without uniforms ... where battles are rare and where most violence is directed against civilians as a consequence of counter-insurgency tactics or ethnic cleansing ... taxation is falling and war finance consists of loot and pillage, illegal trading and other war-generated revenue ... the distinctions between combatant and non-combatant, legitimate violence and criminality are all breaking down. These are wars which exacerbate the disintegration of the state – declines in GDP, loss of tax revenue, loss of legitimacy, etc. (Kaldor 3)

Stressing the decline of dichotomies in twentieth and twenty-first century world, Mary Kaldor maintains that this progression involves “both integration and fragmentation,

homogenisation and diversification, globalisation and localisation” (4), allowing a major global role within the New Wars, which includes, but not limited to, military advisors, diaspora volunteers, international reporters, mercenary troops, non- government organizations and international institutions with peacekeeping troops (4-5). Implying what the sociologist Ulrich Beck would later define as a “general break-down of modernity's dualisms”, and giving a link to Agamben's estimation of the modern state of exception as the rule, Kaldor explains that “the erosion of the distinction between public and private, military and civil, internal and external, also calls into question the distinction between war and peace itself” (32).

Ethnic, cultural tensions, and emerging religious differences are some of the incentives of contemporary wars, as well as nationalist movements. The emphasis becomes on sectarian identities (whether religious, ethnic, or even tribal) which weakens the sense of a collective political community, resulting in deportation, genocide, and mass murder. Kaldor considers them as the purpose of these wars (80-81), affirming that the goals of these New Wars are no longer of a political or ideological nature but about “identity politics”, which she defines as “the claim to power on the basis of a particular identity – be it national, clan, religious or linguistic”(6). She confirms that the term “identity politics” is used as an act of “labelling”, and these labels are usually seen as birth rights, “conflicts based on identity politics may also be termed ethnic conflicts” (80).

The emerging differences between old traditional organised wars, that involve armies and certain military tactics, and the most recent types of inflicted violence and untraditional wars, required a new kind of literature that is capable of portraying this contemporary conflict. And, since war, which was the exception, lately became the “status quo” and the leading force affecting society, the body of theatrical productions concerned with this changed nature of war, has significantly increased, it also modified the way these new wars are represented on stage. As a result, various terms were employed in this representation, such as “hybrid wars”, “post-modern wars”, “guerrilla warfare”, “wars among the people”, “Low-Intensity Conflict” “privatised wars”, “wars of the third kind”, and for the most part the term Kaldor coined, “new wars”.

American historian and university professor, Paul Fussell says in his book *The Great War and Modern Memory* about World War I: “The most obvious reason why ‘theatre’ and modern war seem so compatible is that modern wars are fought by conscripted armies, whose members know they are only temporarily playing their ill-learned parts” (Fussell 2000: 191). While literary scholar Srinivas Aravamudan highlights the performative aspect of war stating that: “a mass combat and social sacrifice, war is both real-life and theatrical performance, an event that can include the planet in 'scenarios,' such as those involving nuclear war” (Aravamudan 2009, 1506).

A quick reading into the theatrical history can prove the development of New War plays. In relevance to Western theatre tradition, the first written record of which can be traced back to (472 BC) when Aeschylus wrote *The Persians* on the battle of Salamis and the Persians' defeat (Law *et al* 462), this play is the first one that may be labelled a “documentary drama”. Greek drama as well was concerned with representing warfare on stage, *The Trojan Women* (415 BC) by Euripides is a fine example of this warfare and gender theatrical discussion , where Euripides wrote about the city of Athens which faced a fate identical to that of Troy in the aftermath of the Trojan war (Morrissey 7). Both plays elicit staging a war for a community involved in a particular war (either as beneficiary, belligerent, or bereaved) without actually being the site of battle. Some of William Shakespeare's plays has war as the central motif, *Henry V* (1599) for example has been considered the “benchmark war play” in English drama. Several other plays succeeded in portraying ideal rulers and warlord who inspired literature of war in general (Howard and Stokes 2-4).

In the twentieth century, plays began to engage with contemporary conflict conditions. One of the most prominent British plays, depicting the horrors of World War I, is *Journey's End* by Robert Cedric Sherriff (1928), whose action is mainly in the frontlines and trenches, highlighting heroic sacrifices of the British soldiers (Howard & Stokes 3). Yet, World War II was rarely represented on British theatres.

Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage* (1941) depicts the continuous war in a series of images showing accurately those situations Kaldor and Münkler refer to as “paradigmatic of the New Wars”. Brecht's play then can be seen as a perfect example of contemporary war plays, which

employs Munkler's principle of "*bellum se ipse alet*". Brecht faithfully portrays Munkler's assessment of the economic mechanisms of the New Wars .

Caryl Churchill's *This Is a Chair* (1997) is an exemplary play which confirms that global conflict and war could be present and absent at the same time; by opening each scene with a topical and far-reaching title, she demonstrates how war might and might not take place simultaneously. The play also talks about different battles where "the personal and political to be intimately related and possibly each even a causation of the other" (Worpel 376).

Blasted (1995), a one-act play by Sarah Kane is another example of blending the personal with the political. The play's exploration of personal violence in a hotel room, in Leeds, between a journalist, Ian, and his partner, Kate, "erupts into a far more bloody spectacle when the hotel room is transformed into ground zero for a war" (Urban 36). *Blasted* shows a fake atmosphere of security at the beginning, later, throughout the forged unity of space and time– the hotel room turns into a bomb shelter in the heart of a civil war. That exposes the fragile line between the imagined security and perceived civilisation of a country living in peace and the chaotic reality of violence during a civil war: this shift in the play from a room in Leeds to a "war-torn zone" abolishes any geographical or emotional distance (Sierz 107).

The play was received with a surge of harsh criticism and unprecedented media coverage that showed how oddly unbalanced public outrage can be: "The week the play opened there was an earthquake in Japan in which thousands of people died, and in this country a fifteen-year old girl had been raped and murdered in a wood, but *Blasted* got more coverage in some newspapers than either of these events ...The representation of violence caused more anger than actual violence" (Qtd Stephenson & Langridge 130-131). The main reason behind considering the portrayal of violence more offensive than real inflicted violence could be that the audience is forced to examine its own moral values, and the related question of how it is shameful to have aesthetic pleasure from watching the suffering of others. Another reason could be found in Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*, where he suggests that the representation of reality, the spectacle, has become more significant in contemporary society than reality itself, he says that "in societies where modern conditions of production prevail, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation."

(2)

Bettina E. Schmidt and Ingo W. Schroeder laud the performative quality of violence, affirming that, although violence causes trauma, but without an audience it remains socially meaningless. Those anthropologists also argue that the effect of violence stems from performing legitimacy and power on stage, presumably even more than from real physical outcomes. In performance, the extension of the effects of violence through time and space, reaches a bigger number of people who might not really be affected by it physically. As a result, this performative quality turns violence into a regular experience even if not physically subjected to harm. This effect comes from its visibility on stage, usually in a public arena (6). A point Kane herself asserted in defending *Blasted* which was attacked by some critics for portraying unjustified violence; she says: “My play is only a shadowy representation of a reality that's far harder to stomach” (Sierz 106) Kane’s claim is echoed in Debord's *Spectacle*, and Artaud's theatre of cruelty. Those authors believe that the performance of violence gains its intended social meaning only when being witnessed, which justifies the much disputed value and necessity of the representation of violence on stage.

“In-yer-face” British theatre shows the essential link between taboos, cruelty, and theatre which mirrors the relationship of society itself with taboos and cruelty. The new war plays, which are historically placed after “In-yer-face” theatre, explore the origins of human hostile behaviour and the resulting wars by examining society's opinions about what is “sacred” and what is “taboo”. It succeeded in beginning this debate when it attempted to redefine the politics and, even, aesthetics of cruelty. The New War plays also employs the theatre of the absurd to represent the unusual state of exception that became the norm because of war. These plays aim at exposing the primary object of taboo: what, the Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben refers to as the *homo sacer* (the sacred man, or ironically, the accursed man). In addressing the societal and political taboos, the plays embody on the stage those figures usually cast off by western society like the victims of war whom Judith Butler identifies as “precarious lives” (1). Those could be unlawful combatants, traumatised returning soldiers, asylum-seekers, or refugees.

Sierz highlights the recurring employment of shock tactics as an intrinsic feature in modern plays, referring to the debate of those tactics' role in questioning and defining moral boundaries and thus increasing the acceptance of what could and could not be shown on stage. He states that this form of drama, “also taps into more primitive feelings, smashing taboos, mentioning the forbidden, creating discomfort” (4). Portraying taboo (directly or indirectly) on stage, of violence, shock, and cruelty, is an integrated part of the theatrical tradition. The taboo of infanticide, for example, is portrayed in *Medea* (431 BC) by Euripides, a motif repeated in *Bacchae* (405 BC) when Pentheus is torn apart by his mother among other frenzied women. Sophocles' Ajax kills himself on stage (450-430 BC). And Oedipus (429 BC) blinds himself after committing patricide then incest.

The tactics of Artaudian theatre of cruelty gives a chance for the production of fantastic imagery, continuous shifting of plot, and contortions of space. It is through the link between the conception of the “absurd” and surrealist plays, the aesthetics and importance of the New War drama may be recognized. Martin Esslin, critic and professor of drama, in his book *Theatre of the Absurd* (1961), maintains that this kind of theatre illustrates the human pursuit to handle “a world deprived of a generally accepted integrating principle, which has become disjointed, purposeless – absurd” (290). As a result of the unimaginable atrocities and destruction of two world wars, and the degeneration of religious belief and consequently the new felt meaninglessness of “simple and complete systems of values”, this kind of drama acknowledges the absurdity of human position and depicts people forced to face life “in its ultimate, stark reality” (*Ibid*). The absurd theatre realizes that people are often detached from their historical and social context, “confronted with the basic choices, the basic situations of [their] existence” (*Ibid*). These New Wars, with their ever shifting frontlines, enmities, objectives and mass-scale atrocities, as they necessarily construct new realities, also impose a totally different reality, an absurd one, on whoever falls in their machinery, due to the fact that distinction between the rational and the irrational is rendered blurry.

Cruel and Tender (2004) by Martin Crimp presents the character of the General who is a war-monger, more of a monster who has no acceptance of the conception of a “just war”, but who earned his place in a war which is invisible to others. The play is a an adaptation of

Sophocles' *The Trachiniae* (430 BC). When he is asked to justify the crimes he committed in the war on terror he refuses even to confess them, instead he seems proud of what he did:

James: ... You are accused of crimes. You have wiped people off this earth like a teacher rubbing out equations. You've stacked up bodies like bags of cement. ...

General: ... I have purified this world for you.

I have burnt terror out of the world for people like you.

I have followed it through the shopping malls and the school playgrounds

tracked it by starlight across the desert

smashed down the door of its luxury apartment

learned its language

intercepted its phone calls

smoked it out of its cave

thrown acid into its eyes and burnt it to carbon.

While you've been logged on to internet chat-rooms

I've seen my friends burst open like fruit. ...

So don't you talk to me about crimes

because for every head I have ever severed

two have grown in their place

and I have had to cut and to cut and to cut

to burn and to cut to purify the world –

understand me? ...

(Points to himself proudly.) Kallinikos. Kallinikos. [the great victor] (Crimp 57-58)

This image of purification Crimp provokes to align this passage with a crisis of sacrifice. To avoid disaster, the society finds their champion, who himself turns out to be the embodiment of the violence embarked to eradicate from the world, like Heracles, the Greek hero, on whom the character of the General is based and whose epithet he borrows in describing himself. When arguing that he did exactly as he was instructed, he kept repeating these last words: “I am not the criminal but the sacrifice” (*Ibid* 67-9), exploiting the wide-ranging licence (the *Carte blanche*)

given to him by the community in order to keep it secure and safe from the atrocities of war and terror.

French historian and literary critic, René Girard states that, “the returning warrior risks carrying the seed of violence into the very heart of his city” (44), this is demonstrated by Zinnie Harris in his play *Midwinter* (2004), in the character of Grenville, who, in spite of his effort, fails to reclaim his civilian psyche and life, because “he has turned back into a soldier”, as Maud, the owner of a rotting dead horse that people feed on, observes with alarm (64). Grenville is a reminder of the character of the Soldier in Kane's *Blasted*, who is rendered unable to leave the war behind, instead he drags it with him like a parasite that is fighting him from the inside and causing his blindness. Veterans, in new wars' plays are seen holding the trauma of war deep inside, as a shell-shock, or even as a possible uncontrollable tendency to self-destruction (Sierz 104). War trauma is intensified in the returning soldier and manifested in the shape of this parasite eating him/her from within: they are distorted by the violence. The anonymous soldier in *Blasted*, stands for every soldier falls in the machinery of war and all its committed military atrocities. Describing incidents of torture, monstrous murders, rape, and the mass transportation of refugees in cattle trucks, he himself is becoming a victim of war, incapable of overcoming the trauma of the brutal murder of his girlfriend, which he recalls over and over again (Innes 531).

Unfortunately, New war theatre never sees a potential positive change in the future, as theatre critic Sanja Nikcevic declares that in these plays,

The worlds are stabilized states of horror, which makes them not political but fatalistic. They offer violence on an archetypal level as something inherent in us, not as the consequence of a social structure, as a political play would show; instead we're given the dramatic equivalent of horror movie ... But the difference between a horror movie and ... drama is that the latter pretends to be realistic ... Unfortunately the horror movie element foregrounds the New European Drama not As politically aware but as a genre which superficially conforms to society's worst impulses (264).

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وقائع المؤتمر العلمي السابع تحت شعار (العلوم الانسانية بين التحديات الراهنة والافاق المستقبلية) الذي اقامته كلية الآداب في جامعة واسط بتاريخ 2023/7/1

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