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Scholar, Shri Govind
Guru University,
Godhra, Gujarat

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Bathavar Virajee
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FRAGMENTATION AND EXISTENTIAL CRISIS IN CRAVE: A STUDY OF LANGUAGE AND SUBJECTIVITY

Bathavar Virajee Lakhubhai**ABSTRACT**

This study examines the intricate relationship between fragmentation, language, and subjectivity in *Crave* by Sarah Kane. Departing from conventional dramatic structures, the play employs disjointed dialogue, fluid voices, and the absence of linear narrative to portray the instability of identity and the crisis of meaning in contemporary existence. Through a qualitative textual analysis grounded in postmodern and existential frameworks, the study explores how fragmented language reflects the psychological disintegration of the speakers and their inability to construct a coherent sense of self. The indistinct boundaries between voices challenge traditional notions of character and subjectivity, suggesting that identity is multiple, shifting, and linguistically constructed. Furthermore, the study highlights how themes of alienation, longing, and emotional void resonate with existential concerns articulated by thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. The interplay between speech and silence underscores the limitations of language in expressing inner experience, reinforcing the idea of fragmentation as both form and content. Ultimately, the paper argues that *Crave* redefines dramatic expression by presenting fragmentation as a central mechanism for representing existential crisis and the fluid nature of subjectivity.

KEYWORDS: Fragmentation, Subjectivity, Existential Crisis, Language, Postmodern Drama, *Crave*, Sarah Kane, Identity, Alienation

1. INTRODUCTION

The late twentieth century witnessed a profound transformation in British drama, marked by a decisive shift away from conventional realism toward more experimental, fragmented, and psychologically complex forms of theatrical expression. Within this changing landscape, the works of Sarah Kane occupy a distinctive and influential position. While her early plays are often associated with the shocking aesthetics of in-yer-face theatre, her later works signal a radical departure from overt representations of violence to more abstract, internalized explorations of human consciousness. Among these later works, *Crave* stands out as a striking example of minimalist dramaturgy, where traditional elements such as plot, character

development, and linear narrative are almost entirely dismantled. Instead, the play presents a collage of fragmented voices, disembodied utterances, and poetic expressions that resist fixed interpretation, thereby challenging both the audience's expectations and critical frameworks.

At the heart of *Crave* lies a profound engagement with the fragmentation of language and its implications for the construction of subjectivity. Unlike conventional dramatic texts, where language functions as a tool for communication and character delineation, Kane's use of language in this play is deliberately disjointed, repetitive, and often incoherent. The speakers, identified only by the letters A, B, C, and M, do

not correspond to stable, individualized characters; rather, they appear as fluid embodiments of shifting psychological states. This deliberate ambiguity destabilizes the notion of a unified self, suggesting instead that subjectivity is fractured, multiple, and constantly in flux. Language, in this context, ceases to be a transparent medium of meaning and instead becomes a site of rupture, reflecting the inner turmoil and existential anxiety of the speakers.

The thematic core of *Crave* is deeply intertwined with existential concerns, particularly those articulated in the philosophical traditions of thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. The play's persistent evocation of longing, loss, alienation, and emotional desolation resonates with existentialist notions of absurdity and the search for meaning in an indifferent or hostile universe. However, Kane does not merely illustrate existential themes; rather, she embeds them within the very structure and language of the play. The fragmentation of dialogue, the absence of a coherent narrative, and the dissolution of clear boundaries between speakers all contribute to a theatrical experience that mirrors the disintegration of meaning itself. In this sense, *Crave* can be understood as both a representation and enactment of existential crisis, where the breakdown of language parallels the collapse of stable identity and purpose.

Furthermore, the play's innovative form invites critical engagement through the lens of postmodern theory, which emphasizes discontinuity, multiplicity, and the rejection of grand narratives. The fragmented structure of *Crave* exemplifies postmodern aesthetics, wherein meaning is not fixed but constantly deferred, and where the audience is compelled to actively participate in the process of interpretation. The absence of stage directions, the lack of a defined setting, and the fluidity of voice all contribute to an open-ended text that resists closure. This indeterminacy not only reflects the instability of subjectivity but also underscores the limitations of language in capturing the complexities of human experience. As such, the play challenges traditional notions of authorship, representation, and meaning, positioning itself within a broader discourse on the crisis of language in contemporary literature.

In this context, the present study seeks to explore

how fragmentation in *Crave* functions as a crucial mechanism for expressing existential crisis and constructing subjectivity. By undertaking a close textual analysis of the play, this research examines the ways in which linguistic disjunction, repetition, and silence contribute to the portrayal of fractured identities and emotional disintegration. It further investigates how the interplay between language and subjectivity reflects broader philosophical concerns about existence, meaning, and the self. Through this analysis, the study aims to contribute to the growing body of scholarship on Kane's work by foregrounding the centrality of language in shaping both the thematic and formal dimensions of *Crave*. Ultimately, the paper argues that the play's fragmented linguistic structure not only represents the instability of subjectivity but also invites a deeper reflection on the human condition in a fragmented and uncertain world.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in an interdisciplinary engagement with postmodernism, existentialism, and psychoanalytic theory, each of which provides a critical lens through which the fragmented structure and thematic concerns of *Crave* may be meaningfully interpreted. The complex interplay between language, identity, and subjectivity in the play resists singular interpretation and instead demands a pluralistic theoretical approach. By situating the analysis within these overlapping yet distinct intellectual traditions, the study seeks to illuminate how fragmentation operates not merely as a stylistic device but as a profound reflection of the fractured human condition in contemporary society.

Postmodern theory serves as a crucial foundation for understanding the formal and linguistic disintegration evident in the work of Sarah Kane. Postmodernism is characterized by its rejection of stable meanings, coherent narratives, and unified subjectivities, favoring instead multiplicity, ambiguity, and discontinuity. In *Crave*, these characteristics manifest through the absence of a linear plot, the dissolution of clearly defined characters, and the use of fragmented, often non-sequential language. The play exemplifies what postmodern theorists describe as the "decentering"

of the subject, wherein identity is no longer perceived as fixed or essential but as constructed, unstable, and contingent upon linguistic and cultural contexts. Language in this framework does not function as a transparent medium of communication; rather, it becomes a site of slippage and indeterminacy, where meaning is constantly deferred. This aligns with broader poststructuralist insights that emphasize the inherent instability of signification, suggesting that the fragmented discourse in *Crave* reflects the impossibility of achieving complete or coherent self-expression.

Complementing the postmodern perspective, existentialist philosophy provides a thematic lens through which the emotional and psychological dimensions of the play can be examined. The works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus are particularly relevant in this regard, as they foreground the individual's confrontation with an absurd and indifferent universe. Existentialism posits that human beings are fundamentally alone, burdened with the responsibility of creating meaning in a world devoid of inherent purpose. In *Crave*, this existential condition is not articulated through philosophical exposition but is instead embedded within the fragmented utterances and emotional intensity of the text. The recurring expressions of longing, despair, and disconnection reflect a profound sense of alienation, while the lack of narrative coherence mirrors the existential experience of disorientation and meaninglessness. The play's refusal to provide resolution or closure further reinforces the existential notion that life itself is inherently unresolved and ambiguous.

In addition to postmodernism and existentialism, psychoanalytic theory offers valuable insights into the fragmented nature of subjectivity as represented in the play. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the self is not a unified entity but a composite of conscious and unconscious processes, desires, and conflicts. The disjointed voices in *Crave*, identified only as A, B, C, and M, can be interpreted as manifestations of different aspects of the psyche rather than as distinct characters. Their overlapping and sometimes contradictory utterances suggest an internal dialogue that reflects the fragmentation of the self. The repetition of certain phrases, the abrupt

shifts in tone, and the presence of silence can be understood as expressions of repressed emotions and unconscious drives. In this sense, language becomes a medium through which the unconscious attempts to articulate itself, albeit in incomplete and often incoherent forms. The instability of voice and identity in the play thus aligns with psychoanalytic conceptions of a divided subject, where coherence is always provisional and subject to disruption.

The concept of subjectivity itself occupies a central position within this theoretical framework, functioning as a point of convergence for the various perspectives employed in the study. Rather than viewing subjectivity as a stable, autonomous entity, the framework adopts a more dynamic and relational understanding, wherein the self is continuously shaped and reshaped through language, experience, and interaction. In *Crave*, subjectivity is not presented as a fixed identity but as a fluid and fragmented process, emerging through the interplay of multiple voices and perspectives. This aligns with contemporary theoretical approaches that emphasize the constructed nature of the self, challenging traditional notions of individuality and coherence. The fragmentation of language in the play thus becomes inseparable from the fragmentation of subjectivity, as both are indicative of a broader crisis of identity in the modern world.

By integrating postmodern, existential, and psychoanalytic perspectives, this theoretical framework provides a comprehensive basis for analyzing the intricate relationship between language and subjectivity in *Crave*. Each theoretical lens contributes to a deeper understanding of how fragmentation functions at both the formal and thematic levels of the text. Postmodernism elucidates the structural and linguistic discontinuities, existentialism highlights the emotional and philosophical dimensions of alienation and meaninglessness, and psychoanalysis reveals the underlying psychological complexities of the fragmented self. Together, these approaches enable a nuanced interpretation of the play, positioning it as a significant exploration of the human condition in an era marked by uncertainty, instability, and the breakdown of traditional frameworks of meaning.

3. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of *Crave* reveals a deeply layered exploration of fragmentation, where language itself becomes the primary site through which existential crisis and unstable subjectivity are articulated. In contrast to conventional dramatic structures that rely on coherent dialogue and identifiable character progression, the play disrupts the very foundations of communication. The utterances delivered by the voices—A, B, C, and M—are marked by abrupt shifts, repetitions, and syntactic dislocations, creating a linguistic landscape that resists continuity. This fragmentation is not merely stylistic; rather, it reflects the inner disintegration of the speaking subjects. Language, instead of serving as a bridge between individuals, becomes an expression of isolation, where meaning is constantly deferred and never fully realized. The discontinuity of speech patterns mirrors the fractured consciousness of the speakers, suggesting that their inability to articulate coherent thoughts is symptomatic of a deeper existential rupture.

In examining the existential dimensions of the play, it becomes evident that the fragmented language is intrinsically tied to a pervasive sense of meaninglessness and emotional void. The voices repeatedly express longing, loss, guilt, and an overwhelming desire for connection, yet these expressions are often interrupted or left unresolved. This lack of resolution reinforces the existential condition of incompleteness, where individuals are perpetually searching for meaning in a world that offers no definitive answers. The influence of existential thought, particularly as articulated by Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, can be discerned in the play's emphasis on alienation and the absurdity of existence. However, rather than presenting these ideas in a structured philosophical manner, Sarah Kane embeds them within the fragmented discourse itself. The absence of a coherent narrative or stable identity underscores the notion that existence is inherently disjointed, and that any attempt to impose order is ultimately futile.

A crucial aspect of the discussion lies in the construction—or more accurately, the deconstruction—of subjectivity within the play. The voices in *Crave* do not correspond to fixed,

individualized characters; instead, they function as fluid and interchangeable manifestations of consciousness. At times, their statements appear to overlap or echo one another, blurring the boundaries between self and other. This instability challenges the traditional concept of a unified subject, suggesting instead that identity is fragmented and constituted through shifting linguistic expressions. The absence of clear demarcations between speakers further complicates the notion of authorship and ownership of speech, raising questions about who is speaking and whether such distinctions are meaningful at all. In this sense, subjectivity in the play is not a pre-existing entity but an emergent phenomenon, continuously shaped and reshaped through fragmented language.

The role of repetition in the play further intensifies the sense of fragmentation and psychological distress. Certain phrases and motifs recur throughout the text, often with slight variations, creating a rhythm that is both hypnotic and unsettling. This repetition can be interpreted as an attempt to grasp meaning or assert identity in the face of disintegration, yet it ultimately reinforces the impossibility of achieving coherence. Instead of clarifying meaning, repetition amplifies ambiguity, as each recurrence introduces new contexts and emotional inflections. The cyclical nature of these repetitions suggests a form of entrapment, where the speakers are caught within their own thoughts, unable to escape the patterns of their fragmented consciousness. This aligns with psychoanalytic interpretations of language as a medium through which unresolved desires and repressed emotions are compulsively expressed.

Equally significant is the presence of silence and absence within the play, which functions as a counterpoint to the fragmented speech. The gaps between utterances, the abrupt interruptions, and the lack of explicit responses create a sense of void that is as meaningful as the spoken words. Silence in *Crave* does not signify the absence of communication; rather, it becomes a powerful mode of expression, conveying what cannot be articulated through language. These moments of absence highlight the limitations of linguistic representation, suggesting that certain aspects of human experience—particularly those related to trauma, desire, and existential despair—resist verbalization. The interplay between speech

and silence thus contributes to the overall sense of fragmentation, as meaning is dispersed not only across words but also within the spaces between them.

Furthermore, the play's structure reinforces its thematic concerns by rejecting linearity and narrative progression. There is no clear beginning, middle, or end, and the text unfolds as a series of disjointed fragments that resist chronological ordering. This non-linearity reflects the temporal disorientation experienced by the speakers, whose thoughts appear to move unpredictably between past, present, and imagined scenarios. The collapse of temporal boundaries further destabilizes subjectivity, as the speakers are unable to situate themselves within a coherent timeline. This structural fragmentation aligns with postmodern aesthetics, where the breakdown of grand narratives and fixed meanings gives rise to a multiplicity of interpretations. The audience is thus compelled to actively engage with the text, piecing together fragments in an attempt to construct meaning, even as the play resists such efforts.

In synthesizing these elements, it becomes clear that *Crave* operates as both a representation and enactment of fragmentation and existential crisis. The disintegration of language, the instability of subjectivity, the pervasive sense of alienation, and the interplay of repetition and silence all contribute to a theatrical experience that challenges conventional modes of understanding. Through its radical form and content, the play not only depicts the fractured nature of contemporary existence but also immerses the audience within it. The analysis thus demonstrates that fragmentation in *Crave* is not an incidental feature but a central mechanism through which Sarah Kane interrogates the limits of language and the complexities of human subjectivity in a fragmented world.

4. CONCLUSION

The foregoing analysis of *Crave* demonstrates that fragmentation operates as the central aesthetic and thematic principle through which the play articulates existential crisis and reconfigures subjectivity. Rather than employing language as a stable medium of communication, Sarah Kane deliberately dismantles

linguistic coherence, presenting instead a series of disjointed utterances, repetitions, and silences that resist unified interpretation. This breakdown of language is not merely a formal innovation but a profound reflection of the fractured inner lives of the speakers, whose voices embody a state of emotional disintegration and ontological uncertainty. The absence of linear narrative, fixed characters, and clear resolution further reinforces the sense that meaning itself is unstable and perpetually deferred.

At a thematic level, the play's fragmented structure mirrors the existential condition of alienation, where individuals grapple with the absence of inherent meaning and the impossibility of fully articulating their experiences. The persistent expressions of longing, despair, and disconnection reveal a deep-seated anxiety that resonates with existential thought, particularly in its emphasis on the absurdity and ambiguity of human existence. However, the significance of *Crave* lies in its ability to move beyond philosophical abstraction by embedding these concerns within the very fabric of its language. The disintegration of speech becomes synonymous with the disintegration of self, suggesting that subjectivity is neither stable nor coherent but is instead constituted through shifting, incomplete, and often contradictory expressions.

Moreover, the play challenges traditional notions of identity by presenting subjectivity as fluid, multiple, and inherently fragmented. The indistinct boundaries between the voices of A, B, C, and M disrupt the idea of a unified speaking subject, indicating that identity is not a fixed essence but an ongoing process shaped by language and experience. This reconceptualization of subjectivity aligns with postmodern and psychoanalytic perspectives, which emphasize the instability and constructed nature of the self. In this context, fragmentation is not simply a representation of crisis but also a means of exploring alternative forms of being, where meaning emerges through ambiguity rather than coherence.

The interplay between speech and silence further underscores the limitations of language in capturing the complexities of human experience. The gaps, pauses, and absences within the text function as significant expressive elements, revealing the

inadequacy of words to fully convey trauma, desire, and existential anguish. These silences invite the audience to engage with what remains unsaid, thereby expanding the interpretive possibilities of the play. In doing so, *Crave* challenges the dominance of verbal articulation in theatre and foregrounds the importance of absence as a meaningful component of dramatic expression.

Overall, *Crave* stands as a powerful exploration of fragmentation, not only as a stylistic device but as a fundamental condition of contemporary existence. Through its innovative use of language and structure, the play interrogates the relationship between expression and identity, exposing the fragile and contingent nature of both. The study thus affirms that fragmentation in *Crave* is integral to its portrayal of existential crisis and its redefinition of subjectivity, offering a compelling insight into the complexities of the human condition in a world marked by uncertainty, disconnection, and the continual search for meaning.

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