

## Žižekian Violence in Martin Crimp's *Cruel and Tender*

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**Abstract:** Martin Crimp is regarded as a difficult dramatist to categorise since he does not obey standard theatrical and literary rules. Though his playwriting technique has a misty atmosphere, there is one thing that is definite about his theatre. Throughout his career, Crimp has utilized the horrific impacts of violence to awaken people. Highlighting the grotesque vulgarity and relentless savagery of today's society Crimp, as the dramatist of the new millennium, exposes the terrible repercussions of violence, oppression, torture, power struggle, cruelty, fear, and victimisation on fe/male bodies. Crimp nakedly exposes explicit and implicit components of violence in diverse contexts in *Cruel and Tender*, his adaption of Sophocles's play *Trachiniae* to the post/modern world. What is remarkable about adapting an ancient play into the contemporary world is to confront people with violence as a never-changing reality of human civilisations. *Cruel and Tender* is also notable for depicting images of war against terror in its historical circumstances and emotional violence with the purpose of a revolution and justice. The aim of this study is to examine the representation of violence in *Cruel and Tender* using Žižekian subjective, symbolic, systemic, and divine violence notions.

**Keywords:** contemporary British theatre, Martin Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, Slavoj Žižek, violence

### INTRODUCTION

Martin Crimp is largely recognised as one of Britain's best post-war playwrights, having a compelling and enthralling voice. He established himself as a significant writer during the Margaret Thatcher era and rose to prominence with the fall of the Berlin Wall, becoming a key figure in the British and European theatrical scenes. As the "[r]emiscent of Samuel Beckett" (Middeke 2011, 82), what distinguishes Crimp as significant is the "dual and equal focus on the private and the public, the collective and the individual, the humorous

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and the dramatic, the spoken and the unspoken” (Angelaki 2012, 1) qualities of his plays. As a Thatcher-era artist, he is outside the political theatre, but this does not imply his plays are devoid of politics. He approaches political issues differently than his contemporaries. Crimp’s “tools are not what we might expect, not social realism, verbatim, docudrama, agitprop, or even conventional satire” (Ibid., 121). His unconventional writing style, which simultaneously disregards Aristotelian theatrical concepts and employs traditional forms, has gained him a reputation as a writer. As Sierz (2006, 2) notes, Crimp’s plays “are experimental in form and unsettling in content. Although animated by a playful delight of subverting dramatic conventions and often exuberant in their wordplay, they rarely encourage audiences to identify with any of the characters”. Language has a vital role in developing Crimland’s conventional and non-traditional forms in this context.

Using words, Crimp depicts the inherent cruelty of human society worldwide. As he says, “the theatre is the acid test of language, the test of language we use every day, and it exposes it, enriches it or reveals it” (Devine 2006, 90). Characters in Crimland often use language as a weapon to irritate one another. Consequently, Crimp’s plays have a unique, terrifying, yet honest voice that employs pauses and many meanings to express abstract and tangible concepts. Crimp’s theatrical universe “is characterised by a vision of society as a place of social decline, moral bad faith and imminent violence” (Sierz 2006, 2). Thus, his theatrical world is a violent one that is full of physical, psychological, verbal, domestic, sexual violence, patriarchal oppression, and cruelty. He views postmodern culture as a source of societal deterioration, suppressed aggressiveness, and immorality because of its detached individuals living in a spectacle society. Crimp builds a cruel universe in which men are unable to control their horrible emotions, and women are mostly the victims and objects of the domestic violence and patriarchy. In this regard, the violence depicted in Crimland can be interpreted through Žižekian theory. The purpose of this study is to analyze Crimp’s *Cruel and Tender*, which is the severe criticism of the War on Terror through the lens of Žižekian violence.

## ŽIŽEKIAN VIOLENCE

The word violence comes from the Latin *violentia*, which means vehemence, a furious and uncontrollable power. However, since acts

of excessive force usually result in violations of norms, rights, or regulations, the concept of violence is sometimes confounded with that of violation, derived from the Latin *violare*, which means infringement. Indeed, most efforts to describe violence combine the concept of an act of physical force with the idea of a violation (Bufacchi 2007, 14). The most widely accepted definition of violence is the intentional infliction of damage on another individual. The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines the term as “violent behaviour that is intended to hurt or kill somebody: crimes/acts/threats of violence” (Hornby 2005, 1704). Moreover, according to Bufacchi (2007, 43), an “act of violence occurs when the integrity or unity of a subject (person or animal) or object (property) is being intentionally or unintentionally violated, as a result of an action or an omission”.

Besides these definitions beginning with Aristotle, many philosophers throughout history have dealt with violence in many domains and circumstances as a dominant factor shaping and affecting social connections. However, there is no specific definition of the concept; several philosophers demonstrate physical, psychological, cultural, domestic, institutional, sexual, verbal, and public aspects. In this cacophony, the contemporary philosopher Slavoj Žižek gives particular importance to the problem of violence in his works. Of contemporary cultural theorists of violence, Žižek is frequently quoted during the last decade. In his book *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (2008), Žižek provides a critical explanation of violence in neoliberal societies by differentiating three categories of violence: “the subjective (terrorism, crime); the symbolic (violence embedded in language); and the systemic (the violence perpetuated by capitalist political and economic arrangements). He argues that a focus on the subjective violence of terrorism has obscured the symbolic and systematic violence of everyday social relations” (Ruez 2011, 154). Because it is perpetrated by an identified person and is the kind of violence readily perceived by humans, subjective violence is instantly visible to human sight and consciousness. Subjective violence, as Žižek points out, is differentiated by the disturbance of the normal, but objective violence is inherent in the normal state of events. Subjective violence is apparent; objective violence is not, disguised as usual as the status quo. Objective violence has two forms: first, via words, and then, through the system. Systemic violence often comes from the economic and political systems (Žižek 2008, 1-2). According to Žižek, systemic violence is often invisible since it is the usual order of affairs against

which subjective violence seems to be unsettling. Even if it is concealed, it must be considered to make sense of what appear to be senseless eruptions of subjective aggression. Žižek (2008, 2) accordingly argues that:

[S]ubjective violence is experienced as such against the background of a non-violent zero level. It is seen as a perturbation of the “normal,” peaceful state of things. However, objective violence is precisely the violence inherent to this “normal” state of things. Objective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent. Systemic violence is thus something like the notorious “dark matter” of physics, the counterpart to an all-too visible subjective violence. It may be invisible, but it has to be taken into account if one is to make sense of what otherwise seem to be “irrational” explosions of subjective violence.

In addition to subjective, symbolic, and systemic violence, Žižek discusses another kind of violence towards the end of his research, which he refers to as divine violence. According to Žižek (2008, 178), “God Himself has lost His neutrality and ‘fallen into’ the world, brutally intervening, delivering justice. ‘Divine violence’ stands for such brutal intrusions of justice beyond law”. Divine violence is not a direct intervention by an all-powerful God to punish humanity for its transgressions (Ibid., 201). The revolutionary violence against unjust social structures and the established order is Žižek’s notion of divine violence. The term divine alludes to the revolutionary character of violence in this context; divine violence “is the violent explosion of resentment which finds expression in a spectrum that ranges from mob lynchings to organised revolutionary terror” (Ibid., 87). To discuss the revolutionary character of the divine violence, Žižek (2008, 198) suggests that:

Divine violence purifies the guilty not of guilt but of law, because law is limited to the living: it cannot reach beyond life to touch what is in excess of life, what is more than mere life. Divine violence is an expression of pure drive, of the undeadness, the excess of life, which strikes at ‘bare life’ regulated by law.

Throughout the long history of British theatre, famous dramatists have addressed the ever-changing theme of violence. Crimp is unquestionably one of them. In *Cruel and Tender*, Crimp investigates many sorts of violence that Žižek theorises.

### ŽIŽEKIAN VIOLENCE IN *CRUEL AND TENDER*

*Cruel and Tender* is Crimp's twenty-first-century adaptation of Sophocles's tragic play *Trachiniae* to the contemporary world. Sophocles's play deals with domestic violence and "shows how frustrated desire can turn into aggressiveness and even violence" (Escoda Agusti 2013, 231). Crimp manages to startle the audience profoundly by using an ancient topic, referring to their senses and consciousness directly while unrolling the fundamental nature of humans. First presented at the Young Vic in 2004 and directed by Luc Bondy, *Cruel and Tender* reveals the political corruption of contemporary society on the one hand, while it portrays the degenerated relationships and the concept of marriage in such a corrupt and collapsed community on the other. Written after the 9/11 attacks, *Cruel and Tender* is a critical reaction to the war on terror. In the course of the play, Crimp deals with global terror, barbarism, domestic violence, and verbal violence. He consciously obeys the rules of classical tragedy. He doesn't put violence on stage since his aim is "to interpellate spectators to become aware of the seeds of barbarism present in their unequal, contemporary world order, as well as to oppose the introduction of barbarism as they may detect it in their own, daily context" (Ibid., 233). *Cruel and Tender* displays Crimp's harsh criticism of the war on terror by examining the catastrophic impact of contemporary global politics on female bodies.

In the play, Amelia is awaiting news from her husband, a General involved in anti-terror activities, and presently deployed to Africa, in a magnificent mansion near an international airport. Amelia is looked for by a cleaner, a physiotherapist, and a beautician, who play the chorus in this play. She sent her son James to find his father. Jonathan, a government official, sends two youngsters from Sub-Saharan Africa into Amelia's home: teenaged Laela, the girl of the African leader Seratava, and a boy who are apparently the only survivors of the General's strike on a terrorist base in Gisenyi (Rwanda). According to Richard, they are rescuers of the war on terror. But the truth is very different. At night, Amelia is told by the journalist Richard that the General destroyed the city because he coveted Laela. To take her revenge and secure her husband back, Amelia constructs a chemical love shelter for the General, which adversely affects his health. Amelia sends her husband the chemical as a gift what she thinks is a love potion. James comes with the news that the General is dying slowly due to Amelia's cruel action. Amelia then commits suicide. The

General reappears, severely impaired by the poison. James tells him that he has been charged with war crimes and will face an investigation. The General desires that her son James adopt Laela and become the child's father. As he is brought away for his crimes, the General reiterates he is the sacrifice that in this conflict, not the criminal (Boll 2013, 149-150).

*Cruel and Tender* is divided into three parts; the first and the second parts are devoted to the violence against the female body and the last part to the males. The play begins with Amelia discussing the negative aspects of her marriage with the General. At the very beginning of the play, Amelia refuses to accept her body as a victim of male culture, saying, "[T]here are women who believe all men are rapist. I don't believe that because if I believe that how -as a woman- could I go on living with the label 'victim'?" (Crimp 2004, 1) While Amelia rejects being the victim of male sexual oppression, she confesses that she was just fifteen when the first man came to her father with a desire having her using numerous tactics. At eighteen, she has married "to a soldier-to the only man who has ever remembered the colour" (Ibid.) of her eyes. In reality, Amelia is the victim of systemic and symbolic violence of male-oriented cultural order. Her first encounter with male violence depicts the hidden face of Žižek's notion of symbolic violence. As Aragay (2011, 80) points out, Amelia "has experienced from an early age the symbolic violence late capitalism exercises on bodies, particularly those of women, as it drills them into submission". After her marriage, Amelia leaves the university education and has a child and must live without her husband raising the children alone because of his military duty. Amelia is a woman who is entirely reliant on her husband's social standing. She utilizes her body as a weapon and a seduction object to lure and keep him at home. But her jealousy becomes worse when she hears of Generals' treachery and realizes Laela is his mistress. She has suffered from sadness for years due to being alone with a child while waiting for the General. After the General's betrayal, which is an excellent illustration of systemic violence of the patriarchal system, as Žižek suggests, Amelia struggles against male-oriented conventions and seeks revenge on both her own and her husband's bodies. This kind of violence is referred to as Žižek's systemic violence. Physical violence, according to Žižek, is usually generated by the systemic violence that supports our political and economic structures. In *Cruel and Tender*, the chemical Amelia pours into the General's shelter makes him lose his mind and transform

his body. His father's physical transformation makes James depressed. In the end, Amelia kills herself. Amelia's two actions are examples of Žižekian systemic violence. Her chemical attack is the last subject of their dialogue:

**James** -the gift of pain-the chemical-your chemical under skin. (*Slight pause*.) And when he turns round it's his eyes-it's worked its way up his spine and into his eyes- he's got these eyes like a cat in the sun-pin-point eyes-he isn't human, Mum-that's what you and your friend have done to him-

**Amelia** Stop it.

**James** -not even human. Which is why when he talks to me-when he says 'It's going dark: give me your hand'- when he says 'Help me, help me, give me your fucking hand' there is no way I am going to let this person-no-sorry-thing-no way I am going to let this thing with the pin-point fucking eyes that used to be my dad even *touch* me. (Crimp 2004, 40)

There is a lot of verbal aggression throughout the play. Amelia uses abusive language, which is a sign of symbolic violence when she interacts with others. She always gives commands to his son, such as "keep out of it [...] See if it's true [...] Go there" (Crimp 2004, 4). While Amelia speaks to Beautician, she insists on using harsh language, indicating the cruelty and tenderness of her trapped life:

**Amelia**

[...] men whose minds are blank

Who fuck you the way they fuck enemy-

I mean with the same tenderness-

When you understand that

Then I will accept your sympathy. [...] I'm sorry: I'm being cruel. (Crimp 2004, 7)

Crimp makes his argument in *Cruel and Tender* by employing linguistic violence via Žižek's state of mind. According to Žižek (2008, 66):

[L]anguage, not primitive egotistic interest, is the first and greatest divider, it is because of language that we and our neighbours (can) 'live in different worlds' even when we live on the same street. What this means is that verbal violence is not a secondary distortion, but the ultimate resort of every specifically human violence.

Crimp effectively confronts conventional norms that place little significance on women in his play. In various ways, he displays two resistive female bodies. While Amelia refuses to live as a deviant and commits herself to the General, Laela, the colonial female body,

initially learns English and then confronts the people in the home, much as Amelia did. Thus, Crimp implies that even in a patriarchal imperialist environment, there is always the possibility of rebellion (Şakiroğlu 2018, 216). Laela is the colonized and abused character of the play. But she accepts her situation, becoming a mistress of the General. She asserts her feeling in a dialogue with Amelia as follows, which is an excellent illustration of systemic violence of the patriarchal system:

**Amelia** The General is my husband, Laela. D’you understand what it means?

**Laela** One man can have many wives.

**Amelia** Of course, of course- but here- where you are now- when a man marries a woman, he stays with that woman.

**Laela** Just her?

**Amelia** That’s what marriage is.

**Laela** (*laughs*) I don’t believe you. That’s what they tell girls at Tuseme club.

**Amelia** It’s the truth.

**Laela** A man can have two wives under one blanket.

**Amelia** No. Not here. No. [...]

**Laela** (with growing intensity) Boys need to fight- they need to learn- they need to kill. Boys need to kill. Boys need to fight. Boys must fight. Boys must kill- must learn to kill. [...] (Crimp 2004, 27)

The occurrences of violence seen over the last decade all around the globe are examples of subjective violence that is visible and has a recognised and accountable actor. In *Cruel and Tender*, the hypocrisy of policy and the destruction of a city in vain are displayed explicitly. Many instances of subjective brutality may be found throughout the play at the hands of the General. The audience observes the General dragging a child off as a bus and cutting his heart in front of the mob in the first part (Crimp 2004, 2). The General has been sent to Africa “of eradicating terror: not understanding that the more he fights terror the more he creates terror, even invites terror” (Ibid.). Moreover, Jonathan, a government minister, defends the subjective violence of western civilisation as follows:

Because if you want to root out terror- and I believe we all of us want to root out terror- there is only one rule: kill. We wanted that city pulverised- and I mean literally pulverised- the shops, the schools, the hospitals, the libraries, the bakeries, networks of fountains, avenues of trees, museums- we wanted that so-called city turned- as indeed it now has been- irreversibly to dust. (Crimp 2004, 2)



In Žižekian terms, while the General's violent actions and mass killing embody divine violence, his attitudes, using physical violence and insulting, towards the others in the house exhibit both symbolic and systemic violence. According to Žižek (2008, 10), opposing all types of violence, from direct, physical violence (mass murder, terror) to ideological violence (racism, provocation, sexual discrimination), seems to be the primary concern of today's tolerant liberal attitude. In *Cruel and Tender*, to take Laela from her father, the General "is prepared to murder not just the father, but the inhabitants of an entire city" (Crimp 2004, 18). The play's mass murder may also be seen in this light. The General destroys a village and many people to get what he desires. Additionally, the General's point of view correlates with Žižek's divine violence, which justifies violence for the cause of revolution. The dialogue between James and the General shows this tendency:

**James** I talk to who I like, Dad. I live in this house and I talk to who I like and there is something you need to understand: you are a criminal. 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** Because I have purified the world for you.

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

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? (Crimp 2004, 57-58)

Žižek uses systemic violence to describe how particular social structures or institutional practices, such as political dominance or economic exploitation, lead to individuals engaging in subjective violence such as rape, murder, crime, terror, and war. The General of the play is the perfect embodiment of systemic violence. Crimp defends his position in the play by appealing to the notion of violence in Žižekian terms many times. Thus, *Cruel and Tender* explores aspects of violence on both female and male bodies in Žižekian terminology. In the closing part of the play, the General's last words feature both subjective and symbolic violence. The play ends in the destruction of all characters, either physically or emotionally. To quote from the play:

**General** (*almost inaudible*) I killed the Neamean lion ... [...]

I killed the snake that guarded the tree ... bore the weight of the earth ...

[...] ... reached into the apple tree... [...]

... pulled the apples out of the tree... (Crimp 2004, 64)

## CONCLUSION

Terrorism, crime, cruelty, language, neoliberal economic policies, revolution, and civilisation are all used to depict subjective, symbolic, systemic, and divine violence in *Cruel and Tender*. First of all, the characters of the play, at some point, spoils the language they use which is the symbolic violence that Žižek suggests. Amelia poisons her husband to take her revenge. She also uses poisoned language that irritates everyone around her. Her insidiously poisoning the General with a chemical, as the most brutal act of the play besides mass killing, can be seen as Žižekian conception of subjective violence. After taking her revenge, Amelia realises what she has done to General, attempts to induce repentance, and commits suicide. Her last behaviour is undoubtedly an example of subjective violence. Apart from these examples throughout the play, James, Amelia's, and General's son, is psychologically and emotionally corrupted. There is no doubt that Laela shares the same fate as Amelia under the harsh conditions of the neoliberal patriarchal structure. She accepts being the second wife and sexual object of a powerful man. Laela also allows systematic control of the male-oriented society on her body. Through Amelia and Laela, Crimp demonstrates how socio-cultural institutions and economic systems control and exploit the female body as a marketplace. Furthermore, the General's activities of mass murder, torture, obsessive love relationships, sexual assault, and justification of cruelty are examples of systemic and divine violence since he derives his authority from the capitalist system and its owners. Crimp also gives no one a chance to set against the patriarchal authority of the General which lets him humiliate the females in the house and his wives. Considered from these angles, Crimp's *Cruel and Tender* portrays aspects of violence concerning Žižek's philosophy.

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