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**STAGES OF RESISTANCE:POSTCOLONIAL FEMINIST VOICES IN LYNN  
NOTTAGE’S RUINED**

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**Abstract**

*In this paper, I examine Lynn Nottage’s Ruined (2008) as a modern American drama that engages with the intersections of gender, war, and colonialism in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The play foregrounds strategies of survival and female agency under conditions of sexual violence and systemic oppression, framed through the lens of postcolonial feminism. It further incorporates insights from resistance studies, highlighting how everyday practices such as commerce, song, and storytelling—transform victimhood into resilience on stage. By situating Nottage’s dramaturgy within feminist, postcolonial, and intergenerational debates on gender, trauma, and postcoloniality, the paper argues that Ruined expands the function of theatre, positioning it simultaneously as a witness to violence and as a mode of resistance against endemic oppression.*

**Keywords:** Lynn Nottage, *Ruined*, postcolonial feminism, trauma theory, resistance studies, African theatre, gender and war, survival, feminist agency

**INTRODUCTION**

Lynn Nottage is the most celebrated among the most important contemporary African-American playwrights whose use of personal stories to bind the bigger political and historical conflicts is remarkable. Her works frequently preempt the voices of oppressed people, in this case, women who manoeuvre within systems of oppressions defined over race, gender and classes (Elam, 2015). Nottage gained global interest in the humanitarian crisis that persisted in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) after winning the Pulitzer Prize in Drama in 2009 because of his play, *Ruined*. In this case, armed conflict and the fight over precious natural resources like coltan has resulted in the situation wherein women are disproportionately victims of sexual violence, displacement, and exploitation (Autesserre, 2010). Using theatrical medium, Nottage is able to turn these realities that are experienced into dramatic action and amplifies silenced experiences and uses theatre as a political space of feminist resistance.

*Ruined* is a play that embodies the harsh reality of war-torn Congo, which is also known as the Africa-World War because of its local and international ramifications (Stearns, 2011). The female bodies in this environment end up being a battleground as they are raped, coerced, and forced to live survival strategies. Nottage places her characters Mama Nadi, Salima and Sophie in these bleak truths but also shows their determination, bargaining, and the ability to withstand. In such a manner, the play challenges gender-based violence as well as the legacies of colonial exploitation that African women still struggle to come out of (Mohanty, 2003).

Historically drama has served as a source of representation as well as political consciousness and social change. Feminist theatre specifically focuses on the theatre as an area where patriarchal and colonial discourses may be confronted and alternative voices may be heard (Aston, 1995). In *Ruined*, the bar which is owned by Mama Nadi is symbolically used to show entrapment and also a negotiation space. Women are commodified inside and outside its walls, but it is also the place where the strategies of survival are practiced, and the feminist agency can be seen. Through the dramatization of this contradiction Nottage emphasizes the ambivalence of survival in the conditions of violence: both victimhood and resilience exist



simultaneously and resistance is frequently enacted in low-key and mundane ways (Scott, 1990).

The current work follows three key research questions. To begin with, what are some of the resistance and survival tactics developed in the play, especially in the way the characters relate with patriarchal and militarized systems? Second, what is the importance of women voice vis-a-vis postcolonial feminist discourse, as well as how Nottage is anti-homogenous in her presentation of the image of Third World women (Mohanty, 2003)? Third, how does the very stage could turn into the means of articulation of trauma, memory, and resistance, which then turns theatre into a weapon of social criticism? These questions guide the analysis on the interaction between oppression and agency, silence and voice, trauma and survival.

Postcolonial feminism, the theory of trauma, and resistance studies are united by the theoretical framework of this paper. It is through postcolonial feminism that Mohanty (2003) criticized the Western portrayal of women and the same offers insight into how Nottage builds a scenario of African women without diminishing them to victims. how *Ruined* enacts the not-utterable horrors of sexual violence, and at the same time points out the delayed and fragmented nature of traumatic memory. Lastly, the concept of resistance which is informed by the notion of weapons of the weak (Scott, 1990) shows that characters in *Ruined* find themselves doing things that are considered acts of resistance every day, whether through bargaining and trading or through narratives and singing. Such a combination allows placing *Ruined* into the context of a multifaceted text that redefines the role of theatre as the means of demonstrating the violence and, at the same time, becomes the means of resistance.

This paper has been divided into a few subsections. Based on this introduction, the literature review canvasses important scholarship about *Ruined*, postcolonial feminism, trauma studies, and resistance theory. It is an informative contextual background in the nature of the Congolese conflict and the colonial legacies. It is divided into three sections, women, war and postcolonial feminism, trauma, memory and survival and the stage as a resistance. The findings are summarized in a discussion which focuses on the importance of women voices in feminist and postcolonial discourses. Lastly, the conclusion also speculates on the general implications of Nottage play to modern theatre and the politics of feminism in the world.

Using this interdisciplinary method, the paper contends that *Ruined* is an example of drama as a witness to trauma, a precursor of marginalized voices and as a place of feminist and postcolonial activism.

## **Literature Review**

Lynn Nottage's *Ruined* (2009) has become a focal point in contemporary scholarship addressing the intersections of gender, war, and postcoloniality. Scholars have analyzed the play through the critical lenses of feminist theory, trauma studies, and resistance studies, situating Nottage's dramaturgy as both testimonial and political. The literature demonstrates how *Ruined* not only dramatizes the gendered effects of war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) but also challenges the epistemic silences around colonialism, patriarchy, and militarized violence.

## **Women, War, and Postcolonial Feminism**

Much of the existing scholarship on *Ruined* foregrounds the play's intervention in postcolonial feminist discourse. Mohanty (2003) critiques Western feminist frameworks for essentializing "Third World women" as a monolithic category of passive victims, a critique that resonates in



Nottage's construction of characters such as Mama Nadi, Salima, and Sophie. These women embody multifaceted identities that resist homogenization and instead reflect diverse survival strategies under oppressive conditions. James (2010) highlights how Nottage situates women's voices at the center of a war-torn society, portraying them simultaneously as targets of violence and agents of resilience. Ukpokodu (2013) furthers this analysis by illustrating how women's bodies in *Ruined* become contested terrains of both exploitation and cultural endurance, thereby resisting reductive victimhood narratives.

Nottage's challenge to the Western gaze is also aligned with Spivak's (1988) seminal question of whether the subaltern can speak. While Spivak is skeptical about the subaltern's capacity to articulate their own histories under colonial discourses, Nottage creates theatrical space for marginalized Congolese women to narrate their lived realities. In doing so, she aligns with Bhabha's (1994) notion of hybridity, where cultural identities and practices are continuously negotiated. Mama Nadi's bar exemplifies this hybridity: it is simultaneously a site of commodification and of survival. Furthermore, Fanon's (1963) critique of colonial violence illuminates the ways in which the legacy of imperialism continues to shape systemic exploitation in the DRC, contextualizing the militarized gender violence that the play depicts.

### **Trauma, Memory, and Survival**

A second strand of literature situates *Ruined* within trauma theory and performance studies. Felman and Laub (1992) argue that trauma is characterized by belatedness, fragmentation, and difficulty in narration. This framework is useful for understanding the silences and ruptured memories in *Ruined*, particularly through Salima's tragic withdrawal and Sophie's songs, which function as fragile yet powerful testimonies. Williams (2014) underscores the role of theatre in transforming unspeakable violence into collective memory, a claim that aligns with O'Brien's (2012) analysis of theatre as a witness to trauma. Through such performances, audiences are invited into the act of remembrance, resisting erasure of violence from historical consciousness.

Showalter's (1985) feminist criticism suggests that women's cultural productions disrupt patriarchal narratives, a view that resonates with Sophie's use of song as a form of cultural survival and resilience. Similarly, Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity provides another interpretive layer: the women's survival strategies are not only biological but also performative acts of negotiation within structures of patriarchy and militarism. Thompson (2009) expands on this by arguing that performance itself carries affective power, enabling audiences to experience trauma and resistance in embodied forms. Together, these perspectives illuminate how *Ruined* dramatizes both silence and expression, memory and survival.

### **Resistance and Agency in Performance**

The literature also emphasizes *Ruined* as a text of resistance. Scott's (1990) notion of "hidden transcripts" is particularly relevant, as it conceptualizes how marginalized groups resist domination through everyday, often subtle acts. In the play, Mama Nadi's management of the bar, Sophie's music, and the women's negotiations with soldiers can all be read as quotidian practices of resistance, reflecting Scott's "weapons of the weak." Hooks (2000) similarly argues that resistance often lies not in grand gestures but in small, insistent affirmations of dignity and humanity. Within *Ruined*, these micro-acts of defiance become crucial strategies for survival in the face of systemic violence.



Furthermore, performance studies scholarship underscores how dramaturgy itself becomes a political act. Fuchs (2010) notes that Nottage's testimonial approach, grounded in interviews with Congolese women, situates the play within traditions of documentary theatre. This blending of personal testimony with political critique strengthens *Ruined*'s role as both cultural witness and resistant art. O'Brien (2012) and Ukpokodu (2013) both affirm that Nottage's dramaturgy challenges audiences to reckon with complicity in global systems of violence, particularly through the play's engagement with the mineral economies of Congo, which implicate Western consumption (Nest, 2011). Thus, *Ruined* not only stages Congolese women's struggles but also destabilizes Western spectators' sense of distance from those struggles.

### **Synthesis**

Taken together, the scholarship reveals a consensus that *Ruined* exemplifies the convergence of feminist, postcolonial, and trauma studies in performance. By refusing reductive representations of Congolese women, dramatizing fractured trauma narratives, and staging acts of resistance, Nottage positions theatre as both a site of witnessing and a tool of political intervention. As Butler (1990) and Showalter (1985) remind us, cultural production is always implicated in systems of power, but it also opens spaces for critique and transformation. Nottage's work thus expands the function of theatre, demonstrating how drama can bear witness to violence, amplify marginalized voices, and resist ongoing structures of colonial and patriarchal domination.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Postcolonial Feminism**

Postcolonial feminism has been a critical reaction to the Western feminism that tries to generalize the experiences of women and the postcolonial theory that fails comparatively to address the issue of gender. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) argues against the ways in which western feminist discourses tend to create the image of the Third World woman as an isolated, homogenous, victim of patriarchal and cultural oppression. This homogenization obliterates historical, class, ethnic and political agency differences. Mohanty instead proposes an alternative that acknowledges postcolonial women as agents that bargain power, survival, and resistance in particular material and cultural situations. Her intervention is most helpful when it comes to the analysis of *Ruined*, as the Congolese women are not represented as voiceless victims but as multi-dimensional characters, struggling with the politics of war, patriarchy, and economic exploitation.

A significant concern of postcolonial feminism is the relationship between gender and colonial governance. Scholars such as Spivak have argued that colonial discourse tended to marginalize women as the subaltern-triple marginalization under imperialism, patriarchy, and culture. In *Ruined*, Nottage dramatizes this double burden: women like Salima are victimized by sexual violence perpetrated by soldiers and silence enforced by their own communities, thus showing how gendered oppression intersects histories of colonial extraction of resources and histories of militarized violence. In addition, postcolonial feminism emphasizes on feminist solidarity that goes beyond geographical borders (Mohanty, 2003). Performing the stories of Congolese women in an American theatre, Nottage challenges the world to experience cross-cultural feminist empathy and political reflection and helps to connect local suffering to global responsibility.



### **Resistance Studies**

The work by James C. Scott (1990) on the resistance study offers a good perspective to examine how the marginalized groups challenge domination in the most mundane and faceless forms. Scott proposes the idea of the public transcripts as well as the hidden transcripts, which characterize the way the oppress groups manage the power. Whereas the public transcripts show adherence to the dominant authority, the hidden transcripts show the shadowy activities, or gossip, humor, unobtrusive disobedience within which resistance is practised.

Mama Nadi represents these forces in *Ruined*. She seems to be colluding in the commodification of women on the face of it, having her own bar serving soldiers. However, the official transcript also conceals another secret transcript of resistance and negotiation, demanding protection for women, thus standing against their total annihilation, which are envisaged through performances of resistance and the narrative. In the bar, again, singing and storytelling or even the power of a few jokes constitutes the weapons of the weak (Scott, 1990), daily strength tactics through which women negotiate and survive silently under domination. It is this model that values not so much the blatantly revolutionary activities as the more obscure but equally significant activities of survival and endurance by which women live in terror-stricken sites.

Here is where resistance studies converge with feminist theory towards consideration of agency under repression circumstances. According to some scholars like hooks (1984), resistance can, moreover, manifest itself not in a loud and spectacular way but rather through some small act of not being silenced, of insisting upon deserving dignity, or just by keeping memory alive. Such forms of feminist resistance are the ones that are typified by Nottage in the play, as performance becomes an act of resistance.

### **Nottage's Dramaturgical Style**

The technique of dramaturgy of Lynn Nottage is characterized by a combination of personal testimony with more extensive commentary on politics. Before she wrote *Ruined*, Nottage had made a visit to Uganda to interview Congolese women who had escaped violence, which she used to write the play (Fuchs, 2010). This act of gathering testimonies places her work in the context of tradition which recognises documentary and testimonial theatre, where the form of narration is informed by actual experience.

Simultaneously, Nottage resorts to the aspects of realism and symbolic space as the ways of dramatizing the contradictions of survival. The bar of Mama Nadi, to be an example, is a claustrophobic space of the Congolese society: a place of exploitation and protection, entrapment and agency at the same time. Nottage uses this setting to show how complicated the lives of women have become in the presence of war, and rejects the idea of victimhood or empowerment. She blends personal intensity with political immediacy in her dramaturgy to encourage people to identify with individual characters and acknowledge the international systems that support their victimhood, like colonialism, capitalism, militarism.

Finding a balance between testimony, realism, and feminist critique, Nottage shows how theatre can be both demonstrative and discursive. *Ruined* therefore places itself in a world discourse of gendered violence, exploitation of resources and resistance against the colonial regime, and prefigures the ability of women to survive amidst the oppression within a system.

### **Women, War and the Postcolonial Feminism.**

*Ruined* by Lynn Nottage allows Congolese women to take the main stage in the dramatic scenery and the writer presents them as both victims and targets of violence and strength. By using characters like Mama Nadi, Salima and Sophie, the play challenges the overlaps of war,



patriarchy and colonial exploitation. By so doing, it is en route to issues of postcolonial feminism, especially the critique of Western feminist accounts of Third World women (such as that by Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 2003) as homogenized victims. Nottage confuses this stereotype by making African women multi-dimensional and their experiences of violence are interlaced with survival, negotiation and cultural survival tactics.

### **Women as the Victims of Violence and the Survivors.**

In *Ruined*, the ugliness of war is branded on the bodies of the women. Salima's narrative serves to catalog the sexual violence enacted as a weapon of war against her: abduction, rape, and the betrayal of her family; her own suffering exemplifies the excruciating scars of war on individual and social spheres (Baaz & Stern, 2013). Her suicide epitomizes the limits of having survived in a situation where both military and civilian worlds abetted her marginalization. Even in her final moments, Salima exercised control over her fate by refusing to be re-victimized. Sophie uses her traumatic events to express herself through art. Sterilized through sexual assault, she uses song as a medium for healing and witness. This music is, therefore, a form of fragile yet powerful assertiveness and continuity of culture. In her own way, Mama Nadi subverts exploitation and protection. By running a bar that profits from the sexual labor of women, she would appear to uphold sexist currents. However, in concealing these women in a brutal battlefield, she simultaneously protects them and grants an unstable measure of security.

### **Critiquing the Western Gaze**

Mohanty (2003) criticizes western feminism because it creates the concept of the Third World woman as an oppressed woman everywhere, but without historical and cultural particularism. These images tend to deprive women and make them passive victims who need to be rescued by the west. Nottage refuses this gaze by developing characters who exist as not merely the symbolic victims of African violence but human beings, complete and fully fleshed out personalities who exist between contradictory oppressions.

Salima, Sophie, and Mama Nadi are not replaceable in terms of suffering; they are a different stance of the Congolese society that is conditioned by the social classes, culture, and any personal background. To give an example, the identity of a singer enables Sophie to be seen as a cultural carrier whereas the spirit of an entrepreneur makes Mama Nadi a negotiator in the war economies. These subtle illustrations reflect the message that Mohanty gave when she stated that postcolonial feminism needs to acknowledge diversity and multifacetedness instead of depending on essentialist representations.

Moreover, the performance of the voices of these women in an American theatre makes Nottage challenge her Western audience with their complicity in the global systems of exploitation themselves. Coltan mined in Congo supplies electronics industry across the globe, which involves western consumers in the chain of violence (Nest, 2011). By so doing, the play compromises the Western gaze and refocuses the attention on pity to accountability.

### **Gender, Survival, and Negotiation.**

Not just biologically, but also culturally and economically, women have survived in the *Ruined* economy. They are the negotiators and traders, the cultural bearers responsible for keeping part of the community alive as the community crumbles around it. Mama Nadi's bar is morally compromised but a bargaining space for women and men with Mama Nadi's mediation. Within the existing patriarchal order, Mama Nadi has partial leverage against gender hierarchies, becoming an economic actor in a male-appointed war economy. Sophie's singing is contoured by trauma and the need for survival. Her voice entertains and consolidates cultural identity, making the memories of raw personal pain their collective memory. Thus, women's



survival tactics incorporate not only that of physical survival but also dignifying themselves, their culture, and their community ties. Such acts exemplify those considered by Scott (1990) as forms of resistance that are quotidian, in the sense that mere survival is a resistance unto itself against the structure meant to obliterate it.

### **Colonial Exploitation, Patriarchy, and Intersectional Oppression**

The political and economic conditions that still characterize Congo today cannot be divided of the violence portrayed in *Ruined*. Belgian colonialism institutionalized extractive economies and dictatorial rule, and left behind institutions that helped to exploit the postcolonial (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2002). The modern day war over minerals is therefore an extension of colonial plundering of resources. They are thus doubly oppressed by their status as colonized individuals as well as women, according to postcolonial feminist definition standards (Spivak, 1988; Mohanty, 2003).

Salima's case exemplifies the most overt scenario of how compounded oppression is exercised. The torment that one goes through in a severely war-torn country is multiplied many times over by the rejection suffered by the abducted women from their families and communities. Moreover, just as the fact that Sophie cannot be married because of her wounds, enforce her social deprivation: patriarchal norms only increase the trauma inflicted by violence. It is thus the drama which Nottage frames that helps to show how war intensifies the existing gender inequalities empowering patriarchal systems at the instance of women body as a conquest site. *Ruined* is a narrative beyond stereotype justified through postcolonial feminist critique, stating that Congolese women are neither passive victims nor heroic survivors but seekers negotiating their survival within multiplicative, overlapping systems of violence. Not only is this a preemptive ascription against Western stereotypes, it's an enactment of how feminist solidarity demands sensitivity and attentive listening.

### **Conclusion**

When viewed through the perspective of Caruth's theory of trauma, it can be seen that violence that cannot be spoken of is not only silenced but also enacted and made tangible. Salima is permeated with tragic silence in contradistinction to Sophie in vocal testimony because it represents two very different ways of dealing with trauma. Memory is inscribed on the bodies of these women, but they will endure. Most importantly, Nottage uses theatre as a memory for all, through which world audiences become trauma witnesses and, consequently, resist erasing the rememorate. the unspoken violence is not only silenced, but enacted and moreover empowers and brightens existence. Salima is strewn apart with tragic silence in opposition to Sophie in vocal testimony; thus, they are pretty disparate in how they describe or react to trauma. The bodies of women are memory places-it is a skin place on which scars inscribe, but even toothless, it can endure. Above all, Nottage uses theatre as a collective memore, which makes world audiences traumatic witnesses and allows them to resist any attempts at erasure from this memory. By so doing, *Ruined* affirms both the continuation of trauma and the survival with testimony, memory and performance.

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