

Victims in the Limelight: Subverting Abuse Tropes in Lynn Nottage's *Ruined*

Abstract: The place of women playwrights was disputed or ignored on the American stage for a long time, few having the opportunity to have their work produced. The tide changed at the turn of the twenty-first century, when voices of women such as Lynn Nottage received praise from audiences and critics alike. It represents a remarkable feat, especially considering that her powerful, unapologetic play revolves around the controversial and sensitive topic of abuse. However, the story in *Ruined* differs from other such narratives because the playwright subverts the tropes of abuse stories in terms of focus, perspective, and character development. Unlike the traditional depictions of abuse, the spotlight here shines on the victims and on their response to the abuse; their voices guide the play. Moreover, Nottage does not approach aggression by pretending to have the answer to the problem, but by showing their audience the aftermath of abuse in the hope that it will generate social action to better protect the defenseless.

Keywords: abuse, womanhood, victim, body, drama, stage

In recent years, women playwrights have reconstructed abuse narratives by not focusing on the act itself, but on the agency of the female protagonist, as Lynn Nottage does in her *magnum opus*, *Ruined*. Her play subverts the traditional depiction of the victim and the assailant, and generates larger discussions about gender inequality, aimed at sparking social change.

Early on, the history of American theatre played a significant role in trying to understand the political, social and cultural reality that shaped the artistry of Lynn Nottage. However, many studies lacked sufficient focus on women playwrights, an absence filled by Carolyn Casey Craig's *Women Pulitzer Playwrights: Biographical Profiles and Analyses of Plays* (2004). Her book

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contains rich profiles on thirteen women who won the coveted Pulitzer Prize for Drama, as well as snippets of history that contextualizes their work. This article also relies on feminist theory and criticism in connection with abuse. For instance, in her the essay, “Women and Everyday Spaces,” Gillian Rose introduces the link between environment and abuse. This concept led to a reinterpretation of the visual component in the play in terms of staging. All these aspects have contributed to a better understanding of abuse, its impact on the victim, and stressed the importance of having it performed on stage and witnessed by an audience.

The structure of this article follows the main aspects of drama: the playwright, the protagonist, the antagonist and the staging. It begins with the topic of gender and abuse in society, followed by an in-depth exploration of Lynn Nottage concerning her views on writing, her creative aims, and the relationship between her work and her audience. Then the attention shifts to the three protagonists, Mama Nadi, Sophie, and Salima. These narratives force the viewer to consider the topic of abuse from the victim’s perspective, to question the morale of their own reality and whether enough is done to protect the defenseless. Lastly, the conversation moves to the importance of the environment and its link to the abusers’ actions. The stage represents a limited space designed to fulfill the visual requirements of the story’s context and integrate the viewers into that specific world, so in *Ruined*, the stage becomes a place of transgression, an extension of the victims’ bodies, which provokes the viewer to consider the gendered public or private space in a different manner.

Women and their bodies have often been under attack. Whether physical, sexual, financial or emotional, domestic or done by complete strangers, abuse represents an ongoing struggle for women. In everyday life, both public and private spaces serve as an extension of inequality. Gillian Rose comments on this issue and describes how “sexual attacks warn women every day that their

bodies are not meant to be in certain spaces” (362). She suggests that space represents a contested area in which the female body cannot exist without unwanted attention or aggression. The fear of being abused in public places is a legitimate concern for many women. Unfortunately, private spaces are not safe either. On the contrary, domestic violence remains an incredibly widespread phenomenon. Renowned feminist Gloria Steinem is quoted as saying that “the most dangerous place for an American woman is not in the street but in her home” (qtd. in Craig 211), a disturbing image which questions the traditional understanding of abuse. Additionally, in “Rape: On Coercion and Consent,” a piece which analyzes the social and psychological character of sexual abuse, Catharine A. MacKinnon claims that “rape is indigenous, not exceptional, to women’s social condition” (42). Usually, the assailant sees a woman’s gender as a clear invitation to violate the limits of her body. Thus, abuse is ubiquitous—a tragic situation resulted from the toxic relationship between genders, rooted in conservative ideas of power and conformist societal roles.

The heavy topic of abuse has gained momentum in modern American theatre, especially in the last two decades. Lynn Nottage achieved wider recognition and acclaim in 2008 with her Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Ruined*, in which she stresses that there is no universal right or wrong response to abuse. Not every woman sees herself as a victim, and not every woman can bear the pain of her memories. Her female characters are complex, and they own their stories and their voices. The spotlight falls on *them*, not on their assailants, which is quite uncommon for plays that deal with aggression. Moreover, their abused bodies represent grounds of trauma. The playwright allows the audience to witness the aftermath of abuse by having the victims’ bodies take over the stage. Lynn Nottage subverts the traditional depiction of the victim’s response to abuse. Her play also highlights the different facets of the transgressed female body, and by not relying on a

universal response to abuse, Nottage brings awareness to the fact that it represents a far more complicated phenomenon than it commonly appears in popular culture.

Lynn Nottage is known for her deep understanding of female struggle across history, and her desire to promote female empowerment and ideas of hope and social change. Recently, she made history when she became the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama twice: in 2009 for *Ruined*, in which she explores the lives of women caught in the middle of Congo's civil war, and in 2017 for *Sweat*, a play that mirrors the current American struggle in terms of gender, race, and social class. Lynn Nottage centers most of her work around the daily lives of women of color, addressing history in a delicate yet powerful manner. She creates characters who are defined not only by their race, but also by their inner strength and independent thought. Nottage has been vocal on issues surrounding female representation on the global stage, as she declares in an interview conducted by Jocelyn Buckner:

I think that my plays are trying to firmly place women of color, in particular women of diaspora in key historic moments so that we can reclaim history and therefore, reclaim ourselves in the present tense.... When I was growing up and reading the history books, I had a real sense of not having been thought of as a participant. It's as though women appeared suddenly and spontaneously in the 1960s. But we were present, and there's no sense of us having any kind of agency prior to the 1960s, with [some] notable exceptions.... You don't see everyday women.... My plays are about ordinary, extraordinary women. (183-184)

Nottage's work asserts a feminist identity, as she tries to depict snippets of the simple, yet difficult lives of women marginalized due to their race, gender or class, and who, despite not having played a leading role in history-making, are nonetheless worthy of admiration. By injecting these stories with a feeling of grandeur, she also confronts the secondary place that women, especially women of color, have been given in society. In a way, she becomes a spokeswoman for the ignored, the silenced, and the forgotten.

Sandra Shannon attributes Nottage's activism to her frequent travel around the world with Amnesty International, an opportunity that offered her the means to learn about global injustices and gave her the platform to bring those lessons to a wider audience (2). However, this does not mean that Nottage's career has been an easy one. For instance, despite her work receiving significant critical acclaim, *Ruined* failed to be directly produced on Broadway – it premiered in Chicago in 2008. Despite it having won the Pulitzer, Broadway producers only financed the play two years later, with Nottage condemning this situation in an interview with journalist and fellow playwright Winter Miller: “[w]hy can this play sweep all the awards and be as popular as it has been—it was extended seven times—and still not find its way to Broadway? I think gender and race play a large part.” It is a legitimate question, especially considering the lack of black female playwright representation in theatre. Less than 2% of all plays produced at the end of the twentieth century were written by African American women (Craig 279). This underrepresentation may result from the fear that a play written by a woman of any color, ethnicity or sexual inclination might not appeal to masses in the way a play written by a white male does, and thus, cause financial loss.

The title of her 2008 play, *Ruined*, is inspired by the lives of the Congolese women caught in the middle of the armed conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo that started in 1998 and

unofficially has continued to the present day. In this context, the term “ruined” strictly refers to the state of a woman’s womb and reproductive organs after she has been brutally raped, beaten and mutilated by soldiers. Between 2004 and 2005, Lynn Nottage traveled to East Africa to interview the women who survived gruesome attacks, and their accounts were jarring. Nottage recalls in great details the conversations they had about the physical damage they had suffered, accounts which may have a strong emotional impact on sensitive readers:

It made them pariahs in their own communities. In many cases, the women had been raped by foreign objects, and they had the area between their vagina and their anus torn and as a result they were leaking fluids. So when some of the women walked into the room you could smell them and know immediately what their history was. There was a great deal of self-consciousness, and they were really reluctant to talk about that. They felt as though there was nothing they could do about it. At least at the time, they didn’t have access to doctors that could sew them up. They felt, ‘This is a stigma that I’m going to have to carry forever.’ Hence the word ‘ruined.’ (qtd. in Fox 8)

Kate Whoriskey, Nottage’s close collaborator and one of her creative partners, expands on this idea. She describes the plight of the victims and talks about the relationship between war and rape as being “a way to strip women of their wombs. All but one of the women interviewed were raped by multiple men. The physical damage incurred was so great, that they were left without the ability to produce children” (Nottage, *Ruined* xi). Infertility leaves many victims feel inferior and a lot of them are even shamed by their families and sent away from home (Friedman 598). A situation like this is rarely discussed in art, let alone on stage. Nevertheless, Nottage creates a visceral portrait

of survival in the character of Mama Nadi, while also dealing with a complex combination of human states and emotions.

The action of the two-act play transpires in Mama Nadi's bar and brothel, near a small mining town situated halfway between the two opposing armies. It opens on the day that Christian, a traveling salesman and friend, begs her to offer shelter to Sophie and Salima, two women who were sexually abused by soldiers. She eventually agrees, even though Sophie cannot work as a prostitute because she is "ruined." For a while, the agreement goes well. Mama Nadi does her best to control her business and to please her customers, most of them soldiers from both the government army and the rebel one. Not long after, a confrontation between the two army leaders ensues in her bar and interrupts the peace. This tense moment that includes attempted rape, physical violence, chaotic movements and screams of pain, ends the moment Salima enters the stage, covered in blood from the waist down after having performed an abortion of the pregnancy that resulted from her previous rape. She condemns the soldiers for her plight before collapsing to the floor, dying. The scene abruptly ends, and the play fast-forwards to the last scene in an undisclosed near future, when Christian proposes marriage to Mama Nadi. She reveals that she is "ruined" and refuses him. However, his response to her revelation pleasantly surprises her, as he accepts and embraces her condition. The play ends with the audience gazing at the couple, who is dancing.

In *Ruined*, Lynn Nottage opts for a social message with a vision rooted in reality. Her style is defined by subtlety, delicacy, and simplicity. She also creates very rich and detailed storylines, with highly descriptive stage directions that offer a better understanding of the characters and the society they inhabit. From a more technical perspective, she tends to avoid risks. Occasionally, she includes juxtaposition of scenes in her plays, but she is extremely careful with those as well. Humor

appears just as rarely. Nonetheless, this restraint functions well with the topics she chooses to tackle in her plays, as she shows creativity in other ways, such as the manner in which she plays with the viewer's expectations or the unique orality of her characters' lines, with some even speaking a different language on stage. Moreover, she also uses music as a means of expression for her characters—Sophie, the bar's singer, chooses certain melodies which focus on the idea of liberation and happiness, with lyrics that Jennifer Scott Mobley describes as “offer[ing] a window into the character's emotions” (137).

Nottage relies on a visual and olfactory presentation of the aftereffects of violence to create a political statement. . Ann M. Fox observes the strong visual presence of some characters' physical disabilities, such as Sophie's limp or the instance when Josephine, another abused girl working for Mama Nadi, accidentally shows the disfiguring scar on her stomach for the first time, shocking the audience (9). Mama Nadi also makes an olfactory reference to Sophie's ailment, when she says “it smells like the rot of meat. So wash good” (Nottage 17), signaling to the audience the magnitude and seriousness of the girl's disability. For Barbara Ozieblo, the incredibly tense and chaotic moment that explodes on stage towards the end of the play teaches the audience “to recognize the unbearable, debilitating loss of sense of self that assault causes” (69). . The play does not create a spectacle around these bodies in pain, but appears instead to “[escalate] political awareness and to [mobilize] feminist activism for intervention” (Mobley 140). Lynn Nottage's play takes these ideas to an international platform and encourage her viewers to engage in social and political action in order to stop these cruel attacks against women and their bodies (Mobley 130).

Ruined takes place during a period of heavy armed conflict and it aims at depicting the sexualized dynamics of war in which “women's bodies became weapons” (594).. Of the group of

women chosen by Nottage as representative, Mama Nadi stands out as a particularly intriguing character. She is morally ambiguous; some critics even consider her “an anti-hero in the truest sense” (Mobley 131) for owning a bar and brothel which profits from the use of other women’s bodies. The opening scene, in which she tries to close a business transaction, also suggests that she has become desensitized by the practice, possibly because she has been involved in it for a long time. The nature of the dialogue gives the impression that she shows interest in buying products, but the scene soon reveals that she is actually purchasing women who have been either raped or “ruined,” to which she refers as “damaged goods” (Nottage 16). In her world, women’s abused bodies become products. However, the ethics of her business should be judged in the context of the country’s political turmoil. The women who were sexually abused by soldiers and shunned by their families had limited chances of survival, but by having these women under her tutelage, Mama Nadi can offer them protection from the rape, violence, and cruelty that poison the country. Her practical spirit and savvy business skills make her bar a safe haven. She does not shy away from showing authority and impose her rules even when dealing with high-ranking soldiers, as it becomes apparent during a short moment she shares with Osembenga, the leader of the current government:

Osembenga: Do you know who I am?

Mama: I’m afraid you must edify me, and then forgive me, if it makes absolutely no difference. Once you step through my door, then you’re in my house. And I make the rules here. (Nottage 42)

Osembenga's question underlines his arrogance, while Mama Nadi's reply shows her strong character and persuasive nature. She expresses dominion over her business in a very direct yet calm manner so as not to incite violent responses from her customers, especially one as cruel and unpredictable as Osembenga. Mama Nadi wants her bar to be a space where the inhumane laws of war are suspended. Unfortunately, her efforts to maintain pacifism sometimes fail. There are times when soldiers become emotional, possessive, and violent, but even then, she always tries to protect her space (Nottage 61, 84). She does not want her bar to become just another chaotic war zone.

Her backstory, including the fact that she herself is "ruined," is unveiled only at the end of the play. Before that, she mentions an event in her youth when her father's land and fortune were confiscated by the government, which impoverished the family. Mama Nadi learned that in order to survive, she had to be self-sufficient. She prevented the scenario from repeating itself, as she herself puts it: "I don't want someone to turn up at my door, and take my life from me. Not ever again" (Nottage 27). Seeing her family crumble forced her to reinvent herself. In one of her most powerful monologues, she states: "I didn't come here as Mama Nadi, I found her the same way miners find their wealth in the muck. I turned a basket of sweets and soggy biscuits into a business. I don't give a damn what any of you think. This is my place, Mama Nadi's" (Nottage 86). Her business becomes her refuge, as well as the proof of her rebirth, and she constantly fights to protect it. Mama Nadi also refuses to enter a heteronormative relationship out of fear that it would cripple her independence, as seen in her replies to her customer's comments such as "I don't need a man to give me anything" (Nottage 44). Furthermore, the sexual attack that left her damaged also seems to have changed her attitudes towards romance. Now in her early forties, she is extremely cynical and emotionally unavailable. Her friendly relationship with Christian, a traveling salesman, slowly turns into romance, but she initially resists it because she doubts that he would accept her condition.

In a moment of complete vulnerability, she confesses to him that she is “ruined” and thus cannot fulfill the traditional role of the wife. To her surprise, Christian does not insult her. He accepts her and the play ends with the two dancing while wrapped in a loving embrace. Although at first glance the ending seems overly emotional or too romanticized, the happy ending fits with Mama Nadi’s character arc. Her storyline does not focus on her abuse; she does not offer details about the sexual assault or about the pain she experienced. Instead, the focus of her character arc falls on the aftermath of the abuse in terms of mental and emotional health. Mama Nadi’s choice was to relinquish the stigma of the helpless victim and to reinvent herself in order to survive in a hostile world. However, this reinvention comes with a price: emotional unavailability. Allowing herself to trust and love someone represents the one element missing in her healing.

In many ways, Sophie’s storyline mirrors Mama Nadi’s. She arrives at the brothel after the “militia did ungodly things to [her], took her with ... a bayonet and then left her for dead” (Nottage 13). Due to her condition, she cannot work as a prostitute, but Mama Nadi hires her to sing and help at the bar. Every day Sophie’s body is put on display and she is verbally, and sometimes even physically, harassed by soldiers when she refuses to have intercourse with them (Nottage 21-22, 82-83). Her movements and her singing betray her pain. The songs she frequently chooses revolve around the theme of freedom and they become a form of therapy: “[w]hile I’m singing, I’m praying the pain will be gone, but what those men did to me lives inside my body. Every step I take I feel them in me. Punishing me. And it will be that way for the rest of my life” (Nottage 32). Her body remains a permanent reminder of the torturous event she experienced, and the stigma of being a damaged woman seems irreversible. Because Mama Nadi sees herself in her pain, she tries to help her financially with a reconstructive surgery that recently became available in the country. Due to unforeseen circumstances, the plan backfires, and Sophie remains disabled. The play closes with

her watching Mama Nadi and Christian dance, her damaged body on display in front of the audience. This moment forces the viewer to understand that no two stories of abuse are the same (Fox 12); Mama Nadi found her happiness, but Sophie's future remains uncertain. Moreover, her presence on stage also points to Nottage's activism, as it draws attention to the crisis of many women caught in war zones who do not have the access or the possibility of receiving medical care.

The last significant character of the play is Salima, a young woman who arrives at the bar in the first scene of the play, together with Sophie. Unlike her, Salima is not "ruined," so Mama Nadi hires her to work as a prostitute, a job she despises. Out of the three main stories of abuse, hers is the most detailed. In one of her monologues, she discusses the way in which her sexual abuse began, with four soldiers who attacked her and killed her baby. On that morning they also kidnapped Salima:

They took me through the bush – raiding thieves.... 'She is for everyone, soup to be had before dinner,' that is what someone said. They tied me to a tree by my foot, and the men came whenever they wanted soup. I make fires, I cook food, I listen to their stupid songs, I carry bullets, I clean wounds, I wash blood from their clothing, and, and, and ... I lay there as they tore me to pieces, until I was raw...five months. Five months. Chained like a goat...Still I close my eyes and I see such terrible things. Things I cannot stand to have in my head. How can men be this way? (Nottage 69)

To her assailants, Salima symbolized another conquered terrain, a common casualty of the war. Following the attack, her family banished her, and her husband even beat her for dishonoring them

(Nottage 70). As a result of victim-blaming, Salima constantly ponders that horrible day, torturing herself with questions and thoughts which convince her that she shares part of the culpability involving the murder of her daughter. The fact that she needs to prostitute herself in order to survive exacerbates her trauma. She is also quite sensitive and meek, for a nature that makes her particularly vulnerable to the rough clients that come to the brothel, whose “hands are so full of rage that it hurts to be touched” (Nottage 70). In a sense, her freedom does not exist. The sexual abuse has left her with no family, despised by everyone in her community, and she cannot leave out of fear of being raped again.

Salima’s downward spiral continues when she realizes that she is pregnant as a result of her five-month captivity. Her husband, Fortune, also arrives at the bar wishing to see his wife and bring her back. Salima suspects that her pregnancy will result in her disappointing him again, so she refuses to meet him. However, Fortune remains unrelenting in his efforts, and after days of receiving the same response from Mama Nadi, he causes extreme commotion towards the end of the play, which includes theft, physical violence, attempted rape, and one death—Salima’s. She enters the stage at the peak of the scene’s tension, “as if in a trance. A pool of blood forms in the middle of her dress, blood drips down her legs” (Nottage 94), after having performed an abortion on her late pregnancy. The image of her covered in blood while defiantly screaming “For the love of God, stop this! Haven’t you done enough to us. Enough! Enough!.... You will not fight your battles on my body any more” (Nottage 94) shocks everybody. She smiles and embraces death as she collapses in Fortune’s arms. With most of her story being read as the epitome of tragedy, her demise could be read in a similar fashion. However, her death represents more than that. It becomes her moment of complete freedom and control, of regaining the right to her body. Salima’s life had been defined by another man’s action on her body, but she did not allow for her death to be the

same. Her story represents a detailed and tragic example of a woman who finds no escape except death from the burden of sexual assault that encumbers her existence.

Traditional depictions of abuse include a certain type of relationship between the abuser and the abused, with the former usually being a complete stranger who transgresses the victim's personal space. The abuser also tends not to have any redeeming qualities. His personality is defined only by his terrible act. Lynn Nottage adopts the main aspects of this scenario in her play, with more reliance on a group of abusers rather than an individual. The abusers in *Ruined* are mostly complete strangers without any backstory and do not have concrete motivations for their actions. However, the setting alone offers enough explanation: a war-torn Democratic Republic of Congo, a time when most soldiers act cruelly and few women are safe. Usually, these types of narratives highlight the spectacle of brutality as seen through the eyes of the male soldiers, but in *Ruined*, Lynn Nottage reverses the trope and chooses to depict war indirectly, using the devastating experiences of women who do not participate in the battles, but whose lives are nonetheless affected by the armed conflict. In this story, female characters are individualized, each presenting unique traits, while the abusers belong to a collective. Jennifer Scott Mobley describes the antagonists as "somewhat interchangeable" (133) because there is indeed little to no difference between the soldiers, or even between the leaders of the two armies. In addition, most of their wrongdoings, such as physical and sexual abuse, are kept off-stage. Similarly, the horrid actions of the victims' families, who punish, harm and banish the abused women, are not shown, but only described in heartbreaking monologues. The viewer follows the aftermath of their actions by listening to the main female characters reflect on their abuse and trying to overcome it.

Space plays an important role as well. A large portion of the story takes place in Mama Nadi's bar, an oasis of calm in a country crippled by fear and violence. For her, as well as for her

workers, the place serves as a home, not only a business. According to the stage directions, it holds “makeshift furniture and a rundown pool table. A lot of effort has gone into making the worn bar cheerful” (Nottage 5). Commonly, the bar and the brothel represent masculine spaces, but these staging details, along with activities such as having Sophie sing to customers indicate Mama Nadi’s struggle to make the space more feminine. This combination of the masculine and the feminine might not work in other circumstances, but in this context, it is one of the few ways in which the protagonist asserts her influence over a space. Jeff Paden argues that her bar temporarily suspends the bloodshed of the war as she tries to please and entertain the soldiers in both armies, and at the same time the space also serves as a safe environment for the women who work for her (152). However, oftentimes soldiers undermine her authority, and on one occasion they even attack her in her bar. The climax of the play transforms the set into “a contested space” (Paden 153), in a scene which shows the difficulty of keeping even one intact feminine site amid a mostly masculine armed conflict.

By focusing on one setting only, as well as on the aftermath of abuse and the ongoing misogyny of the war, Lynn Nottage highlights the tragedy and the absurdity of the entire situation. Women’s bodies are attacked, used, and mistreated on a daily basis. The abusers target them only because they perceive their gender as invitations for sexual intercourse, which usually happens without the woman’s consent. Without a higher authority to punish the abusers, the violated female body has to bear the weight of the crimes. Oftentimes, the victims are punished for being violated because certain societies view their bodies as tainted, and thus not worthy. Even though they are blameless, they have to endure the judgements of their communities and confront stereotypes about their alleged crippled and grotesque womanhood. They become branded as seductresses and have to leave their homes and settle in other spaces as in the case of Sophie and Salima, or they have to

rebuild their destroyed space exemplified by Mama Nadi and her bar. Either way, they are at a disadvantage. Nonetheless, they all remain the agents in their stories, and the audience accompanies them on their journeys, whether that implies dealing with trauma or spiraling into madness. The core idea of this play is to show that there is no universal story of abuse and no perfect reaction to aggression. Instead, it asserts that every response of the attacked individuals remains valid.

Women's bodies and spaces have suffered and endured many transgressions, but the conventional depiction of abuse often sees the victim as the bland casualty, with overall little interest in the aftermath of the aggression. However, modern American theatre has changed this perception. In *Ruined*, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Lynn Nottage has created unique and captivating female characters that do not conform to traditional notions of victimhood. Mama Nadi completely reinvents herself and embraces her disability. Although more sensitive, Sophie seems to head in a similar direction, while Salima tragically ends her own life in an effort to escape the stigma. Nottage understands the transformative power of art. She generates cultural change in contemporary society by putting the spotlight on the abused characters and how they deal with their trauma while still living in a hostile space. Stories like *Ruined* highlight the significance of openness in the aftermath of abuse, criticize traditional depictions of masculinity and femininity, and push towards new perspectives.

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