

Form, Technique And Existential Problems In The Play *Ruined*

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Self-belief usually results in success and triumph. If someone believes the way they think regarding themselves, then their life would inevitably start to change the roots to their thought process. When people are defining anything like life, they affirm that there is a definite hope to appreciate life instead of destroying it. Affirmation can reinforce positivity and encourage with a developing sense that they are gifted with many skills which will be useful for them at some point. Lynn Nottage is well known for the part she has played in the lives of African women with her writings. She narrates the tales of rare human disasters in *Ruined*. She wrote for Congolese women as it helped them rise again, provided them with a belief and a sense of self-confidence that they are gifted with many skills that they can still use to change their lives. Nottage wanted to converse with an audience who may be oblivious to the situation of Congolese women or the ones who did not feel compelled to act against the

present situation of the Democratic Republic of Congo. She interviewed Congolese women and documented them. Initially, she had plans of following the Brechtian concept for her play, but then she decided to drop the plan because she thought that its didactic and agitprop demands would diffuse the political action that was demanded as an outcome of the play. She believed that people react more out of emotions than when they are preached or told what to do. The play *Ruined* has a principled interest as Nottage's strategy was to instigate political activism through the play's realistic form.

Realism concentrates on human behaviour, and it pays attention to the life, motives and reactions of the ordinary people. This is the primary concern of this realistic form of theatre. Thus, realistic form of drama is a mirror that is put up on the stage to demonstrate the realities of life to the audience (*Hartnoll 2003*).

The theatre of realism usually bestows monologues and asides. As such, it represents the everyday conversation that ordinary people have with themselves and with people around them. It resides on the plainness of speech that may seem ordinary, but in a real sense, it is very revealing in nature, especially when embedded with relevant actions and the theatrical subtext of the play (*Benedetti 2012*). The sets of realistic plays revoke typical cities, towns, villages, workplaces, and homes. Since this kind of a play is an accurate depiction of the life of an ordinary man; the settings also reflect the culture, tradition, and society where ordinary people live. The audience can easily relate themselves with these kinds of settings. So, the plays become more relevant and acceptable to them. The realistic settings add power to these plays. An intense drama performed over an everyday foundation is more acceptable to the audiences (*Benedetti 2005*).

The play is polemical in its intent to call more extensive attention to a world where women's bodies have become the battleground, with rape and other atrocious abuses being used as a weapon of war to destroy the enemies. Nottage and Kate Whoriskey, who also directed the playwright's *Fabulations*, have not resorted to Agitprop theatre.

The action of the play *Ruined* takes place at Mama Nadi's bar and brothel in a small mining town in the Ituri forest of the Democratic Republic of Congo. She offers food, drink and sexual pleasures to men in her brothel. Almost ten women work at Nadi's brothel, and these women make this choice for themselves to earn their livelihood. The play adopts the form and techniques of realistic theatre. Realistic play generally attempts to represent the subject matter in its most natural form avoiding unrealistic, supernatural, and exotic elements (Styan 1981). *Ruined* is about African women who were sexually abused and ostracized from society but are still trying to survive in all circumstances, and their struggle is giving them fruits out of worst situations. The play majorly focuses on the people who are acting as protagonists, including Mama Nadi, Sophie, Salima and Christian who would be travelling to the salesman. There was tension prevailing outside, but the brothel was considered to be an ideal place where the actual human conversations would take place. The essential affirmation about life would be the philosophical concept that is portrayed in the play and is entirely related to the concept of nihilism, which was propagated by Friedrich Nietzsche. From the psychological and existential perspective, the play talks about life and leaves a new ray of hope for the people who are disheartened with their lives to lead a happy one.

As per the existentialist thought by Jean-Paul Sartre, man is brought into the world, leaving a kind of gap in their lives. He has the choice to stay on this planet and lead a passive and happy life that exists for him. However, it is up to the man to get out of the passive

situations and gain more consciousness about himself. The energy that is produced in the process of gaining awareness about himself would help him to evolve as a better person and learn more about himself. By learning about the significance of choices, the person can give the actual meaning of living in this world.

The characters that are sketched in the play, especially the characters that take the lion's share are Mama Nadi, Salima and Sophie who portray the theory of existentialism. Nottage has precisely portrayed the choices made by Mama Nadi and the young women who live in the brothel. Mama Nadi was initially portrayed as a shrewd woman who was interested only in material gains however the decision of running a brothel and living at a place surrounded by danger was her choice of taking charge of her life. Sophie, whose life was utterly ruined, had no choice but to live with Mama Nadi to survive in the war struck zone of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Salima's death was questionable from various point of views. Salima's decision of refusing to go back to her house with her husband made the play more realistic by portraying the internal conflict in Salima's heart. She was aware of the fact that she would not be accepted in the family if she gives birth to a baby girl. They would also have to go through the same hardships and ultimately, she would either be raped and killed or would turn up working at a brothel like her mother, Salima. It is here that Salima takes charge of her life and considers it better to commit suicide than allowing men to fight battles over her body.

When the play comes to an end, Mama Nadi is revealed as a character who was ruined ages ago and contrary to the earlier beliefs, she is a woman who safeguards the girls in the brothel. Moreover, she would let them build their own identity. She makes sure to settle everyone's life and ultimately settle for the love of Christian. Despite the efficacy of

Nottage's strategy, there is a disparity between the realistic subject matter and its anodyne conclusion. Mama Nadi's departure from the role of Mother Courage, and accepting the smuggler, Christian, as her love interest shows that Nottage succumbs to a desire to portray hope and happiness which she has projected as unlikely by portraying Christian's success in wooing Mama Nadi. The ending of the play seems to be a trivial and cuddly one to an otherwise heart wrenching, resonating play. By focussing on the union of Christian and Mama Nadi, one tends to overlook the presence of Sophie who is at the periphery. In Manhattan Club's production, Sophie and Josephine were shown as the symbols of the heteronormative familial resolution. The two girls looked at Mama and Christian's union with hope and happiness. Sophie looks hopeful, but she remains ruined. The play rendered hope and love, intertwined and overlapped with uncertainty. The irresolution and uncertainty make the spectators consider ways to act on behalf of the Congolese women like Mama Nadi, Salima, and Sophie. In *National Post*, Rober Cushman wrote: "In *Ruined*, form and content are at war, and content wins" (T07). The implication that the play surrenders to the demands of realism for a dance-back-into society denouncement dismissed how Lynn Nottage harnessed the form for her political aims but also dismissed the potential of realistic plays to efficiently stage human rights violations.

Nottage's approach to the play is conflicted. It is an old fashioned drama with an uncomfortable conventional subject. She holds the audience with her conventionally structured plot which was purposely supplied with sympathetic characters and relevant, informative details. Her artistic caution, in the real sense, sanitised rather than highlighted the condition of war-struck Congo. However, by manipulating the form, she achieves the activist agenda by drawing attention to the act of viewing itself.

Realism maintains a strict boundary between the performers and the audience. However, the use of songs and scenes of violence propose that the playwright made an effort to instigate political action by disrupting the boundary between the spectators and the performers. Thus, it can be said that there is hybridity of form in the play *Ruined*. Nottage chose this hybridity to root in her ethnographic dramaturgy.

In Act One, scene two, Sophie and Salima are depicted as adjusting to the lifestyle of the brothel. Sophie is shown as singing an “upbeat dance song, accompanied by a guitar and drums” (Nottage 20). The song’s upbeat tempo seems antithetical to the tension within the bar. Such songs mark the hybridity of form since, on the one hand, it points out to the violence against women, and on the other hand, it comments on the spectator’s ability to witness such cruelty and violence without taking action against it. The modern-day theatre has lit stages and a darkened auditorium because of which there is hypervisibility of the performer onstage. The play uses this element of realism to allow the spectators to look at the images of pained bodies without demanding the kind of action that the image demands. The pained bodies assemble activist agenda whereas the songs question the privileged gaze of the spectators. It seems that the play intends to expose and instigate rather than conciliate. The hypervisibility of the wounds and the physical ramifications of the war points out at the repeated confrontations with it which helps Nottage to mobilise political action in response to the pain.

The ramifications of sexual violence which were portrayed remained distant because the act of violence was not staged, it remained unseen. However, towards the end, Mama’s brothel turns into a contested space. When Osembenga’s violence, Josephine’s rape, and Salima’s suicide is staged, the spectators are turned into sympathisers of the survivors of

these brutal crimes. More complexly, Nottage configures the spectators as co-conspirators in the socioeconomic underpinnings of the civil war of Congo. Subtly, Nottage makes Salima's declaration, "You will not fight your battles on my body anymore" (94) and her death a way to directly communicate with the audience. As a result, the performer gives up on the realism protocol by acknowledging the presence of the spectator by which the most fiercely fortified element, the fourth wall is breached and the spectator's wish to remain unseen dissipate, making them self reflexive. This self-reflexivity makes Nottage's activist intentions firmer and weakening the spectators' ability to remain politically inert after witnessing such horror on the stage. As a result, Salima's death serves as the climax of the play because violence is shown starkly by Nottage and she further negotiates the limits of realism.

Though the play is filled with tragic situations and sufferings of humans and social evils, the human stories that are added with a tinge of humour would convey better to the audience. Despite the loss, still, there would be a ray of hope that would boost their lives. There would be new sunshine every day which brings in new hopes, new days and new ways to lead a life and sustain.

Lynn Nottage represents the potential strategies of showcasing violence on the international stage to make the audience aware of the situation of Congo and to ally with the survivors of war. Nottage renegotiates the form by expanding the capacity of realism to present the atrocities of war hurled upon women. Nottage makes sure that the victims of the war remain visible rather than forgotten.

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