

# “Unspeakable Suffering”: Women’s Experience of Trauma in Lynn Nottage’s *Ruined*

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**Abstract**—Lynn Nottage's *Ruined*, a Pulitzer Prize play, tackles the plight of women’s survival during the civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The play is a loud scream for the whole world to view the physical violence of women and hear their traumatic memories, hoping that this attempt might save them from their disastrous lives resulting from the brutalities of civil war. In this play, women are portrayed beyond victims of the political and armed conflicts as they serve as a reflection of a serious issue that threatens the human race in general: the continuing dehumanization whereby women are considered minorities and the “others,” even within their own society. By applying a critical analysis technique, the current paper aims to shed light on women’s experience of their violated bodies and their unspeakable suffering in the context of their trauma.

**Index Terms**—Congo, Lynn Nottage, memory, *Ruined*, trauma, violent rape, women

## I. INTRODUCTION

In her play *Ruined* (2009), the award-winning African American playwright Lynn Nottage uncovers the ugly and unspeakable reality of the hideous crimes committed against the people of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), particularly against women. Notoriously, Congolese women became both the war weapons as well as the victims of rape and sexual violence during the long and brutal civil war. They were drastically crushed under diverse armed, political, social, tribal forces and even UN Peacekeepers that stripped them from the basic essence of existence as human beings. Women’s violent rape occurs massively, and they were taken as sex slaves for Congolese rebels and governmental army. Moreover, these victimized and wounded women were harshly shunned and stigmatized by their own community and families who rejected them and even failed to offer any assistance or support. They were mercilessly outcast and left alone to face their vague destiny. They helplessly survived within their own unparalleled physical bodily damage, untreated trauma, as well as social and economic hardships.

Described as “the rape capital of the world,” the DRC is considered the worst place to live in (Tramboo and Khanna, 2015, p.193). According to the UN, over 200,000 women and

girls have been violently raped; in 2008, around 15,996 rape cases were reported, and two out of every three were children. The co-director of AIDS-Free World, Stephen Lewis, says, “there is no precedent for the insensate brutality of the war on women in Congo. The world has never dealt with such a twisted and blistering phenomenon” (Wakabi, 2008, p. 15). DRC’s rich natural resources of precious minerals, such as coltan, diamond, and gold, became problematic and resulted in the killings of the villagers by different militias. The militias’ aggression to control the mineral assets, which opened the door for the global marketplace, has grossly overlapped with the violation of human rights and genocidal ethnic violence in Congo. Amnesty International (AI) cites cases of collective rape in which up to twenty attackers may partake in a single rape incident (2004a). AI emphasizes that rape as an effective weapon of war is “a deliberate strategy of warfare to destabilise the opposition forces ... and to secure control through fear and intimidation” (2004b). Nonetheless, when assailants rape individual women or girls, they attack the entire society. In this regard, Clarkson (2004, p. 17) considers violent rapes as intended vulgar actions to destroy communities at large: “As a weapon of war, sexual violence is highly effective. The outcome is a traumatized, impoverished population”.

Owing to cultural and tribal beliefs, a raped woman is regarded a curse whereby the “whole family is deeply shamed by association” (Pratt and Werchick, 2004, p. 12). However, these conventions have no genuine concern or consideration for women’s feelings and devastated souls. No significant attention has been paid as to how rape can psychologically destroy its victims, causing a severe depression or post-traumatic stress disorder to the extent that some victims refuse to articulate their tragic experience (Kern, 2006). In a chaotic political climate, the sexual assault directed toward Congolese women became not only “a tool to humiliate the women or to degrade the opposing side’s masculinity; [it is] a way to strip women of their wombs” (Whoriskey, introduction to *Ruined*, p. x.). Such brutal method affects the society at large, leading to the annihilation of its communal structure.

Various studies in the field of trauma investigate the indelible effect of traumatic experience that leaves people defenseless and in a continuous struggle to retrieve their memories in a

bearable form. These studies show that those who survive the trauma have altered psychological and physical views toward life as they change their perceptions of self, reality, beliefs, and feelings. The psychologist Judith Lewis Herman (1992, p. 34) observes that the kind of disintegration resulting from traumatic experience “tears apart a complex system of self-protection that normally functions in an integrated fashion.” Herman further argues that “Traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death. They confront human beings with the extremities of helplessness and terror and evoke the responses of catastrophe” (p. 44).

Nevertheless, Herman and other leading figures in the field of trauma, such as Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, Shoshana Felman, and Dori Laub concentrated on the importance of articulating the experience of suffering as being a very crucial step in the healing process. Hartman suggests that verbalization “remains a basis for making the wound perceivable and the silence audible” (Hartman, 2003, p. 259). Those psychologists propose that literature “could be viewed as a talking cure to a higher degree” (Hartman, 2003, p. 259). Pioneering in the field of trauma, Cathy Caruth (1996, p. 3) argues that we can increase the understanding of literature through an analysis of traumatic experience by stating that “literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing.”

Cathy Caruth (1996, p. 91) provides a general definition of trauma as “the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena.” Caruth also suggests that all traumatic events have a “moving and sorrowful voice that cries out, a voice that is released ... through the wound” (p. 2). This voice “witnesses a truth that [the survivors] cannot fully know” (p.3). If survivors cannot fully comprehend the traumatic causes and results and cannot loudly verbalize their own feelings, the writers, such as Lynn Nottage, act as their articulated voice and dialectically present the unknown to be known by all. Nottage in her play *Ruined*, focuses on the crises of women in a marginalized region (Congo), where the only information provided about that country is the crimes committed by militias on civilians and which is mentioned statistically in media. Therefore, human beings in that country are merely seen as a number with no actual significance..

## II. LYNN NOTTAGE AND THE AFRICAN WOMEN’S ISSUES

Assigned by AI as the press officer, Nottage achieved a clear perception of the issues related to African women and studied them within the context of the African civil war. These issues include the oppression of women, violent rape, human right violation, and patriarchy. Feeling their pain, Nottage decided to do something to help the women in that area. In an interview, she mentioned the following: “I cannot bear to live in a world where such horrific things are happening to my African sisters without doing whatever I can to help them... Our silence on this issue sends a message to the Congolese government that it can

continue to rape the land and its people with impunity” (Nottage, 2012). Hartman states his belief in the power of literature to represent the unspeakable: “as a specific literary endeavour, trauma study in the arts explores the relation of words and wounds;” that “its main focus is on words that wound, and presumably can be healed, if at all, by further words” (Hartman, 2003, p. 259).

Nottage and Hartman share this view, strongly believing in the power of theater to create a change and raise a kind of public awareness as well as “bring an end to the scourge” by confirming that

The power of the theatre is that it can peel back layers of emotion to reveal human truths that often get lost in clinical human rights reports and detached news stories. In many societies, you’ll find that theater is at the vanguard of change. The communal nature of the medium allows us to explore difficult and troubling subject matters that ultimately lead to some form of collective catharsis for the audience. (Nottage, 2012).

In summer 2004, Nottage visited the Congolese refugee camps in Uganda and listened attentively to the Congolese women’s painful stories as the latter narrated their incredible sufferings from the hands of the soldiers and rebels who violently raped and tortured them physically and psychologically. Inspired by their true and agonizing stories, Nottage, therefore, brought into the theater a play that reflects the horrible truth of these ignored women. Her play *Ruined* has stories that “don’t often find their way into the mainstream media” (Nottage, 2012); these stories are narrated beyond the grim statistics of wartime violent rape. The play addresses the crisis of the Congolese women who are horribly suffering from sexual violence and dehumanization. In *Ruined*, Nottage projects the “innermost thoughts of marginal characters whose voices remain muted and whose stories have been deemed irrelevant by those around them who wield more power” (Shannon, 2007, p. 187); indeed, the play displays an intense awareness of their plight.

Based on interviewing raped victims who hardly survive the brutal war, Nottage was shocked by the extent of damage in their bodies. She writes,

When I began interviewing the women I was really surprised by the extent to which they had been physically damaged. We know that there was emotional damage, and psychological damage, but the thing that was hardest for them ... was the physical damage. It made them pariah in their own communities (Cruz, 2010, p.27).

In her portrayal of the abuse of the female body, Nottage depicts the consequences of war from a woman’s perspective. She wants to offer an effectual voice for the African women living in the shadow of war by narrating a story of war through the eyes of women who inescapably found themselves in the middle of armed conflicts and who are left fragmented by their abusers and by their own families.

### III. CONGOLESE WOMEN “CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE OF MEN’S WAR”

*Ruined* is a play that concentrates on traumatized experiences by four women who find refuge and work at Mama Nadi’s brothel/bar in the turbulent mineral area of Eastern Congo. The play starts with a travelling salesman, Christian, who attempts to convince Mama Nadi to buy new women, Sophie and Salima, and let them work in her brothel as the latter is the only means of their survival. These women are dehumanized and degraded by being sold as commodities, with no concern for their dignity and plight. They have been dealt with as worthless effects, with their humanity totally erased. In the brothel, the abused women who are invisibilized and packaged as men’s entertainment give access to strange men by selling their bodies and sexuality. Ironically, the brothel becomes increasingly secure and the only shelter for these women as a contrast to the awful and miserable life outside it where women are left highly vulnerable to sexual assaults.

Mama Nadi, a shrewd, an exploiter, and an attractive forty-year old woman is a brothel keeper and bar owner. With a profound mastery of duplicity, she runs a profitable business from war by exploiting customers from both sides of the civil war. She presents entertainment services to both governmental soldiers and rebels. For her, money matters, regardless of loyalty to any group. Ironically, Mama Nadi lives off the exploitation of “ruined” girls; she is “exploiting them, but in a twisted way, she’s able to nurture them and keep them alive” (Gener, 2009, p. 21). She clearly declares that her place is not for charity: “I’m sorry, but I’m running a business not a mission” (Nottage, 2009, p. 14). Therefore, “Mama Nadi is deliberately morally ambiguous. She does things that shock the audience. But in the end, they understand her, and that she has to do what she does to survive” (Iqbal, 2010). Throughout the play, she does not appear as a totally unethical figure; instead, she possesses contradictory features as being both sympathetic and ferocious (García, 2012).

Mama Nadi’s brothel is the only place where the expelled and desperate women survive as prostitutes; at the same time, the place offers safety and “some kind of dignity that is not available outside” that place (García, 2019, p. 133). If these women remain outside, they would be prey to militias who would rape them violently, constantly, and occasionally murder them. As Mama Nadi claims, “My girls, ask them, Emilene, Mazima, Josephine, ask them, they’d rather be here, any day, than back out there in their villages where they are taken without regard. They’re safer with me, than in their own homes” (Nottage, 2009, p. 57).

The female body is represented in Nottage’s play as a weapon and a conflict territory that both the soldiers and the rebels fight to conquer and colonise. The female body is the prize and price of the winner and loser as both want to undermine each other. Patricia Hynes (2004, p.441) notices that

Of all who suffer the trauma of war, women and girls pay the highest price for the military culture and war environment that prepares and inures men to kill and exploit humans—no matter the age, gender, and civilian status—and that cordons off a zone of tolerance for sexual exploitation of women and girls around military

bases, during armed conflict and in post-conflict peacekeeping and occupation sites.

Accordingly, the female body in war becomes the main target for the conflicting powers that use it as an effective means to achieve their aims.

### IV. BATTLES ON WOMEN’S BODIES

The women as portrayed in this play are “doubly victimized—sexually assaulted and impregnated or left unable to reproduce . . . they [also] must endure shaming by male members of their families and communities, who perceive the violation of ‘their’ women as another form of defeat” (Friedman, 2010, p. 597). As now one of Mama Nadi’s “girls,” Salima is a married woman. She is abducted from her village by rebels and turned into a sex slave.

CHRISTIAN. Salima is from a tiny village. No place really. She was captured by rebel soldiers, Mayi-mayi; the poor thing spent nearly five months in the bush as their concubine.

MAMA. And what of her people?

CHRISTIAN. She says her husband is a farmer, and from what I understand, her village won’t have her back. Because . . . But she’s a simple girl, she doesn’t have much learning, I wouldn’t worry about her. (Nottage, 2009, p.12)

The traumatic experience and the shame she feels haunt her along with the cries of her baby girl who is killed by the rebels. She painfully and reluctantly recalls her traumatic sexual experience caused by the rebels who kidnapped and repeatedly raped her. They have violated and stolen her body and treated it as their own commodity:

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. These men fighting . . . fighting for our liberation. 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, 2009, p.46)

Salima escaped and made her way back to her village. She is persecuted and shunned by the villagers and even by her husband. She is blamed for a crime she has not committed but only because tribal traditions are stronger than all human considerations. She grieves at the lack of familial understanding, saying,

SALIMA. I walked into the family compound expecting wide open arms. An embrace. Five months, suffering. I suffered every single second of it. And my family gave me the back of their heads. And he, the man I loved since

I was fourteen, chased me away with a green switch. He beat my ankles raw. And I dishonored him? I dishonored him?! Where was he? Buying a pot? He was too proud to bear my shame ... but not proud enough to protect me from it. (Nottage, 2009, p. 46-47)

Salima's pain is so unbearable and unshareable that she becomes rootless with no home, no past, and no definite future. This condition is explicable as the psychologist Dori Laub argues that "the traumatic event, although real, [takes] place outside the parameters of 'normal' reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time." The trauma thus leads Salima to feel that the event "has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after" (Laub, 1992, p. 69). Finding herself in a position with few or no options, Salima desperately surrenders to becoming a prostitute at Mama Nadi's brothel. In return, she is provided with basic life necessities, such as a bed, clothes, food, as well as a possible safe place to live in.

In a conversation with Sophia, Salima recalls the events which turned into nightmares and flashbacks, haunting her and bringing her to this brothel:

It was such a clear and open sky. This splendid bird, a peacock, had come into the garden to taunt me, and was showing off its feathers. I stooped down and called to the bird. "Wssht, Wssht." And I felt a shadow cut across my back, and when I stood four men were there over me, smiling, wicked schoolboy smiles. "Yes?" I said. And the tall soldier slammed the butt of his gun into my cheek. Just like that. It was so quick, I didn't even know I'd fallen to the ground. Where did they come from? How could I not have heard them?... One of the soldiers held me down with his foot. ... His boot was pressing my chest and the cracks in the leather had the look of drying sorghum. His foot was so heavy and it was all I could see, as the others ... "took" me. My baby was crying. She was a good baby. She never cried, but she was crying, screaming. "Shhh," I said. "Shhh." And right then (*Salima closes her eyes.*) A soldier stomped on her head with his boot. And she was quiet. (*A moment. Salima releases.*) Where was everybody? WHERE WAS EVERYBODY? (Nottage, 2009, pp. 45-46)

This moral contradiction of having abused and raped women working as whores in *Ruined* is implicitly forcing the reader to focus on the ugly realities of their lives. In their work as prostitutes to both the soldiers and rebels in Mama Nadi's brothel, they are re-living their torture, something that has damaged them every single day. Mama Nadi explicitly explains to Salima, whose husband is now looking for her, the reality that those women may face if they return to their village:

He'll see you, love will flood into his eyes, he'll tell you everything you want to hear, and then one morning, I know how it happens, he will begin to ask ugly questions, but he won't be able to hear the answers. And no matter what you say, he won't be satisfied... But if you want to go back out there, go, but they, your village, your people, they won't understand. Oh, they'll say they will, but they won't. Because, you know, underneath everything, they

will be thinking, 'She's damaged. She's been had by too many men. She let them, those dirty men, touch her. She's a whore.' And Salima, are you strong enough to stomach their hate? It will be worse than anything you've felt yet. (Nottage, 2009, p. 44)

The women in the brothel live in an unforgettable traumatic predicament with an agonizing present and an uncertain future. Josephine is another girl in Mama Nadi's brothel. Although Josephine belongs to a high class society, she faces the same plight as the poor women. All women are equal in this brutally; they all share the same destiny in Congo. Talking to Sophie, Josephine describes how she had been raped viciously in front of other villagers who did not offer any help:

My father was chief! ... My father was chief! The most important man in the villages, and when the soldiers raided us, who was kind to me? Huh? Not his second wife. 'There she is the chief's daughter!' Or the cowards who pretended not to know me, and did any of them bring a blanket to cover me, did anyone move to help me? NO! So you see, you ain't special! (Nottage, 2009, p.26)

Alongside Salima is Sophie, who is also considered as "damaged" goods. In the opening scene, Christian tells Mama Nadi that Sophie is his niece and that she has been "ruined" from the several rapes by her kidnappers: "Militates did ungodly thing to the child, took her with... a bayonet and then left her dead" (Nottage, 2009, p. 10). Moreover, he tells her that Sophie, similar to all raped victims, is expelled by her family: CHRISTIAN: And as you know the village isn't a place for a girl who has been ... ruined. It brings shame, dishonor to the family. (Nottage, 2009, p 11)

Realizing the injustice, sexual abuse, and the way society rejects the "ruined" women; Mama Nadi sympathizes with Sophie and takes her to work in her brothel, although Sophie is more "ruined" than the other women:

MAMA. Are you a student?  
SOPHIE. Yes, I was to sit for the university exam.  
MAMA. I bet you were good at your studies. Am I right?  
SOPHIE. Yes.  
MAMA. A petit bureaucrat in the making. (Sophie shifts with discomfort. Her body aches, tears escape her eyes. Mama uses the cloth from her skirt to wipe Sophie's eyes.) Did they hurt you badly?  
SOPHIE. (Whispered.) ... Yes.  
MAMA. I bet they did. (Mama studies Sophie. Considers, and then decides.) Christian, go get me the chocolate (Nottage, 2009, p.12)

Sophie sings at the bar and assists Mama Nadi with the accounting. Her singing as she entertains Mama Nadi's customers is more expressive than merely talking about her pain. In a study that investigated the significance of music and songs for traumatized individuals at war time, Martin J. Daughtr (2015, p. 2) illustrates that music and songs are used as healing agents where the survivors can regain their agency. Through music, singing, and dancing, survivors of war trauma can "extract valuable information from the ambient soundscape

while struggling with the deleterious effects that it produced in their ears, throughout their bodies, and in their psyches.” Therefore, the music and songs for these women become their eloquent voices and provide them with a sense of safety as they release their emotions and anxiety. Sophie’s song about the bird in which if seen will be caught and imprisoned, symbolically reflects on the deeper personal implication of her unspeakable suffering; it is a means of self-expression and catharsis.

SOPHIE. (Sings.)

A rare bird on a limb  
sings a song heard by a few.  
A few patient and distant listeners,  
Hear, its sweet call,  
a sound that haunts the forest  
A cry that tells a story,  
harmonious, but time forgotten.  
To be seen, is to be doomed  
It must evade capture,  
And yet the bird Still cries out to be heard  
(Nottage, 2009, p.38).

Sophie comments on her singing that echoes and narrates the unimaginable suffering of being ruined:

While I’m singing, I’m praying the pain will be gone, but what those men did to me lives inside of 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, 2009, p.23)

Ms. Whoriskey, who accompanied Nottage to Africa, noticed that during the interview with the women who survived the hellish war, the latter cannot even cry or express their stories as their tragedy is greater than all what might be uttered (Nottage, 2009).

Amid the intense mutilation of the body, soul, and humanity, Sophie wants to capture a glimpse of hope by undertaking a surgery to fix her genitals. The only way for her is to steal money from Mama Nadi, who later forgives her when Sophie tells her that she needs the money for her surgery. Mama Nadi gives a precious diamond to Mr. Harari, a Lebanese merchant, to accompany Sophie to the capital city and have the surgery. In the final scene, we will know that Mama Nadi’s sympathetic attitude toward Sophie’s status is due to her revelation that she herself is “ruined.”

Salima’s pain ends after a fight between Osembenga, a leader in the government army, and Mama Nadi in the brothel. When soldiers are about to rape Josephine, Salima appears on stage, with blood seeping through her dress and down her legs, having self-aborted a “child of a monster.” She screams at them:

SALIMA. (*Screams.*) STOP! Stop it! FORTUNE. Salima!

SALIMA. (*Screams.*) For the love of God, stop this! Haven’t you done enough to us? Enough! Enough! (*The soldiers stop abruptly, shocked by Salima’s defiant voice.*) (Nottage, 2009, p.63)

Salima dies, leaving behind her a world described as an “empire of trauma” (Edmondson, 2018, p. 199). Her death

symbolizes a message to the fighting men on behalf of all the ruined women of the Congo that “you’ll not fight your battles on my body anymore” (Nottage, 2009, p. 63). Salima denounces the ugly fact that she and other women in Congo are caught between the war and the men who claim rights to their bodies and their lands. Nottage shares with her audience the harsh realities facing Congolese women, believing that this atrocity against women must be stopped as it snatches away from them their dignified and respected life as partially embodied in their human rights. In an interview, Nottage (2012) says

Most of [the women] were incredibly traumatized and yet they still found the strength to tell their stories. As painful as was, I felt this urgency for them to recount every comment...At times I wanted to close my ears and stop listening. But I think they really wanted to go on record...They wanted the world to hear their stories.

It seems that Salima gains autonomy and complete control over her life only when she chooses to end it. In life, Salima could not actually stop men or others from violating and using her body as their battleground. Predominantly, the studies in the field of trauma showed that in many cases, the traumatized individual who is continuously living a traumatic experience tends to commit suicide. Salima committed suicide because carrying the shame inside her womb is unbearable.

The play ends sometime after Salima’s death, with Christian returning to offer his love and support to Mama Nadi, who accepts him. The final scene ends with the two of them romantically dancing together. The ending dance suggests that those people share “a physical embodiment of hope—hope that Christian can begin a new life with Mama Nadi, and hope for the brothel’s women that they too will experience the happiness Mama Nadi finally embraces” (Jordan, 2010). In *Ruined*, men, except Christian, are generally portrayed as vicious figures and a source of tragedy and torture for women, but the romantic ending suggests that men’s true love heals ruined women. Understandable and loving partners, such as Christian, can change the perspective of women and society by challenging the cultural convictions and seeking to redefine their masculinity in the presence of the women they have discarded. The romantic ending is akin to a therapeutic process for all abused women targeting at not losing hope; instead, they must be adequately strong to overcome the physical and psychological pain.

## CONCLUSION

The cruel and realistic episodes, along with the amount of agony presented in *Ruined*, allowed the dramatist Lynn Nottage and her audience to both act as witnesses to the traumatic human experiences and share in the pain of these victimized and traumatized women. Nottage’s play is a profound cry for global attention, respect and support to save Congolese women from a long servitude and struggle. The play depicts the horror of rape and narrates the stories of afflicted but life-loving Congolese women who, although traumatised, they are fighting for their rights of survival. It succinctly provides an accurate picture of

the real-life challenges of this complex conflict in Congo, which uses females' bodies as a battlefield. However, the play ends with a glimpse of hope, essential to those women in the healing process from their trauma and of moving forward.

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