

Screams of Broken Souls in *Ruined* with the Context of Existential Feminism

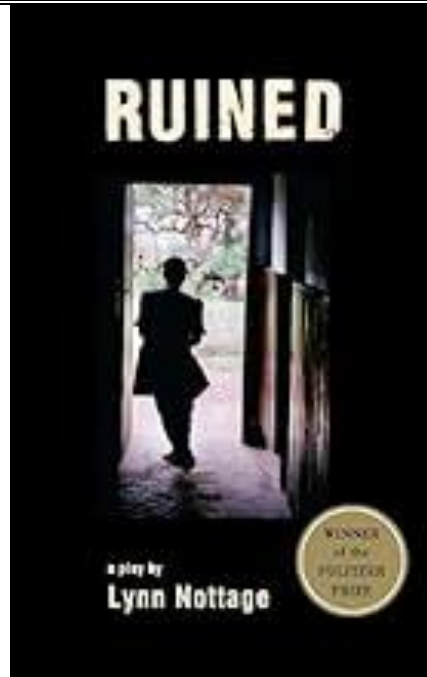
Dr. Parvesh, Ph.D.

SMDRSD College

Pathankot 145001

Punjab

drparvesh85@gmail.com



Courtesy: www.amazon.com

Abstract

Existential feminism paved the way for other female writers who desired to explore literature with the lens of gender equality. After World War II, Jean Paul Sartre propounded the theory of Existentialism where he concluded that ‘existence precedes essence’ (26). In 1949 Simon de Beauvoir redefined the limits of gender and wrote a book called *The Second Sex* where she lamented upon the status of labeling a woman as other. She stressed upon the fact that even women, like men are not pre-destined. This theory proved to be revolutionary and was an amalgamation of her firsthand experiences and philosophical ideology.

The main purpose of existential feminism is to serve absolute liberty in making choices and acknowledgement to every sex and gender on the basis of individual spontaneity whether it is political, social, domestic or psychological, and not from external or authority. The basic trait of a woman in each corner of the world is similar as well their issues are.



Lynn Nottage

Courtesy: <https://signaturetheatre.org/playwright/lynn-nottage/>

In this present article I will be focusing on one of the darkest and harsh realities of a region called Democratic Republic of Congo while exploring a play by **Lynn Nottage** called *Ruined* with the context of existential feminism. Nottage is a very profound playwright who is the only playwright to win Pulitzer award twice in her life for plays, one for *Ruined* in 2009 and another in 2017 for the play, *Sweat*. Nottage has published more than ten plays and acclaimed worldwide popularity. Her plays are the replete of basic and relevant social issues based in Congolese culture and the people. Her play *Ruined* has multifaceted themes discussing darkest sides of female exploitation. The setting of the play is a bar in an anonymous small mining town with the backdrop of civil war in DRC. The bar's owner Mama Nadi is an authoritative lady in her early forties who runs a bar where she sells alcohol as well as ladies. The present paper will throw light on the circumstances where all these above-mentioned topics were brutally ignored. Beauvoir affirms that despite tireless endeavors a woman still experiences existential crisis in every sphere of life.

Keywords: Lynn Nottage, *Ruined*, Existential Feminism, Democratic Republic of Congo, genital mutilation, rape, violence.

Introduction

=====

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940** **Vol. 24:10** **October 2024**

Dr. Parvesh, Ph.D.

Screams of Broken Souls in *Ruined* with the Context of Existential Feminism

Lynn Nottage's writing style often investigates the human mind and soul from depth while also focusing on introspection of the characters. Her language mirrors the plain prose depicting true events and brutal atrocities perpetrated on Congolese women. She reflects the true picture of these women with a convincing and accessible narrative addressing the themes of existentialism, patriarchal society and raising feministic point of view. In an interview, **Lynn Nottage** 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).

War has always proved to be means to violate female rights. Women become victim of war and have been exploited the most. Civil wars too created much chaos and here women as assumed to be the weakest section of society, have been subjected to gender-based barbarism. Even after the fourth wave of Feminism the issues and debates seem much needed for raising voices in the favor of gender equality today. Beauvoir asserts,

why is woman the Other? The question is how, in her, nature has been taken on in the course of history; the question is what humanity has made of the human female. (71)

In the interview Nottage said that during her visit to Congolese refugee camps, she got disturbed on hearing heart aching life stories of African women who were the victims of child marriage, forcible pregnancy, genital mutilation and rapes. She says,

"The stories of these refugee women running away from rape and domestic abuse are so graphic, so heart-wrenching, that it will be difficult for people to spend two hours hearing them in a two-hour play. It was emotionally difficult for me to hear when I interviewed over 15 women in Kampala."

Lynn Nottage portrays the real and brutal picture of civil war took place between rebels and government where Congolese women are used as a tool who are sexually assaulted, and they continue to perpetrate atrocities on them as long as these can be consumed for their sexual gratification. These women are kept by soldiers and local men as their concubines for as long as they wish and then thrown to die. 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 play begins on the note of Christian's arrival with three girls in the bar seeking refuge there. Salima, has been rescued from a violent act and now, is impregnated due to this horrifying episode. She hides her pregnancy from Mama as she really needs refuge. Christian introduces her to Mama as,

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.her husband is a

=====

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940** **Vol. 24:10 October 2024**

Dr. Parvesh, Ph.D.

Screams of Broken Souls in Ruined with the Context of Existential Feminism

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)

Every woman in the bar has a traumatic past, Josephine another girl in bar, daughter of a chief of a village, who was raped publicly by the soldiers and then disowned by her community. Men of the tribe decide to abandon her as she's no longer acceptable. She envies Sophie as she is beautiful and has become popular in the bar very soon. Even Mama talks to her politely. She tells Sophie,

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).

Cathy Caruth has discussed in detail the psychological ailments in her book *Unexplained Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996). She contends that the horrifying old memories can occur as a nightmare, flashback or intrusive memory. Sophie is unable to get rid of her intrusive memories of being tortured. Sophie sings in the bar and called a rare bird by Salima. Sophie is stealthily hoarding money from Mama's account. She hopes that her genitals could be fixed through a surgery. Nottage says,

"Hope is a strange and fragile thing. It can bloom in the darkest places".

This statement emphasizes a message of resilience and perseverance that a hope can provide, even in a depressing atmosphere. Sophie symbolizes ray of hope where she dreams to undergo an operation to fix her genitals. She aspires to lead a normal life afterwards. Each woman of the play deals with a disturbing and horrifying past, unable to forget. These women are the victim of misogynistic thought process prevailing in the society where men decide the fate of women. These women consider themselves, inferior to the male sex and act accordingly. Beauvoir writes that,

"Society has always been male; political power has always been in men's hands. "Political authority, or simply social authority, always belongs to men," (105).

These women are deeply affected by the heinous atrocities they had experienced and feel emotionally disoriented. But they still gather courage and emerge as survivors who wish to live as Sophie aspires to have an operation after which she might have a chance to lead a normal life. Salima, once a captive of rebels is ostracized by her own people for bringing slur and shame to their clan, yearns to meet her daughter Beatrice. Though Salima's husband Fortune comes to find her, she hides herself in the bar and refuses to go with him. She thinks that she has brought shame to the family. Salima finds herself a misfit for her society and asks Mama to make Fortune

leave the bar. Despite Fortune's yearning she denies meeting him as she's ashamed of being used as a toy to myriads of men. Beauvoir asserts,

"Now, woman has always been, if not man's slave, at least his vassal; the two sexes have never divided the world up equally; and still today, even though her condition is changing, woman is heavily handicapped. In no country is her legal status identical to man's, and often it puts her at a considerable disadvantage. Even when her rights are recognized abstractly, long-standing habit keeps them from being concretely manifested in customs" (29).

Salima gets along with Sophie and shares their anguish and pathos with each other. Salima finds disgusting to be a sex worker and calls Sophie fortunate that she only sings in the bar and doesn't have to sleep with men. But Sophie tells her that the atmosphere of bar, lustful staring of men always makes her sick.

"SALIMA: You, you don't have to be with them. Sometimes their hands are so full of rage that it hurts to be touched. This night, I look over at you singing, and you seem almost happy like a sunbird that can fly away if you reach out to touch it.

SOPHIE: Is that what you think? 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. (45)"

Sophie tells her that she feels choked to be in the bar. She tells her plan of hoarding money and going along with Salima to Bunia for a better future. Josephine too desires to have a good time with one of her regular customers, MrHarari who promises her to take her to city where she would live with him.

"JOSEPHINE: Mr. Harari is going to take me. Watch out, chérie, he's promised to set me up in a high-rise apartment. Don't hate, all of this fineness belongs in the city. (48)"

She cherishes living a better life with some honour. She doesn't mind being called as his keep or mistress as there would be nobody, but Mr. Harari only to gratify his sexual urge. Mama Nadi in the play serves as their guardian who protects these victims of violence. The play doesn't reveal much about her past, but in the end, it's been revealed that she too was a victim of sexual assault and was mutilated. She shows herself as strong and audacious woman, an untamed spirit, but the concluding part of the play exhibits her fragile and compassionate aspect. She cries loudly and confesses about being a victim of rape. Initially she seems very calculative, shrewd and business minded who deals with alcohol and girls. But ironically these sex workers feel haven, and safer to be in the bar. As Mama Nadi says,

“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).

Showing her generosity, Mama hands over a diamond to Mr. Harari, her lifetime saving and asks him to take Sophie with him to Bunia. She requests Harari to arrange an operation for Sophie.

“MAMA: No, listen . . . I’m talking about Sophie. This will raise enough money for an operation, and whatever she needs to get settled. (102)

In scene six of Act two, Salima dies and rescues all other girls at the bar from the trap of Osembenga, the commander. Dying Salima says:

SALIMA (To Osembenga, the Soldiers and Fortune): You will not fight your battles on my body anymore. (Salima collapses to the floor. Fortune cradles her in his arms. She dies. (106))”

Conclusion

In the end of the play a revelation shocks the audience that Mama Nadi herself was a ruined, but Christian accepts her whole heartedly and proposes her for marriage. Thus, the play ends on a note of resilience and beacon of hope where these female victims emerge as fighters, the survivors who foresee to pursue a better tomorrow filled with positivity. Salima’s sacrifice brings the fruit of hope to others. Her death makes the whole chaos stop at the moment and brings a positive hope in all others life. Still all the odds, many among these women emerge as survivors, and not the victims of the social evil of prostitution, objectification and extensive barbarism in Congo. Lynn Nottage created this piece of art with a notion to show what exactly was happening in DRC, with a backdrop of war, but with an overview and perspective of women. She says,

“My play is not about victims, but survivors. *Ruined* is also the story of the Congo. A country blessed with an abundance of natural beauty and resources, which has been its blessing and its curse.”

References

Beauvoir, Simone de. “The Second Sex.” New York: Vintage Books, 1949.

Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. The John Hopkins UP, 1996.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 Vol. 24:10 October 2024

Dr. Parvesh, Ph.D.

Screams of Broken Souls in Ruined with the Context of Existential Feminism

Jardine, Alice A. "What Feminism?" *French Politics, Culture & Society*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2010, pp. 66–74. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42843656>. Accessed 2 Sept. 2024.

Joseph Mahon. *Existentialism, Feminism and Simone De Beauvoir*. Palgrave Macmillan. 1997.

Nottage, L. (2009). I. New York, NY: Theater Communications Group.

Sartre, Jean-Paul (1962). *Existential Psychoanalysis*. Translated by Barnes, Hazel. Chicago: Regnery. pp. 19–152.

<https://www.critical-stages.org/3/on-lynn-nottages-ruined/>

<https://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/africa/08/11/congo.rape/index.html#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20United%20Nations,in%20military%20courts%20last%20year.>

https://www.academia.edu/111791520/Unspeakable_Suffering_Women_s_Experience_of_Trauma_in_Lynn_Nottage_s_Ruined



Dr. Parvesh, Ph.D.
SMDRSD College
Pathankot 145001
Punjab
drparvesh85@gmail.com

=====

Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940** Vol. 24:10 October 2024

Dr. Parvesh, Ph.D.

Screams of Broken Souls in Ruined with the Context of Existential Feminism