

ECHOES OF THE SUBALTERN: MARGINALIZED VOICES IN LYNN NOTTAGE'S "RUINED"

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Abstract

This research study aims to explore the overlooked perspectives portrayed in Lynn Nottage's play Ruined. It attempts to address a significant gap and shed light on how marginalization, particularly of women in conflict zones, is a shared experience across societies and a universal dilemma. While Nottage's narratives of women in war-torn Congo have been widely discussed, this study focuses closely on how her play amplifies subaltern voices. Drawing from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's Subaltern Theory as a guiding framework, this study utilizes methods like Close Reading, Thematic Analysis, and Contextualization to explore Ruined deeply and uncover its underlying themes and messages. Through this analysis it seeks to show how literature serves as a platform for marginalized voices to be heard, revealing shared struggles and resilience while highlighting the influence of socio-political context on the narrative. This study plays a role in raising awareness about the challenges faced by marginalized women, aiming to change how society views them and to influence perceptions and policy.

INTRODUCTION

This study examines how Lynn Nottage's portrayal of conflict-ridden Congo amplifies subaltern voices. It explores their struggles and resilience while highlighting how socio-political conditions shape literature. The analysis demonstrates how marginalized perspectives challenge dominant narratives and influence broader social and historical conversations. Modern literature, especially modern drama, serves as a powerful tool for critiquing society and fostering empathy. It captures the spirit of the times, providing insight into contemporary social issues. The strength of drama lies in its ability to create a space where audiences can connect with characters and narratives, leading to a deeper understanding of the world (Jia, 2023). Empathy

transcends boundaries and enriches analysis, as evidenced by studies on empathy in literature (Meghan Marie Hammond and Sue J. Kim, 2016). This comprehensive perspective allows readers to empathize with characters' emotions and thoughts, bridging their experiences with those of others. Drama's role in critiquing society is evident in its themes, which reflect present-day challenges. Realistic modern plays delve into psychology and behavior within context, challenging conventional beliefs and advocating for change. Playwrights like Lynn Nottage, drawing inspiration from Africa, exemplify this approach. Through examining these elements, this study highlights the significance of drama in amplifying voices and raising social consciousness.

The presence of Subaltern voices in literature

The term "subaltern" refers to groups systematically excluded and displaced from socio-economic institutions that hold power (Subaltern in Literature & Literary Theory, n.d.). This idea, central to the writings of Lynn Nottage, explores the stories of those silenced and pushed aside by cultural forces. Literature serves as a platform for these suppressed voices, providing an opportunity to challenge the existing order. The subaltern narrative goes beyond describing oppression; it also celebrates the strength and independence of those who have been historically overlooked (WADE, 2021). Gayatri Spivak's influential work "Can the Subaltern Speak?" sheds light on the obstacles that silence these voices, with a focus on third-world women and other marginalized communities. According to (Spivak, 2010), the silence of the subaltern reflects the barriers preventing them from being heard, underscoring the complexities of representation and the struggles faced by thinkers in amplifying these voices. This study explores how Nottage brings attention to these neglected narratives through her use of language. Her tale exposes issues of gender bias and societal isolation, deepening our understanding of what it means to be subaltern. By giving a voice to those who are often unheard, Nottage provides insight into the experiences of individuals outside mainstream power structures, shining a light on the enduring challenges and resilience of marginalized groups.

Portrayal of the Subaltern in Nottage's narratives

Lynn Nottage uses her writing to give a voice to marginalized groups, particularly women, and to question narratives that are often sidelined by mainstream literature. Nottage's plays, focusing on the experiences of working-class individuals, serve as testimonies to the challenges faced by those on the margins. Nottage's dramas, such as *Apparel*, *Ruined*, *Sweat*, and *Fabulation or The Re-Education of Undine*, shed light on the lives of marginalized individuals, urging audiences to pay attention to narratives often sidelined in mainstream discussions. Nottage's works particularly highlight the experiences of women,

factory workers, and those grappling with hardship, showcasing their resilience in challenging circumstances. Through her plays, Nottage prompts viewers to confront their biases and acknowledge the obstacles that contribute to marginalization. Her writing touches on themes of exclusion and the value of humanity, acting as a link bringing together communities through common encounters with marginalized groups, showing how her work still holds significance in the present day.

Problem Statement

This study aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of the depiction of marginalized voices in Lynn Nottage's modern drama *Ruined*. It explores how Nottage captures the experiences of women in war-torn Congo, amplifying their voices and questioning the societal norms that surround them. The research aims to analyze how Nottage's portrayal of marginalized characters both challenges and mirrors the socio-cultural landscape she depicts. By dissecting the story, the study seeks to provoke thought on how marginalized individuals navigate issues of identity and survival, and to offer deeper insight into the relevance of this narrative for present-day society, including Pakistan.

Research Objectives

1. Analyzing the portrayal of subaltern voices in Lynn Nottage's drama, with a focus on themes of oppression, marginalization, and resilience.
2. Placing Nottage's writing in the political context of Congo to explore how the story is shaped by the region's cultural background.
3. Examining the potential role of literature in amplifying the voices of the subalterns and shaping social consciousness, drawing insight from Nottage's work to illustrate the power of storytelling for social impact.
- 4.

Significance of the Study

In contemporary Pakistani society, marginalized voices frequently remain unheard, particularly those of women in conflict-affected regions who face numerous obstacles. The significance of this

study lies in its capacity to shed light on the neglected stories of marginalized individuals and to add to the conversation about basic human rights, fairness, and their portrayal in literature. By examining Lynn Nottage's writing, this research emphasizes the significance of literature as a platform that not only mirrors societal problems but also questions and transforms people's perceptions of them.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The term "subaltern" was first introduced by Antonio Gramsci to refer to the marginalized groups excluded from cultural dominance due to socio-economic structures. It has since undergone significant change in postcolonial theory, now encompassing classes and other marginalized groups in imperial colonies known for their limited or no access to dominant cultural frameworks. Gramsci's original concept focused on the Southern Question in Italy, highlighting disparities and political marginalization (Subaltern in Literature & Literary Theory, n.d.). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, among others, has expanded on this idea, viewing the subaltern as a space representing the voices of the marginalized (SPIVAK, 2005). She cautions against the overuse of the term "subaltern," noting its significance as a symbol of resistance against imperialism and underscoring the deep exclusion and lack of upward mobility experienced by these groups. According to (Spivak, 2010), forging connections with subaltern communities allows for a portrayal of their perspectives, offering valuable insight into their unique realities and power dynamics on both global and local scales.

Literature serves as a mirror reflecting reality, bringing attention to the challenges faced by marginalized communities and playing a pivotal role in reshaping narratives and broadening perspectives. (Jia, 2023) further asserts that by sharing the real-life stories of marginalized communities, literature acts as a platform for empowerment, giving these individuals a voice to challenge norms and advocate for social change. This shift in storytelling not only promotes empathy and understanding but also contributes

to the broader aim of societal advancement and inclusivity.

(Bagto, 2021) points out that Western feminism, which has traditionally sought to unify issues under one umbrella, fails to address the struggles faced by African women due to varying factors such as class, race, culture, and the historical context of women living in formerly colonized regions. Therefore, postcolonial feminists strive to amplify the voices of marginalized women who face injustice and severe human rights violations. Nottage adopts this lens in her play to shed light on the challenges faced by women in Congo and other distant regions, where women endure violence at the hands of soldiers during times of conflict. Nottage skillfully weaves together the stories of three women burdened by exploitation and subjected to injustice. The portrayal of the experiences faced by these women within traditional cultural norms results in turmoil, dishonesty, and uncertainty across all aspects of society.

The act of group rape carried out by conquerors symbolizes a celebration of gaining control over territory, as expressed by Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (Spivak, 2010). In the same way, (Fitzpatrick, 2018) explores how rape and sexual violence are depicted in texts using gender perspectives and narratives of imperialism, postcolonialism, or nationalism to portray sexual violence as a metaphor for defeat and destruction. Works ranging from Euripides's *Trojan Women* to Lynn Nottage's *Ruined* and contemporary verbatim performances in Northern Ireland are examined by Fitzpatrick. These works illustrate the concept of a woman's body being likened to a battlefield, revealing the techniques employed by playwrights to convey the impact of rape. The prevalence of rape in art not only portrays tragic events but also, at times, normalizes war and conflict, reinforcing imperial power dynamics and ethnic divides.

(Poll, 2020) adds to the discussion that in *Ruined*, Nottage skillfully portrays the impact of the genocide in the Democratic Republic of Congo, highlighting how it is intertwined with capitalism. The play challenges the tendency of entities to overlook their role in this tragedy by focusing

solely on sexual violence. He delves into how *Ruined* questions narratives surrounding genocide and redefines common perceptions of such atrocities. Rather than viewing genocide as a specific historical incident, Nottage suggests that it is a systemic issue ingrained in modern society. The play emphasizes the devastating effects of using rape as a tool of warfare and calls for its cessation. Through dialogue that contrasts acts of love with scenes of brutality, Nottage underscores themes of resilience and survival amid suffering and loss. According to (Saleh, 2017), Nottage portrays women as resilient individuals fighting for freedom and survival despite formidable challenges. In *Ruined*, she vividly captures the realities endured by women in the Democratic Republic of Congo, using Mama Nadi's bar as a microcosm reflecting societal struggles. The play intertwines discussions of violence and location, illustrating how female bodies are both targets of abuse and sources of resistance. The female characters frequently confront cultural pressures that aim to oppress and quiet them; they work hard to rediscover who they are and stand up for their rights in the face of daunting obstacles. Nottage also incorporates elements from epic theater, such as the alienation effect, to engage her audience in reflection, prompting viewers to consider the societal issues surrounding the women's stories and the systemic challenges they face. This method supports Nottage's aim of shedding light on the struggles of marginalized women and sparking action against gender-based violence.

In the play, women's voices are often overlooked due to various social, cultural, and political factors, along with mistreatment by male figures, asserts (Shakya, 2018). Although Mama Nadi may initially seem distant, she shows a caring side toward the women under her protection while maintaining a hardened exterior. The play delves into the challenging journeys of these women as they strive for survival and independence in a society dominated by men and plagued by war. The unequal power dynamics between men and women place women in positions of exploitation. Throughout *Ruined*, the female characters grapple with hope and disappointment as they navigate

conflict and societal constraints. Mama Nadi herself reflects the gender dynamics and harsh realities faced by women while engaging in profit-driven activity. The narrative also touches upon how gender militarization within armed groups impacts women's reproductive rights and sexuality. Shakya further adds that Nottage employs epic theater techniques to prompt thought rather than evoke purely emotional responses, presenting the injustices suffered by women in a manner that encourages reflection.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Lynn Nottage has a great talent for giving a voice to those who are often unheard, depicting the struggles of the marginalized and oppressed with compassion and authenticity. Her writing highlights the ordeals faced by women who endure violence, exploitation, and social exclusion, turning their stories into reflections on gender inequality and societal injustice. In her Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Ruined*, Lynn Nottage explores the emotional trauma experienced by women in war-torn areas. After conducting interviews with survivors of assault, Nottage was deeply moved by the physical injuries these women had suffered. She expressed her emotions through her writing,

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 (Muh, 2019)

Nottage gives a voice to women who have faced severe hardship and displacement due to socio-political oppression and violence that have taken away their autonomy over their bodies and destinies. For example, when Mama Nadi is questioned by Christian about her actions and choices during the war, she responds with determination,

"I open my doors, and tomorrow I'm refugee camp overrun with suffering...Everyone has their hand open since this damned war began...I can't do it...I keep food in the mouths of eight women when half the country starved so don't give me

shit about taking on one more girl" (Nottage, Ruined, 2009)

In her portrayal, Nottage depicts Mama Nadi as a woman who perseveres through challenges with unwavering strength and conviction. Despite enduring the worst difficulties, she remains steadfast in her fight – her voice powerful, resolute, and unapologetic; resolute not to lose what matters, her livelihood, her home, and the women she has come to care for. She says, "This place is all I have in this world. These women are all I have. No one will take this from me" (Nottage, Ruined, 2009). Nottage's dedication to portraying women in her writing is evident, as she once expressed that "Women are my focus." She believes that one's surroundings deeply shape one's sense of self, with many of her characters on a quest for identity. She acknowledges the duty placed upon her as a writer: her primary goal is to shine a light on the struggles faced by women by telling stories that delve into how marginalized women are unfairly positioned in society's hierarchy. The female characters in *Ruined* stand as symbols of women enduring violence and societal neglect,

They're all stories about people who are marginalized. People who are struggling with identity. People whose identities have been erased. They're about working people who felt incredibly marginalized and unseen, and about how they can assert themselves in a landscape that refuses to recognize their dignity. (Nottage, *Insight Into Sweat: An Interview with Playwright Lynn Nottage*, 2018)

Nottage sheds light on the resilience and humanity of characters like Salima, Josephine, and Mama Nadi, urging viewers to confront the realities they endure and appreciate their strength. Salima's story reveals not only her emotional suffering but also criticizes societal systems that fail to protect victims.

"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 ankle 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. Let him sit in the rain." (Nottage, Ruined, 2009, p. 50)

The quote underscores Salima's struggles with her family and spouse, showing how society often resorts to victim-blaming instead of supporting survivors. Nottage aims to stir emotion in her audience by immersing them in her characters' pain and aspirations. Sophie, for instance, grapples with both external abuse from soldiers and internal turmoil caused by the violence she faces. Her conversation with Mama highlights the depth of her suffering and fear of harm.

"JOSEPHINE: 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, Ruined, 2009, p. 26)

Moreover, Nottage attempts to give voice to her characters through art; for instance, Sophie's singing at the bar acts as a way for her to express herself and a kind of catharsis from anxiety. In her song, Nottage sheds light on the pleas of oppressed women who yearn for their stories to be heard worldwide.

CONCLUSION

Lynn Nottage's *Ruined* delves deep into the lives of marginalized communities, particularly women, as they navigate challenging socio-political circumstances, offering profound understanding of their plight. Readers and viewers are immersed in the realities experienced by characters like Sophie and Salima in war-torn Congo, where sexual violence is rampant amid civil unrest. The story unfolds at Mama Nadi's bar, a place that acts both as a shelter and a center of exploitation. Through her storytelling, Nottage sheds light on the harm caused by war, emphasizing rape as a destructive tool that requires immediate global attention and action.

Nottage utilizes irony and empathy to criticize systems that perpetuate marginalization. Her

portrayal of Mama Nadi, in a role as both protector and profiteer, mirrors the realities of survival in war-torn areas, where women's bodies are used as tools for power and exploitation. The representation of the body is a recurring theme in *Ruined*, symbolizing resilience in the face of exploitation and violence. Through the play, Nottage effectively illustrates how characters like Sophie and Salima navigate their bodies as battlegrounds, reflecting the struggles for dominance in regions plagued by conflict. Through the lens of Subaltern Theory, literature emerges as a tool for critiquing society and advocating for change, bringing overlooked stories to light and prompting deep reflection on societal norms.

Recommendations

Recommendations for other researchers in future are:

- 1.They can utilize postcolonial literary theories to analyze the representation of women in *Ruined*. These theories offer insight into power dynamics, agency, and representation within contexts of conflict and societal oppression, and may further explore how colonial histories and postcolonial contexts influence the experiences and identities of marginalized characters.
- 2.They may apply Kimberlee Crenshaw's Intersectionality Theory to examine how intersecting identities (such as race, class, and gender) impact the portrayal and reception of marginalized characters, studying characters from *Ruined* to understand how these intersections shape their agency, vulnerabilities, and societal roles.

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