

## Trabajo Fin de Grado

Women's Resilience to Sexual Abuse in *Ruined*  
by Lynn Nottage

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Ruined* (2008), one of the most influential plays written by Lynn Nottage, deals with the social, emotional and physical consequences women victims of sexual abuse suffered during the Civil War in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The main purpose of this dissertation is to study in depth the use of women as sexual objects and the post-traumatic effects affecting female characters. Female genital mutilation, rape, sexual aggression, physical and psychological manipulation, and abuse of power are some of the main elements analysed in order to understand *Ruined* as a social denouncement of injustices that women and children suffer as a consequence of wars. The play, which won the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, aims to raise female survivors' voices in order to offer them power to fight against dehumanizing procedures that have been taking place in the DRC until a few decades ago.

**Key words:** female genital mutilation - sexual abuse - rape - trauma - resilience

## **RESUMEN**

*Ruined* (2008), una de las obras más influyentes escritas por Lynn Nottage, trata las consecuencias sociales, emocionales y físicas que sufren las mujeres víctimas de abuso sexual durante la Guerra Civil en la República Democrática del Congo. El objetivo principal de esta tesis es estudiar en profundidad el uso de las mujeres como objetos sexuales y los efectos postraumáticos que afectan a los personajes femeninos. La mutilación genital femenina, la agresión y el abuso sexual, la manipulación física y psicológica y el abuso de poder son algunos de los principales elementos analizados para entender *Ruined* como una denuncia social de las injusticias que las mujeres y las niñas sufren como consecuencia de las guerras. La obra, que ganó el Premio Pulitzer de Drama de 2009, tiene como objetivo alzar las voces de las mujeres supervivientes y así ofrecerles el poder para luchar contra los procedimientos deshumanizantes que han tenido lugar en la RDC hasta hace unas décadas.

**Palabras clave:** mutilación genital femenina - abuso sexual - violación - trauma - resiliencia



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## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this dissertation is to analyze how Lynn Nottage's play *Ruined* (2008) portrays the effects of sexual repression that African women suffered in the Democratic Republic of the Congo during the 1990s. Physical and psychological manipulation are some of the main themes the play presents, which is why resilience is a key word that would be helpful in the understanding of the play's female characters' behavior. For years, it used to be highly common to consider female characters to be weak, sensitive, delicate and vulnerable figures. The male-dominant culture in which we live, and have lived in for centuries, has coerced human beings to be attached to a specific function and profile that is portrayed in different fields, being literary works one of them.

Sexual oppression can be considered to be one of the most significant consequences of living in a patriarchal system. As a result, it is not a surprise to find it as a topic in Nottage's play. Due to the fact that the plot is set during a civil war which jeopardizes the independence of the country, it is inevitable to assume that women are going to be silenced and oppressed because they are under male control. Weapons are only allowed to be used by men, since they are the ones in charge of fighting. Consequently, the male gaze is going to acquire an authoritarian role over women that becomes extremely harmful for women's living conditions. The main reason why Lynn Nottage decided to write a play about these women's distress is because she considered it was extremely necessary to break the silence African women suffered and give them voice in order to express what had been hidden for many years. Because of the fact that in the present day sexual violence is being more and more condemned, this play may result really helpful for those women who have experienced any kind of manipulation. In fact, at the end of the book as part of the appendix, Nottage presents testimonies of the real African women that the characters represent, which gives the reader an indication of how shocking their personal lives have been. It is true that the Democratic

Republic of the Congo (DRC) is considered an underdeveloped country of the Third World. Taking into account the lack of education, together with the fact that there exists a huge humanitarian crisis due to its poor living conditions and the military rule, it is only to be expected that abuse of power exists in many situations. Sexual abuse, mutilation and raping are some of them. UNICEF claims that “[a]round the world, over 230 million girls and women have been cut. Africa accounts for the largest share of this total, with over 144 million.” This shows that there is an extreme urge for improving human rights in African countries, such as in this case, the DRC.

After having presented these main ideas, it is going to be relevant to focus our attention on the reason why this play is called *Ruined* via the characters of Salima, Sophie and Mama Nadi, who are the ones that give this title meaning. Getting to know the past of each woman is going to be the key to understand their behaviors. Although each of them is totally different at first sight, all of them are objectified, and even become animalized, in the same way at some point of the play. They have been raped at least once in their life.

In the following, I will provide a brief historical context in which some relevant factors are going to be analyzed for a better comprehension of the DRC’s traditions and lifestyle. Additionally, this study will be preceded by a theoretical framework which will present the main theories that are going to be employed in this dissertation. Finally, in the Analysis section, I will discuss more in depth the different topics presented in the introduction, including the main themes, genre, style and language of the play, as well as the idea of male power and the impact mutilation has on women.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

When people talk about *resilience*, it is common to understand it as “the ability to adapt to difficult or challenging life experiences” (55), as Margaret Saelens and Brian Larsen define it. Nevertheless, being used to living with difficulties which do affect your daily life does not mean that problems have been overcome. For that reason, a more concrete definition for the term *resilience* would be:

The process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands. (“Resilience”)

The mental and physical efforts that resilience requires derive from aiming to control the damages of a traumatic experience. Hanna Meretoja suggests the term “working through trauma” (28) in order to reinforce the traditional idea of writing and talking about trauma so that it can be slightly overcome. *Ruined* evokes a strict process of adapting to life despite being mutilated or raped. Regarding the definition of the term *mutilation*, The World Health Organization (WHO) states that it “comprises all procedures that involve partial or total removal of the external female genitalia, or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons.” So far, The World Health Organization has divided the female genital mutilation (FGM) into four types depending on the genital part removed, including the removal of the clitoris (type 1), or the clitoris plus the labia minora (type 2), reducing the vaginal orifice (type 3), or other damaging aesthetic injuries like piercing the genital (type 4). Therefore, it can be said that *genital mutilation* is any kind of genital manipulation in which, involuntarily, women are deprived, either partially or totally, of their reproductive organs. The practice of female mutilation and sexual torture in Nottage’s play is directly connected with the culture of the country. The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is considered

to be “on track to have record levels of verified grave violations against children for a third consecutive year in 2023” according to UNICEF. This data shows that this procedure can be interpreted as a normalized suffering that young girls experience in some cultures due to the lack of civil legislation which would forbid this kind of practice. In the DRC, it was not until 2006 that the government established a law which would punish sexual violence infractions, though it did not include “genital stretching” despite being a “a form of gender-based discrimination” regarded as a necessity to do before marrying (Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada).

In this play, as well as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and other African countries, mutilation is suffered by many young girls and female adolescents. As claimed by the WHO, this practice is considered to be done not to be rejected in a specific society, to control sexual desire or even because of religious rituals, among other reasons. As a result of this practice, although “people may experience a range of reactions after trauma, and most people recover from initial symptoms over time” as the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) clarifies, “those who continue to experience problems may be diagnosed with PTSD”. This kind of disorder is originated by harmful occurrences which cannot be fully overcome and, as a consequence, it brings people problems when facing a situation which recalls a terrifying event. Wulfes et al. have studied some anxieties produced by PTSD, including physical insecurities, anguish, guilt, fear, shame or tensions created within sexual encounters. In fact, NIMH asserts that PTSD can appear regardless of age. Owing to the fact that mutilation, rape and sexual tortures are enforced practices which are not usually agreed to by the victim, trauma will remain anchored in the victims’ identity affecting the way characters behave.

### 3. Historical Context

The study of the historical context that surrounds *Ruined* is crucial for a better understanding of the DR Congo's traditions and lifestyles which are portrayed in the play. Although this work was published in 2008, the play emerged from travels Lynn Nottage made to East Africa in 2004 and 2005. At the end of the book, she explains how this journey changed her vision by getting closer to real survivors of sexual abuse in the DRC. After interviewing different women who suffered from "raw and ugly tales of sexual violation and torture at the hands of both Rebel and Government militias" (Nottage 120), she clarifies that she created the play in honor of Black women's resilience so that they would no longer be forgotten. Talking about the DR Congo is talking about human's rights oppression, sexual abuse, rape, and war. It was not until the 1950s, after a long period of protests, that the Republic of the Congo became independent from Belgian leadership. From that period onwards, two civil wars broke out and, as a consequence of these conflicts, up to six million people have died "due to violence, starvation and disease" (Tworoski).

The First Congo War, which took place between 1996 and 1997, was fought among Tutsi ethnic groups and Hutu extremists in order to overthrow the dictatorship of the Congolese Mobutu, resulting in a victory for the Tutsi minority as the Center for Preventive Action explains. One year later, in 1998, the Second Civil War began, which lasted up to 2003. This combat, also called Africa's World War as Zofsha Merchant and Joanna Michalopoulos state, which emerged from economic and political interests, is considered to be one of the most violent and lethal wars ever fought. Unfortunately, death is not the only consequence and firearms are not the only weapon. Because of the fact that the DRC is an underdeveloped country, the poor living conditions and power abuse is still an issue. According to Kathryn Reid, who collaborates with World Vision, which is a humanitarian organization, fatal hunger, poor healthcare, lack of education and sexual exploitation are

some of the dangers which are disfavoring a fair development of children. The lack of education is the main reason why some children are forced to be soldiers and, as a result, have the power of possessing weapons from a very early age. Young boys are obligated to kill and are accustomed to the cruelty of the war. Thus, since they are kids, raping young girls and abusing them sexually is seen as something ordinary. Sexual assault, then, is one of the most important injustices to be solved in the DRC.

## 4. Analysis

### 4.1. Background of *Ruined*

*Ruined* is considered to be one of the most relevant and memorable works written by Lynn Nottage. The play is set in a small town in the Democratic Republic of the Congo during the Second Civil War. It starts by presenting Mama Nadi in her bar. She is an attractive business woman who runs an establishment involving women, most of them being prostitutes, in order to protect them, take care of their lives and feed them in exchange for satisfying the soldiers who visit her bar. From the very beginning the readers can infer that this place, far from being an ordinary bar, is a brothel. Christian, who is the salesman who provides Mama Nadi with products for her business, introduces Salima and Sophie to her. These two characters are two young girls who have gone to the brothel voluntarily. Salima is a nineteen-years-old girl and mother who had to escape from the rebels, while Sophie is described simply as “ruined” (Nottage 12), although she sings beautifully. So far, the reader can already guess that “to be ruined” has to do with having no value in a prostitutes’ house. That is, Sophie may have suffered some kind of physical injury which impedes her to do sexual work. That is the reason why Mama Nadi, who seems to be quite conservative at first, refuses to take her into her house. She will not bring any economical benefit which will affect Mama Nadi’s brothel reputation.

The current realities of the three main female characters, Salima, Sophie and Mama Nadi, are represented as affected by the traumas they have experienced because of past tragedies. During this play, we are going to be able to analyze that women will come across different obstacles which come in the form of psychological manipulation, cultural traditions, a sexist society, and physical damage. Confronted with these barriers, women try to ignore them in order to adapt to a new kind of life. Assuming that they have lived an unfair life but,

at the same time, having the necessity to keep going on, is their main tool for surviving and facing the new reality. A new reality which will not be exactly “new” but actually a fight against their traumatic past.

Through the narrative of the play, the aforementioned obstacles are going to be presented to the reader/spectator. Salima has to face the aggressive appearance of Fortune, her husband, who tries to force her to come back with him and her baby. Mama Nadi has to cope with alcoholic men who go to the brothel with a violent attitude which is bolstered by their social status of power, in order to pay for sexual affection. Moreover, at the end of the play, the reader discovers that Mama Nadi is also ruined. This fact has been hidden for the whole play so that the character is not judged by the reader as she is by society. Sophie, in contrast, does not experience sexual encounters in the bar, as mentioned above. She is saving money in order to pay for an operation to “repair the damage” (Nottage 55), but meanwhile, she is the person in charge of accompanying the few peaceful moments there are with meaningful songs which mirror her current emotional situation. Finally, Josephine, who is another young girl employee in Mama Nadi’s house, develops a conflictive attitude against Salima and Sophie. She does not seem to accept that Sophie is there if she does not work like she has to, and she mocks Salima’s situation. Against the background of this situation, the main themes to be analyzed in the following sections of the thesis are sexual abuse, the loss of identity, torture, war, violence, as well as friendship and love.

The complexity of these issues, together with the fact that the setting of the play is always almost the same, allows us to get to know the characters more in depth when overcoming failures and achieving successes. Both trauma and happiness share the same space, just as victims and rapists do. This paradoxical idea lets us analyze how harmful the consequences can be for survivors, but at the same time, how sharing problems can help, specifically the female characters, create bonds between them and fight together against

injustice. Nottage decided to deal with uncommon, and also taboo, topics in order to confront a reality which had been untold for years. Not only did she break with racial and gender stereotypes, but she has also achieved, by narrating traumatic explicit stories, that readers may identify, or at least sympathize, with the victims. It can be said that she has encouraged humans to empathize with what society has unfairly dehumanized. In fact, *Ruined* is not the only work in which Nottage talks about social problems. The African American activist published a play called *Intimate Apparel* (2004) which presents the life of a Black woman living in California who fights in order to fulfill her dream of becoming a seamstress and the obstacles she faces living in a white-dominant society. This work also touches upon themes like prostitution, racial inequality, industrialization and social classes. In 2010, J. Kelly Nestruck interviewed Nottage in order to let her explain the main reasons why she had chosen those themes both in *Ruined* and *Intimate Apparel*. Nottage answered that she wanted to give marginalized people, especially Black women, a voice so that they can be heard around the world and can have an impact on civilization. For centuries underprivileged people have been oppressed. Although this does not mean that they are privileged now, at least they are being heard by society thanks to authors like Nottage. Their lack of power in society has forced them to live in unfair conditions since they had no social authority. Therefore, because of the class and racial heritage Nottage has as a Black woman and the injustices she discovered on her trip to East Africa, she decided to give women power in her works since, as she concretely states in the interview mentioned above: “we’ve been present throughout history, but our voices have been neglected.”

#### 4.2. *Ruined* as Tragedy: the Question of Genre

According to its author, *Ruined* might be classified as belonging to the genre of tragedy, on which the play relies to expose its main themes. In an interview with Jean E. Howard in 2014, Lynn Nottage argues that “*Ruined* is a tragedy even though it has a happy ending.” When people think about tragedy, we tend to associate the genre with the portrayal of traumatic experiences and events which do have an impact on characters’ behaviors. This would mean that the ending is not a happy or successful one. When undergoing terrific and cruel situations, people will normally bear in mind this horror once experienced, and therefore, they may never be happy again because these traumatic incidents will always remain part of their memory. Insecurity, mental instability, and low self-esteem are some of the consequences that tragedy may leave on someone in form of a Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) which will severely affect victims’ lives, making the event impossible to forget (“Post Traumatic Stress Disorder”). Nevertheless, in *Ruined*, Nottage aims to deal with tragic episodes that conclude in a happy ending. The message Nottage presents by mixing these strategies is that a tragic experience can sometimes be adapted to survivors' lives.

In contrast to the playwright’s notion, Jennifer Scott Mobley discusses that this play takes the form of a classic melodrama. In her view, the use of “theatrical conventions such as music, suspense and sensation scene” (130) makes readers suffer a transformation in socio-political terms, making them part of the plot. According to Mobley, Nottage may have been inspired by nineteenth-century American melodramatists as can be analyzed through the utilization of “anti-war themes and a story told through a female protagonist caught in the middle of a war zone” (130) and other techniques like portraying a domestic sphere, the idea of a heroine who fights against the devil, and the contrast between the use of male violence versus the submissive women, among other conventions. Nevertheless, this dissertation will focus on Nottage’s view of *Ruined* as a tragedy due to the fact that she denounced in her

interview with Howard that contemporary melodramatics are ashamed of emotional writing, considering it even “bad writing” (Nottage and Howard 848). In fact, as she says, this play concludes on a happy end because it breaks with female stereotypes. When Mama Nadi finally reveals to Christian that she is ruined, Christian does not care. He even feels sorry about what other men could have done to Mama Nadi and he promises that their love is true love. This ending portrays the idea that female genitals do not determine women's identity, and that the lack of them should not be a reason for rejecting women and leaving them alone for the rest of their lives.

The main difference between female and male writers when confronting a social problem as a main theme is the experiences and the respective pain they have suffered. Because of the fact that raping and genital mutilation is mostly suffered by women, tragedy about these issues tend to be a topic which only female writers tackle. The physical violence women suffered in the DRC is clearly portrayed in the plot of *Ruined*. Although the play does not focus on the process of mutilation itself but the physical, psychological and social consequences it has instead, there is a feminist approach which is highly effective through the empathy created with the characters. Being Mama Nadi, who acts as the representative of the women living in her brothel, the one who enjoys having the leading role highlights the importance of looking for the equality between genders, raising the voice of those who have been previously silenced. On the one hand, the main role Mama Nadi takes in the play is that of a leader who has the power to make decisions and give orders to soldiers. This representation can be interpreted from a feminist point of view because within the historical context in which the play takes place it is very uncommon, even far from reality, to have a woman who has enough power to control even soldiers' behavior at her bar in order to protect Salima and Sophie's lives. Conversely, Mobley contends that Mama Nadi must be considered an anti-hero since she is “thrust into the role of savior against her will” (131). Consequently,

the role of Mama Nadi is highly important, but her actions will determine whether to consider her a heroine or an anti-hero figure.

Regarding the linguistic features of the play, the most meaningful stylistic notion that must be analyzed is the use of songs as a way of self-expression. Language in the play is simple and colloquial. Although the play is written in English, there are some parts where French and African Vernacular English (AVE) are also used. Firstly, writing in English enables Nottage to reach a wider range of readers around the world. Taking into account that English is a global language, the story can travel around many women's lives helping them to feel identified by people who are not from their own countries. In other words, *Ruined* can work as a link to join different cultures and women who are trapped under a traumatic experience like the characters in the play. Secondly, the use of French expressions also plays a significant role since it helps to set the context of the play. In the DRC, French is spoken as the official language. Thus by making use of this language the playwright allows readers to be closer to the reality of the place at that time creating a realistic atmosphere in the brothel. Thirdly, instances of AVE like "You...you be a good girl" (Nottage 19) or "them soldiers don't respect nothing" (31) are identified through Christian's speech as a representation of an English variety which is not standard, neither in the play nor in the current reality of the DRC. The use of different languages gives this play hybridity in the same way that songs, poems and dances contribute to the creation of a cultural heterogeneity. In this context, Sophie's role, which is no other than singing, should not be overlooked. In this play, songs work for her as a therapy and help readers to understand her feelings. In the song "A Rare Bird" Sophie creates a metaphor by comparing ruined women with "rare birds":

A rare bird on a limb

Sings a song heard by a few,

A few patient and distant listeners

Hear its sweet 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, evade capture,  
And yet the bird  
Still cries out to be heard.  
And yet the bird  
Still cries out to be heard.  
And yet the bird  
Still cries out to be heard (Nottage 38)

The idea that Nottage portrays here is comparing women with birds as these feathered creatures are a kind of animal which is usually represented as captured and repressed, but also as free once they are out of the cage. From another perspective, it could be also possible to analyze the fact that the final sentence which closes the dialogue of the play is spoken by a parrot (i.e. a bird), as highlighting the final freedom achieved by Mama Nadi as she is finally free from her own prejudices, despite still being imprisoned. The main idea in this dissertation, though, is that the play denounces that women, especially “ruined” women, are trapped like a bird in a cage and they cry out loud in order to be heard by society. In fact, in a recorded live production of the play available on the Internet (Coosie Creates) the audience can see the abovementioned parrot trapped in a cage in the background, thus birds and cages are definitely symbols to foreground in this play as they represent the oppressive environment in which women live in. The play suggests that behind each traumatic experience there is a story but the patriarchal society silences female victims so that their stories remain unheard

and their suffering is ignored and forgotten. In fact, the soldiers in the play do not seem to catch the message behind each song. This means that they are also trapped in a male dominant ideology that makes them unaware of the pain they are causing women. Therefore, music works as a means to feel liberated. Apart from the language and the music, hybridity is also created by African dances as can be analyzed in the video (Coosie Creates 01:47:30) and the amount of poems Christian offers to Mama Nadi in order to win her heart.

#### 4.3. Women as Battlefields

In general terms, when a war breaks out there are always two opponents who fight for winning something, which may be territory, lands, colonies or rights, among other goals. Typically, it is assumed that the ones who suffer the most are soldiers since they are at risk of being killed or injured. Nevertheless, there is a forgotten group of the war which is commonly undervalued, which are the civilian victims, especially children and women. For women, being the victims means to experience double sufferings: the consequences of the war (destruction, injuries or deaths) and the consequences of the male power (rape and sexual abuse). As is normally thought, soldiers are mostly armed men who have to fight for their faction. However, men being the only ones allowed to possess weapons and having a high social status can be harmful for women and children, as it is the moment when the abuse of power starts. Elaff Ganim Salih et al. discuss that the painful reality represented in *Ruined* aims “to portray rape as an instrument of emasculation and violence against women” (115) in order to highlight that soldiers use “women’s wombs as battlegrounds”, demonstrating their strategic use in warfare. The fact that the military army is dominated by the male gaze makes them assume that they have a higher status than women, who do not take part in the war as fighters in underdeveloped countries since it has always been considered to be a male-focused mission as women are seen as vulnerable and weak. The patriarchal system in

*Ruined* is explicitly illustrated by the abuse suffered from the troops. Laura Michaela Basalic analyzes that abuse is “a tragic situation resulted [sic] from the toxic relationship between genders, rooted in conservative ideas of power and conformist societal roles.” (70).

In *Ruined*, this idea is perfectly shown. At the beginning of the play, when Sophie and Salima are introduced, Mama orders Josephine to “[t]ake them out back. Get them washed and some proper clothing” (Nottage 11). Unquestionably, the reader is forced to think of women as objects who have to be looked after by someone who has more experience. In order to convince Mama Nadi not to reject Sophie, Christian says: “The girl cooks, cleans, and she sings like an angel” (Nottage 13). The domestic environment in which women have been commonly placed in literature has an impact on determining their social value within a real society. As they cannot do anything as fighters, they must remain at home. The idea of having a girl who stays at home and who has to do what men ask for, portrays a vision of women as servants in any field. During the second scene, in Mama Nadi’s bar, a rebel soldier interrupts by saying “psst! You! Psst! Psst!” (21) in order to call Sophie’s attention. By talking to a woman like he would have called a dog, he is animalizing women in a subtle way. Even at some point, Salima admits that she was called by her husband “a filthy dog” (Nottage 67). In this sense, Nottage opts to portray women as objectified and animalized beings in order to make the reader become aware of the dehumanization this provokes. Another instance of men’s attitude of superiority can be seen when the rebel soldier mentioned above, annoyed by not having Sophie for himself, says: “Now, I want her to talk to me!” (Nottage 23). In this example, the above mentioned video (Cosie Creates 00:17:44) helps the listener to form an idea of the violent and aggressive kind of man soldiers are. Because of the fact that Sophie is mutilated, Mama Nadi tries to make the soldier believe that Salima is a better choice so that he cannot discover that Sophie is injured, since it would be dishonorable for her.

The technical and explicit words Nottage selects are by no means meaningless. Mr. Harari, another provider for Mama Nadi's business, says that "if that young man had come to me, I would've given him enough money to buy pussy for a month." (Nottage 25). The playwright wants to convey the idea that women's bodies become an object for which men and even boys bet and pay money in order to possess them, treating female bodies and intimacy as a treasure men must control. As has been shown, female characters in the play represent the idea of men's happiness connected with their total dominance over obedient girls in order to keep them satisfied. This idea is exactly what can be inferred from Mama Nadi's message when she says "I need one of you to go and make him happy, show him his hard work isn't for naught" (Nottage 65).

The consequences of living in a patriarchal society are suffered mostly by female characters. The objectification and animalization suffered by the characters allows the audience to open their eyes to this cruel reality that has been hidden for years. By representing the different tragic lives female characters have to face from the victims' perspective, Nottage is denouncing the abuse of power that the war brings to humanity. Apart from the fact that women are only valued, both in the brothel and in society, if they are not ruined or damaged, they also have to cope with physical manipulation and intimidation as something integrated in their culture. A meaningful tool that Nottage has used to represent women's anxieties is the use of two common and recurrent spaces like the home and the brothel itself. Salima, Sophie and Mama Nadi are always in the same place, they do not have a room outside the bordello. They are trapped within a sexual and domestic atmosphere as it is the place where women are supposed to be in a country like the DRC. The fact that it is the only place where they are allowed to be creates a feeling of anxiety on the spectator's side too. The play thus denounces the use of women's bodies as battlefields by giving voice to damaged female characters.

#### 4.4. *Ruined* as Metaphor

The resilience that survivors from sexual abuse develop emerges from past horrible experiences which they have to adapt to the present reality. The title of the play reflects the idea that once a woman is damaged, she will be conditioned by her pain for all her life. Nevertheless, in this play resilience is a capability that teaches both survivors and readers that, although tragic occurrences do affect their identity and way of dealing with everyday issues, there is always a path to follow and changing the perspective might be the key to confronting their current physical limitations. One of these previous constraints is the female genital mutilation that women suffer just because soldiers consider women to have “dishonored” them. Accordingly, wombs are going to become the most powerful and valuable weapon for men during the war.

That is the reason why war and sexual abuse go hand in glove. Since the womb is the organ where babies, and therefore new lives, begin, women are the ones in control of the regeneration of the ethnicity and the nation. This is the main reason why they are seen as enemies by the male-dominated state, since they have the power to procreate and it is something men cannot control completely. By means of rape and mutilation, then, women are marginalized, dishonored, and humiliated both by men but also by the system. Therefore, the title works as a metaphor that mirrors these women’s realities. Not only are they “ruined” physically, since they lack genitals and thus have lost their value in the patriarchal system, but they are also “ruined” because being mutilated makes it impossible for them to succeed in life, since their social function, which is reproduction as creators, has been grabbed from them by men. Through this perspective, Lynn Nottage denounces that female genitals and bodies are still under men's control, as if it was something that men must own. In the following quotation, Salima is explaining to Sophie in a devastated and frustrated tone how

she was used and abused by troops and how harsh it is to talk about it in spite of the time that has passed:

But they still took me from my home. They took me through the bush—raiding thieves. Fucking demons! "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 69)

Being physically injured and battered creates a Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder which can lead to a sense of insecurity, fear and shame as introduced in the Theoretical Framework. As mentioned in the Theoretical Framework, talking about a specific problem may help the person to overcome the issue, just as Meretoja explains when she mentions that “working through traumatic experience requires the difficult task of reinterpreting one’s self-narrative and trying to renarrate it in less damaging ways that strengthen one’s agency” (31). However, because of the fact that traumatic thoughts will come back as a result of the damage suffered, it can “shape one’s narrative self-understanding, resulting for example in a self-diminishing narrative that impedes one from flourishing” (31), which is what happens to Salima. “And then he fucked me, and when he was finished he sat on the floor and wept. He wanted me to hold him. Comfort him” (Nottage 31), Salima says. Because of the amount of times she has been sexually abused and mistreated by soldiers, it is impossible for her to eliminate those experiences from her mind and she will eventually kill herself. The damage caused by rape

will never be fully overcome by Salima's character. The message Salima and Sophie give to the audience is that, despite having each other's support, nothing will repair the harm created by the rebels. The sense of community they try to explore within Mama Nadi's brothel is not enough for the torture they have undergone. They are experiencing more wars than the one they share with the country. The intimate wars they are fighting against their identity are even more important than the physical war. Being mutilated means that they cannot have the biological form of their genitals anymore, and as a result, most of them are deprived from being pregnant and having sexual relationships. Leaving aside the idea of women's individual sexual pleasure, FGM can bring other consequences such as "haemorrhage and infection" which can be mortal, or lead to the "anxiety, depression, terror, feelings of humiliation and sexual disorders" (Generalitat de Catalunya 15) that Sophie and Mama Nadi show regarding their bodies.

The dichotomy within Mama Nadi, as a victim and, at the same time, as a character with patriotic values, is strongly relevant. On the one hand, Mama Nadi is presented as the boss of the bar who only admits women she considers to be complete. That is, women who have their genitals, as they are going to work as sexual workers. She depicts "ruined" girls by objectifying them in an unpleasant way. At the beginning, she says: "I have half a dozen girls like her, I don't need to have another plain girl" (Nottage 13). For Sophie, listening to this remark must be quite hard because if Mama Nadi, who is another damaged woman, does not accept her, then no one will. Furthermore, this "maternal figure" that Mama Nadi represents discourages young women from expressing their emotions and feelings. Statements like "Now, uh-uh, don't cry. We keep our faces pretty" (67) shows that this adult woman has been taught not to show her emotions since that would confirm to men that girls are actually weak. As a result, it can be said that girls in the DRC are expected to be complete, silenced and smiling, as if problems and wounds did not exist for them. On the other hand, the reader can

finally see an empathetic attitude from Mama Nadi towards Sophie, once the latter is installed in the brothel. She offers help to treat Sophie's injury since, as Mama Nadi defines it, "it smells like the rot of meat" (Nottage 17).

Despite the fact that both Sophie and Salima represent the girls of a new generation, they show two contradictory ways of dealing with PTSD. From Salima's perspective, the readers learn that mutilation and raping, as well as any kind of sexual abuse, can have such a harmful impact on victims that it seems impossible to cope with it, leading to the development of PTSD which brings different anxieties into their lives. In this line, Basalic discusses that "not every woman sees herself as a victim, and not every woman can bear the pain of her memories." (70). The fact that women like Salima have decided to end their life rather than keep going reinforces the idea that the women who opt for remaining alive are not merely victims but survivors. Not only have they survived a war but they have also decided to keep going on despite their tragic experiences in order to make history and let the world know the inhuman atrocities they have suffered. Committing suicide becomes the easiest solution for Salima. On the contrary, Sophie tries to find accessible possibilities for her distress by saving money in order to visit a doctor because "they can repair the damage" (Nottage 55). In the end, Nottage decides for this play to have a successful ending because there is learning involved. Mama Nadi has learnt that despite being ruined, she can still be valued because Christian truly loves her. She had not ever imagined that an "incomplete" woman like her will ever succeed in life since society has taught her that she is worthless. Sophie survives although being injured since she learns that women are not only defined by their genitals. As a result, resilience appears as a surviving tool for Sophie and Mama Nadi in order to adapt their personal issues to their lives, although their tragic experiences may not ever be fully overcome.

## 5. Conclusion

Lynn Nottage's *Ruined* works as a social denunciation of the injustices carried out by men in the Democratic Republic of the Congo during the Second Civil War. Through the study of the female characters who share the same traumatic experiences, it is possible to confirm that women pay a double price for the consequences of the war. The military conflict which citizens of the DRC experience has a tremendous impact on victims' lives. The social status men have acquired by being the soldiers and the guardians of their faction offers them the chance to take advantage of their social power and expect people from other social groups, in this case women, to do what they request. They aim to govern women's bodies in the same way they govern the part of the country under their faction's control. As a sign of social punishment when not following their orders, soldiers in *Ruined* mutilate women, from a very early age on, in a cruel and inhuman way. Female characters are represented as part of men's possessions and as a result, the audience can clearly infer from the plot that women are treated as nothing but objects.

Although Mama Nadi's brothel represents a neutral place for men who are willing to pay for affection, female characters do not seem to find it the most peaceful environment. Salima and Sophie still have to use their bodies for men's desires. Nevertheless, it is the place where they deal with the consequences of the traumatic experiences and aim to look for ways of surviving. The focus on the characters' issues and personal traumas helps the audience to understand that tragic events will always have an impact on individuals' attitude. As has been previously analyzed, in the play *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* leads to two different outcomes, and the main reason for that might rely on leaving the chance to the audience to choose what they would do if they were in the position of Mama Nadi, Salima and Sophie.

It would be meaningful, hence, to end this dissertation by concluding that female characters' attitudes are definitely affected by mutilation and sexual abuse suffered by hands

of men. The internal fights Salima, Mama Nadi and Sophie carry out inside themselves are highly remarkable in relation to Nottage's aim of denouncing that violence or sexual abuse is not a justification of men's lack of emotional affect as women's bodies are not men's possession.

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