

Original Paper

Unveiling the Construction of Overall Meaning: A Social Semiotic Analysis of the Anti-War Discourse in Lynn Nottage's *Ruined*

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Abstract

Lynn Nottage's drama, *Ruined*, depicts the profound and far-reaching consequences of warfare on both individuals and communities. With deliberate emphasis on the harrowing experiences of Congolese women, this play is concerned with the intricate web of human rights challenges that plague conflict-ridden regions. Halliday's social semiotics understands and analyzes how meaning is constructed in various discourses, which can provide a framework for probing the relationships between language, communication, and society, and how these entities interplay to convey meaning and mediate social interactions. This paper delves into the discursive cues that construct the overall meaning of *Ruined* through the lens of Halliday's social semiotics, and further explores the social-cultural contexts constructed by Nottage as well as the anti-war keynote embedded within her play. By examining the ideational, interpersonal, and textual expressions throughout the text, this analysis suggests that the adopted framework can provide valuable insights into understanding how discursive strategies serve character development, relational dynamics between characters, and the underlying message of the targeting play, which can also be taken as an attempt at multidisciplinary interpretations on literary works.

Keywords

social semiotics, anti-war, Lynn Nottage, *Ruined*

1. Introduction

In contemporary literature, the humanistic concern and advocacy for the rights of disadvantaged groups have garnered significant attention. In our increasingly complex world where certain individuals continue to suffer from various conflicts, literature emerges as a distinctive genre with the potential to compel

individuals to scrutinize reality and discern the underlying messages within various discourses. Consequently, literature assumes a pivotal role in heightening awareness regarding specific ethical and humanistic issues. Lynn Nottage, an American playwright, stands out as a notable contributor to drawing attention to the often-overlooked groups worldwide. One of Nottage's impactful works, *Ruined*, exemplifies her commitment to expressing compassion for those residing in conflict zones. This paper attempts to analyze how Nottage shows her solicitude for the disadvantaged groups struggling in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (thereafter, the DRC) in her play, *Ruined*, and seeks to explore the discursive strategies for constructing the overall meaning, thus reflecting the keynote of the play under the lens of Halliday's (1978) social semiotics.

Lynn Nottage, born in 1964 in Brooklyn, New York, is a renowned American playwright and screenwriter, known for her exceptional work in the drama genre. After becoming a full-time playwright in the 1990s, she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize twice. One award was for her play *Ruined* in 2009, and the other was for *Sweat* in 2017. Inspired by Brecht's antiwar play *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1939), Nottage embarked on a journey to Ugandan refugee camps where she conducted interviews with women who had escaped the civil strife in the DRC to delve into and comprehend their lived experiences (Whoriskey, 2009, pp. 10-11). In the 1960s, the DRC successfully freed itself from the oppressive grip of Belgian colonial rule and obtained its long-awaited national independence. Tragically, the DRC has been plagued by two devastating conflicts since 1996, embroiling not only its own people but also nine African nations, most notably Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi. The escalating conflicts developed into a complicated interplay of political, ethnic, and economic stakes, with armed groups competing for power and control over natural resources such as diamonds, gold, coltan, and tin. This war has led to widespread violence, displacement, and human rights violations. Millions of deaths have occurred with many more forced out of their homes. Disadvantaged groups have been especially targeted, with women and children left exceptionally vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation, deliberately employed as weapons of war (Stearns, 2011, pp. 65-73). Nottage's play, *Ruined*, unfolds within this contextual backdrop.

Set in the war-torn DRC, the story takes place in a mining town located in the eastern part of the country, with the focal point being a bar as well as a brothel owned by Mama Nadi. The bar is located on a key thoroughfare frequented by miners, soldiers, and various individuals linked to the ongoing conflict. Apart from providing an entertainment venue that offers catering services as well as song and dance performances, Mama Nadi also assumes the role of overseeing the management of the girls under her care, who are involved in the sexual services to both government forces and rebel factions. Women like Sophie and Salima are forced to engage in such sexual acts with the soldiers from the armed groups that had previously brutally killed their families, sexually tortured them, and left them homeless. This is their only means of obtaining shelter and some semblance of safety under Mama Nadi's protection. As the story unfolds, the play delves into the personal stories of the characters who find themselves at Mama Nadi's bar. It explores their resilience, strength, and determination to survive despite the horrors they

have experienced. It also highlights the power dynamics, exploitation, and gender-specific violence that are all too prevalent during wartime.

2. An Overview of Previous Studies on *Ruined*

Many scholars have analyzed Nottage's *Ruined* from different perspectives. Fox's study on disability in *Ruined* delves into the interpretation of disability features exhibited by various characters, including Salima and Sophie. Fox's examination of disability in the play demonstrates how Nottage engages in a profound dialogue with African women grappling with the hardships induced by the war in the DRC (p. 3). In a parallel vein, Katrak's 2014 exploration emphasizes one of the functions of theatre, namely, to elicit affective responses from spectators to inspire them as active participants in movements aligned with the pursuit of social justice (p. 33). Approaching *Ruined* through the lens of Foucault's concepts of "biopower" or "biopolitics," Katrak argues that these responses can extend into the real world, potentially inspiring the audience to envision a more justified and empathetic society. This heightened awareness of social justice issues can serve as a foundational step towards addressing existing gender and social inequities and fostering genuine improvements in social realities. In an edited volume that critically analyzes Nottage's plays, Terry, highlighting the diasporic features underlying *Ruined*, draws attention to the land-female metaphors that reveal the obscured realities experienced by women in the DRC (pp. 162-178). Building on Jonathan Gottschall's Strategic Rape theory, Salih et al. add another layer to the discussion by arguing that wartime rape against women is not merely a consequence of conflict but a deliberate tactic employed to morally attack and emasculate the enemy (pp. 113-114). The thematic connection between Fox's disability study on characters in *Ruined*, Katrak's exploration of how Nottage elicits affective responses from the audience, Terry's diasporic analysis, and Salih's interpretation on the basis of Strategic Rape theory provides a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the multiple layers embedded in Nottage's portrayal of women's experiences during the wartime.

In a nutshell, previous studies predominantly focus on exploring the challenges faced by women in *Ruined*, while less attention is given to the profound impact of wartime devastation on the broader social structure and all the individuals within that context. Understanding how characters are shaped by their socio-cultural environment and how this context contributes to the unmerciful conflicts in the play is essential in understanding the full scope and significance of *Ruined*. Therefore, this study mainly pays attention to the analysis of the intricate interplay between the socio-cultural contexts depicted in the text and their profound influence on the development of characters, the dynamics of their relationships, and the overarching keynote that permeates the play. In order to achieve this goal, a social semiotic approach was adopted, which is suitable for exploring the implicit and explicit manifestations of social realities through the overall flow of both semantic and contextual meanings. By examining the discursive cues (ideational, interpersonal, and textual) that contribute to the meaning construction of the text, this study attempts to answer the following questions:

(1) How do the ideational, interpersonal, and textual features construct the overall meaning and socio-cultural context of *Ruined*?

(2) How does the overall flow of meaning reflect the keynote of *Ruined*?

3. Theoretical Framework: A Brief Introduction to Halliday's Social Semiotics

Halliday's social semiotic framework examines the ways in which meaning is created and communicated in social contexts. According to Halliday, language is a semiotic system of social phenomenon, and meaning is not inherent in words or symbols but is constructed through the social contexts in which they are used. He emphasized the social attributes of human beings, insisting that the input and output of the semantic system within any discourse are sociological, thus highlighting the importance of examining how human beings function in social and cultural systems in understanding meaning creation and interpretation. According to Halliday, language is not a neutral tool for communication; it is deeply embedded in social structures and the inner power dynamics. He argued that semantic meanings existing in the discourse are not solely determined by individual cognitive processes, but are also shaped by social factors (pp. 133-139). In other words, the meanings we produce and interpret are influenced by our social roles, relationships, and the broader social context in which communication takes place.

Literature frequently acts as a medium for societal commentary and critique. Halliday's framework can offer a valuable tool for investigating how literary texts either challenge or uphold established social norms, interrogate power hierarchies, or advocate for transformative social actions. By employing this framework, insights into the manner in which literature actively participates in and influences social and cultural debates can be gained. Adopting a social semiotic approach helps to analyze the utilization of linguistic and literary devices in representing and navigating social realities, power dynamics, and cultural values within a given literary work. To be more detailed, social semiotics attempts to deconstruct the underlying message by examining ideational, interpersonal, and textual expressions within the targeting discourse. According to Halliday, language describes and interprets the whole of our experience; it also expresses certain logical relations (p. 21). Ideational expressions facilitate the comprehension of language and other semiotic resources' utilization in representing and conveying characters' experiences. This is achieved through the analysis of ideas, symbols, and metaphors. Meanwhile, language expresses our participation and indicates our speech role during the communication (pp. 21-22). Due to this fact, analyzing interpersonal expressions can explore how language is used to establish social relationships and power dynamics, in order to discover how language is used to negotiate power, express emotions, and establish social hierarchies. Furthermore, language has to do all these things mentioned above simultaneously, in which relates to the context and to be capable of being organized as relevant discourse (p. 23). The textual expressions appearing in the text are conducive to examine the overall meaning that is shaped by the context in which it is produced and understood. By examining the ideational, interpersonal, and textual expressions existing in *Ruined*, this study will be endowed with access to

comprehend how the meaning system in this play has been established by the playwright, and how this system serves the ultimate keynote of the play.

4. Discussion

4.1 Ideational Expressions: The Distorted Social Values Regarding 'Sex' and 'Woman's Body'

Halliday argues that the enactment of ideational expressions allows individuals to express their own experiences relating to their respective environments. These expressions indicate how speakers, their experiences, and their words engage in the construction of this social system (p. 112). During periods of conflict, social structures are submerged in chaos and the social values prevalent during peacetime are notably challenged. The distorted social values that are highly conspicuous in the wartime context are unmasked in the dialogues delivered by the characters in *Ruined*. This exposes the pressing issues of humanity inherent in the given context. Two evident illustrations of such altered perceptions are the distorted notions of 'sex' and 'woman's body' prevalent in such scenarios.

In *Ruined*, Nottage portrays the experiences of women who have been subjected to sexual violence, highlighting the trauma, physical and emotional pain, and social consequences they endure. There are several references to 'sex' and sex-related topics in the play. There is a large majority of clauses involving psychological processes in clauses adjacent to the concept of sex. The women in the play often associate sex with negative emotions and perceptions, such as 'hurt', 'disgust', and 'pain', when they talk about and recall their memories of their experiences with 'sex'. An obvious illustration can be found in Salima and Sophie's lines, when Salima confides in Sophie that she wants to leave Mama's bar:

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.

(Nottage, 2013, p. 1822)

In contrast to the prevalent perception of 'sex' in civilized countries, the women in the play closely tie 'sex' to physical and psychological suffering: sex is torture, sex is a serious threat to their survival, and sex is the only way for them to make a living out of this mess. For example, Mama Nadi evaluates the girls according to the value of in terms of their sexual services from the very first moment she meets them. In Scene 1 of Act 1, Sophie, who is outwardly more attractive, is preferred at first; but when Mama learns that Sophie is 'ruined', she immediately changes her mind and is prepared to keep Salima, who is still physically intact. This demonstrates that the perception and commodification of sexuality in the context of this play extend far beyond the individual autonomy or consensual nature usually associated with it in more peaceful societies. Rather, the act of engaging in sexual relations is re-framed not as a

personal choice, but as an imposed survival strategy, augmented by distress, exploitation, and rampant violation of human rights.

In this warped milieu of *Ruined*, women's bodies are also perceived differently from those that are widely accepted in normal societies. A woman who has been subjected to sexual violence is, unfortunately, often stigmatized within society as her assault is inextricably linked with personal dishonor, stemming from the perceived loss of bodily sanctity. Furthermore, the situation worsens when a woman's reproductive capabilities are compromised, as she becomes subject to further degradation, even from other women. In this context, a woman's body is viewed not as her personal domain, but as a commodity -- subject to objectification, commodification, and control -- serving various purposes ranging from entertainment, reproduction, to the evidence of conquest. Under this patriarchal scrutiny from the whole society, women find themselves re-victimized in this social context. Consequently, a female victim is often subjected to internal marginalization from not only her spouse but also her family and community, leading towards a profound and cruel form of secondary violation, perpetuated by the broader social structure. This paints a portrait of a society where a woman's value is arbitrarily linked with her physical integrity. These misshapen perceptions, pervasive throughout the narrative, elucidate the harsh realities and exploitative structures that encapsulate women during periods of armed conflict. The ideational expressions of 'sex' and 'woman's body' illuminate the potential for language to frame and render visible the intricate web of distress, oppression, and impermanence woven through these women's narratives. Thus, Nottage's *Ruined* poignantly underscores that amidst the turmoil of war, the personal battlefields that women face are multi-layered, complex, and deeply interconnected, and these battles intertwine not only with their own lives but also with broader social values that permeate their everyday existence.

4.2 Interpersonal Expressions: The Power-centered Interpersonal Interactions During Wartime

According to Halliday, interpersonal expressions in language show the speaker's attitudes and judgment, and at the same time attempt to influence the attitudes and behaviors of others through these expressions. These expressions are related to the speaker's role in the specific situation, such as questioner and respondents, informer and doubter, and so on (p. 112). This, to some extent, indicates the power dynamics hidden behind individuals' language and behaviors, thus reflecting one of the sections of the society. Interpersonal expressions, especially during a time of conflict, become a potent tool to wield power, assert authority, and negotiate personal agency. Such language expressions not only shape the interactions among characters, but also magnify the multifaceted and shifting power dynamics that permeate the wartime landscape.

In Mama Nadi's bar, Mama possesses a firm power of speech and authority over other women. During their conversations, she commonly questions someone and issues commands to someone, and this indicates her powerful speech role that can request information and services from others. Imperatives are also common in Mama's lines; even when providing information, Mama always maintains a dominant position when communicating with other women in her bar. Every element within her bar, including the employees, particularly the young women working under her supervision, is considered as her personal

assets. This demonstrates her extensive control over both the tangible and intangible elements within her purview, thereby anchoring her as the unquestionable authority within this microcosm. While engaging with the armed forces, Mama habitually assumes the responsibility of initiating conversations, yet it is implicitly clear that the actual control over these conversations rests with the one who possesses weapons. In such scenarios, Mama transposes her speech role to that of an informer, necessitating her to provide information, commodities, and services. This is done not solely for herself, but also for the protection of the other women in her care, thus maintaining a semblance of fragile safety within her bar. In her communication with the general of the local government and the leader of the rebel soldiers, Mama often actively starts a conversation and expresses a willingness to provide commodities or services in exchange for a temporary respite from the conflict. Such an initiative, upon closer examination, can be understood as a compelling inclination to offer additional details or commodities to the recipient: in this case, Osembenga and Kitembe. This underscores her subordinate position within the relationship and signifies her willingness to barter any resources at her disposal as a survival mechanism. It is the armed forces, wielding weapons, power, and authority, who retain an irrefutable hold over interpersonal interactions, highlighting the vulnerable and lopsided balance of power inherent in these conversations. The power-centered interpersonal interactions during periods of conflict skew considerably from conventional norms of social exchange, characterized by heightened imbalances and systemic vulnerabilities. Within the throes of war, conventional social hierarchies dissolve, yielding to a more unordered, force-driven dynamic. As such, the possession of weapons becomes a determinant of supremacy, exerting a crucial influence over the destinies of individuals. This stark power disparity elucidates how the instruments of violence -- weapons, in the context of *Ruined*, become the compelling currency of power during wartime, drastically manipulating the course of interpersonal interactions and social structures. Such a power dynamic embodies the profound socio-cultural repercussions of war, serving as an emblem of the multifaceted hardships endured by all individuals existing within this context.

4.3 Textual Expressions: The 'Downward' and 'Upward' Flow of Meaning Indicating the Social Disorder in the DRC

Halliday posits that textual expressions serve essential functions in making language use congruent with the associated meaning. They effectively link the application of language to the specific circumstances and environment in which the speakers find themselves. Messages that are connected via textual expressions are replete with meanings that direct both 'downward' towards the text itself and 'upward' towards the broader linguistic and social systems (pp. 110-113). In more precise terms, the 'downward' interpretations of the textual expressions are facilitated by ideational and interpersonal expressions, serving to contextualize the present discourse in relation to the underpinning ideas and social relations. Meanwhile, the 'upward' meanings of the textual expressions primarily rely on non-linguistic devices, such as the strategic employment of omission and repetition, to bolster inter-textual coherence and consistency. As such, these tactics serve to integrate the present discourse within the overarching narrative and social context. In the case of *Ruined*, the 'downward' flow of meaning coalesces with the

intricate semantic system and social context constructed by Nottage. On the other hand, the ‘upward’ stream of meaning transcends the boundaries of the narrative, reaching into the sphere of reality, specifically concerning the ongoing humanitarian challenges plaguing the DRC. This duality of textual expression thereby bridges the gap between the play’s narrative and the broader social commentary it aims to highlight.

In *Ruined*, there is a reiteration of ‘gun’ and ‘gunfire’ across the text. The repetition of these words has become a narrative implication: as the plot unfolds, these words appear more frequently in the text, implying that the imminent outbreak of armed conflict is drawing closer to the temporary refuge established by Mama Nadi, and this leads to growing concerns among the audience about the fate of the characters in the play. The reiteration of these words serves as a constant reminder of the war-torn setting of the story, which underscores the brutal consequences of war, both physically and psychologically. Also, guns are often associated with power and control. In this context, the repetition of these words reflects the power dynamics and struggles for control that exist between different factions, namely the government soldiers, rebels, and Mama Nadi’s establishment. It symbolizes the ability to exert power, inflict harm, and maintain dominance within the war-affected society. This recurring motif generates a pervasive sense of unease and uncertainty, implying that the characters’ existence is perpetually precarious. By employing this literary device, the playwright effectively enhances the dramatic intensity and sustains a sense of suspense. Moreover, the iterative nature of this thematic thread intertwines with other ideational and interpersonal cues, collectively contributing to the portrayal of fragmented social realities created by Nottage. The strategic foci on these representations, phrases, and embodiment are paced with the plot’s development, finely organized to build tension and draw the audience into the harsh reality of the characters’ lives.

The story of *Ruined* is firmly rooted in the harrowing realities unfolding in the DRC. The war that happened in the DRC has caused millions of deaths; what amplifies the horror is the deeply troubling tragedies experienced by the civilians amid this war. Staggeringly inhumane actions like cannibalism, sexually mutilating girls with gun barrels and sticks, and burying women alive, have become tragically commonplace. These stark instances of human cruelty underline the extreme dehumanization and degradation that have pervaded this war-torn region (Stearns, 2011, pp. 369-370). The repercussions of warfare are profound, affecting all those within the conflict zone indiscriminately, irrespective of their gender, nationality, or ethnicity. Nottage’s friend, Whoriskey, joined her on an impactful journey to Africa, where they interviewed women from the DRC who had managed to seek refuge at the border of Rwanda. In the introduction to *Ruined*, penned by Whoriskey, she articulates: “Like many people who perpetrate sexual crimes, the men and boys who raped were themselves victims of unspeakable violence” (p. 11). Men have also been brutalized in the war; such male characters can be found in *Ruined* as well. Old Papa, the solitary survivor of his tribe, is relegated to sharing his past tales only with his pet parrot; the white priest labors tirelessly to save others’ lives, only to meet his end in an inexplicable act of violence; Christian and Mr. Harari, merely transient visitors to the bar, find themselves perpetually confronted by

the armed forces at every turn. These individual narratives underscore the precarious lives of innocent civilians as they navigate the treacherous terrain of conflict, each grappling with their personal encounters with hardship and danger. However, such a tragedy does not acquire the attention it deserves. As what is stated in Stearns' book, there seems to be a palpable lack of concern regarding the current situation in the DRC, a distinctly troubling conflict occurring in Central Africa, predominantly involving the African people. While humanitarian aid may provide temporary relief to the pressing circumstances of the DRC, it fails to address the root cause of the problem. The international community appears hesitant to invest the required intellectual resources in formulating relevant resolutions and countermeasures for this region, which underscores the need for increased commitment and a sense of urgency (pp. 373-376). The individuals residing in the DRC merit heightened attention; fortunately, dramatic literature possesses a distinctive advantage in this respect. According to Katrak's research, theatrical portrayal of violence can provoke emotive responses from the audience, acting as an initial step towards encouraging a genuine pursuit of social justice (pp. 32-33). Similarly, the upward meaning woven into the narrative can elicit connections with reality, thereby resonating with real-world issues and humanitarian concerns towards the DRC. Through the overall flow of meaning within the text, Nottage communicates her stance on warfare and displays deep empathy for innocent civilians affected by wartime atrocities. The portrayal of distorted social values, imbalanced relationships, and disorderly social systems within the narrative further intensifies the readers' comprehension of the devastating impacts of warfare. This immersive experience created by Nottage establishes an anti-war keynote in *Ruined*, prompting broader discussion about the dire circumstances in the DRC and highlighting the crucial role of literature in advocating for social justice.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study analyzes Lynn Nottage's play *Ruined*, examining both the text itself and its broader context. Using social semiotics, the study explores how Nottage skillfully crafts characters, their relationships, and the socio-cultural backdrop. Within this social semiotic analysis, Nottage's deliberate creation of a semantic system diverging from the widely accepted one yet grounded in a segment of reality is illuminated, evoking empathy from readers and audiences toward the victims of war. This intentional divergence generates an anti-war sentiment that resonates throughout the play, evident in the nuanced discursive cues strategically embedded within its fabric. As a result, this analysis enhances our understanding of Nottage's ability to evoke emotions and engage the audience intellectually. Furthermore, this study sheds light on the play's prominent anti-war keynote and serves as a testament to its deep-rooted humanistic empathy. Through this social semiotic exploration, a fresh perspective on gender-specific violence, human rights, and anti-war activism embedded within literary discourse can be gained.

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