Women’s Confinements in Lynn Nottage’s Intimate Apparel

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Abstract

Women around the world are subject to different kinds of injustice and oppression. African American women are suffering from many kinds of problems. They were brought from their homeland in Africa to a hostile environment. Being placed under the burden of slavery, African American women experienced all kinds of injustice that were represented in many plays, written by African American female playwrights.

African American women suffer from marginalization, domestic violence, and social injustice, their predicaments are deepened by other kinds of abuse, like sexism, rape, and sex trafficking. Such practices turn their life into hell. African American women suffer also from problems like illiteracy and gender bias in work and education.

Lynn Nottage is famous for her bold exposing of the miseries black women around the world. In her Intimate Apparel, she discusses the dilemmas of a single working woman in 1900s Manhattan. Nottage presents the main character Eester, she is a 35-year-old African American seamstress, who lives by her own in a boarding house. Esther creates custom-made lingerie for New York’s wealthy ladies as well as to its women of the night. Nottage exposes the social oppression experienced by her main character as a single working woman and the different confinement she is imprisoned in as an African American woman. The play also discusses the different issues that touch women’s life and affect their status in society.

Key words: Lynn Nottage, Intimate Apparel, oppression, injustice, gender-bias, confinement

1.1 About the Author

Lynn Nottage was born in 1964 Brooklyn, New York. At the age of eight, she began writing, inspired by the strong African American women in her family, like her grandmothers and aunts; they were models, who Nottage regarded as dynamic figures in her life”( Shannon, “An intimate look”, 186). She moved at the age of four to the racially mixed Gowanus section of Brooklyn, where she played street games with the children of Latino and Irish immigrants. She recalled spending her childhood in the midst of Native American and African American families who found temporary housing in nearby boarding houses (Shannon, “Women Playwrights”, 216). Nottage grew to adulthood enjoying a secure middle-class lifestyle, yet she was able to transcend her world to find art in the noble struggles of the voiceless, nameless, and less fortunate. In 1982, she received her diploma from New York’s High School of Music and Art in Harlem. She attended Brown University and received her BA Degree in 1986. Without interruption, she got her Master of Fine Arts in playwriting at Yale School of Drama in 1989. She explained in an article written for The Los Angeles Times: “It has taken me the act of writing a new play to rescue the members of my family from storage. If my family hadn’t preserved our stories, and history certainly had not, then who would?”(Ibid)

Nottage grew up in an environment rich with diversity. As African American writer, she was constantly expected to write about race. She said “I find this is less true as a female writer. I feel that there isn’t the same weighted expectation that we as women are going to write solely about gender-specific issues…I feel that there is pressure to address issues of race more than gender. I understand why this is true, based on history, but sometimes it feels creatively limiting” (Greene, 117).

During the 1990s Nottage began writing plays. In 1993, she wrote Poof!. It premiered at the Actors Theater in Louisville, Kentucky. It won the Heideman Award. In 1996, the Steppenwolf...
Theatre Company in Chicago produced *Crumbs from the Table of Joy*, 1995, which was one of her best known plays. Nottage’s most successful work was *Intimate Apparel*, 2003, an exploration of race and class in USA (Hill and Barnett, 370).

Nottage’s plays were described as multicultural for crossing the borders of traditions, countries, races, and civilizations. In an interview with Alexis Greene, she declares that:

Crossing borders is about crossing from the familiar into the unfamiliar, which is a challenge that I’ve set up for myself. I love traveling, literally and figuratively. So I find myself seeking out different kinds of territories, and that territory can be a remote village in Africa, as in *Mud, River, Stone* (1996); a Jewish tenement on the Lower East Side, as in *Intimate Apparel* [2003]; or Europe in the 1600s, as in *Las Meninas* (2002). All of those places, until recently, were equally unfamiliar to me. But I feel that I should be able to explore them, because that’s part of my creative journey and part of trying to answer the questions that I have about this world. (Greene, 116-17)

Nottage concentrated on African American women in self-defining roles. Female characters in her plays boldly assert their individuality and undergo painful journeys that end in self-discovery. She was addressed as an original voice in American theater. At the time, her best-known play was *Intimate Apparel*. Two years later, her play *Ruined* won the Pulitzer Prize for drama. It is set in a brothel in the war-ravaged Congo. The play compelled audience to “face the horror of wartime rape and brutality while still finding affirmation of life amid hopelessness” (The Bureau of International Information Programs, 14). Nottage offered part of her $10,000 Pulitzer Prize award to the Panzi Hospital in the Congo, which did reconstructive surgery for women (Ibid).

She found employment at the national human rights defense organization, Amnesty International. Nottage believed that studying kept her from real matters in life.

When I graduated from Yale, because I believed I hadn’t had any life experience, I was hungry to do something different. I was also feeling as though theatre was decadent and not relevant to this culture that I was living in, and I got a job working at Amnesy International as a public relations person. Then after four years of doing that, I thought, you know, theatre is relevant. And I have to find a way of making it so. (Shannon, “Women Playwrights”,218)

She turned to write plays of restless searchers, forgotten people, alienated folks, mismatched souls, unlikely lovers, and odd couples. Nottage acknowledged a kinship with a community of African American women playwrights, such as Dael Orlandersmith, Ntozake Shange, Kia Corthon, and Suzan-Lori Parks. She conveyed her characters’ stories in different forms. Nottage celebrated African American women in numerous voices and characters with a distinguished style that placed her in the company of famous African American female playwrights (Shannon Shannon, “An intimate look”, 191).

Nottage credits her own curiosity—what she calls the “what if” factor—and a healthy obsession for research as inspirations for her growing body of dramatic works. These factors, along with the indelible imprint left by childhood memories of her mother, a constant hankering for excursions, keen powers of observation, and a healthy imagination have placed her in the forefront of a new generation of black female playwrights. (Ibid)

Nottage is a fearless traveler in her plays, as well as in her life. She has a keenly perceptive eye and an unerring ear for dialogue, and a healthy appreciation for the unusual (Ibid).

1.2 *Intimate Apparel* 2003

Nottage’s first successful work was *Intimate Apparel*. It won most of the major awards for the 2003-2004 theater season, including the Francesca Primus Prize, the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, and the Steinberg Award. It was inspired by the life of her great grandmother. Nottage’s personal exploration of her familial history was a means of investigating the truth and opportunities for African American women in New York during twentieth century (Dickersun, 50). *Intimate Apparel*
was Nottage’s first theatrical triumph. It was the most produced play in American regional theater in the 2005-2006 season (Durham,140).

In *Intimate Apparel*, the audience witness Esther’s status. They make connections between her past destruction and her present recovery. In an interview with Nilo Cruz, Nottage explained the connections between *Intimate Apparel* and her own historical perception. She said that she wrote the play after her mother’s death: “I feel like *Intimate Apparel* is my most deeply personal play. It’s a play that I began writing shortly after my mother died” (Cruz, 23). She said that she wanted to write a play to her mother, a play that was simple, honest, and emotional; she created a play that she knew that her mother wanted to see (Tichler and Kaplan, 95). She reflected the significant relationship within the play between Esther, a poor African American, single seamstress, and Mr. Marks, a Romanian Jewish, fabric distributor. She commented on the personal association between her and the protagonists of the play:

> My husband is Jewish, and his family name was Marcus—they were Romanian—and the name became Marks when they came to the United States. And my family name is Armstrong. Both names appear around the same time on the passenger lists at Ellis Island. So the characters in *Intimate Apparel* are named after our two families. And when I sat down to write the play, I imagined, if my husband and I had met a hundred years ago, what our relationship would have been then. It would have been an impossible relationship. (Greene, 116)

*Intimate Apparel* takes place in lower Manhattan, in 1905. The leading character is Esther. She is a 35-year-old African American seamstress, who lives alone in a boarding house, run by the Mrs. Dickson, who acts as a motherly figure. Esther creates custom-made lingerie for New York’s upper class ladies and its women of the night.

*Intimate Apparel* begins with the single Esther alone in her room adding lace to a camisole, while people downstairs are celebrating Corrina Mae’s wedding. Esther has lived in her boarding house for over 18 years since she was 17 and she is now the only single woman among the 23 women, who live there. She is a clever, hardworking, good girl, but men ignore her as “wall flower.” (Nottage, 8) Being illiterate increases her misery.

The theater is a useful means in awakening the awareness of violence and injustice towards women (Ozieblo and Hernando-Real,2). Simon de Beauvoir asserts in her book, *The Second Sex*, that all kinds of oppression create a state of war (De Beauvoir, 849). Oppression urges female playwrights to fight against it. As a female dramatist, Nottage believes that there will be forms of resistance: "as long as there is theatre, as long as there are women, as long as there is an imperfect society, there will be women's theatre." (Cited in Friedman, 69).

In the opening scenes of the play, Esther discusses with Mrs. Dickson, her landlady, marriage and its significance to women in general. A single woman cannot be independent and she is considered incomplete. When her fellow border, Corrina Mae, gets married, Esther exposes her insecurities about her own marriage visions:

> ESTHER. If you must know, I turned thirty-five Thursday past… And now Twenty--two girls later, if you count Lerleen. That’s how many of these parties I have had to go to and play merry. I should be happy for them, I know, but each time I think why ain’t it me.

> MRS. DICKSON. Your time will come child.

> ESTHER. What if it don’t? (Nottage, 8-9)

Esther’s last inquiry displays her intense fears. The landlady declares “It’s tough for a colored woman in this city. I ain’t got to tell you that” (Nottage,9). Mrs. Dickson has not been married, but only to a shadow of man, “Bless his broken down soul. He had fine suits and perfect diction, and was too high on opium to notice that he was married…But you have godly fingers and a means, and you deserve a gentleman”( Nottage,33). She convinces Esther to accept Mr. Charles. She intentionally overlooks how greedy and fat this frequent visitor is, because she believes that single women, like Esther, cannot be
choosers. Mrs. Dickson says: “sometimes we get to a point where we can’t be so particular” (Nottage,10).

Esther buys the needed fabrics for the garments from an Orthodox Jewish supplier, Mr. Marks. Her exchanges with Mr. Marks, and her dream of opening her own beauty salon, give her hope until she receives a letter from George, a Barbadian laborer working at the Panama Canal. Being illiterate, she relies on others to write to George. The relationship grows through their letters. Eventually George comes to New York. Against the advice of Mrs. Dickson, Esther leaves the boarding house to marry him. She is unable to communicate with George. Nottage comments on issues of race, women’s feelings of worth, and their struggle against compromising one’s dreams and feelings.

Society forces women to consider marriage as the ultimate goal of their life. In an interview, Nottage states:

I am concerned about telling stories about women whom I knew in a way that touches audiences… In the case of Intimate Apparel, I wanted to bridge the gap between women at the turn of the nineteenth century and at the turn of the twentieth century. They were very focused, very hard-working women, and because of the choices that they made, they were being punished, which I think is what’s happening to a lot of African American women today who have taken a career path (Shannon, “An intimate look, 197)

The landlady comments on her marriage of convenience, which is based on economic security rather than emotional needs. “I married him, because I was thirty-seven years old, I had no profession and there wasn’t a decent colored fella in New York City that would have me.” (Nottage,32) Her thoughts reveal a deep desperation. She reveals her husband’s drug addiction. Though Mrs. Dickson occupies a secure position by her business and status as widow, she implores Esther to take a chance and wait for a respectable gentleman. Her motherly advice springs from her negative experience. She does not approve marriage that is based on love:

My mother wanted me to marry up. She was a washerwoman, and my father was the very married minister of our mission…Marry good. She didn’t ever want me to be embarrassed of my fingers the way she was of hers…She wouldn’t even let me help her, she didn’t want my hands to show the markings of labor. I was going to marry up. Love was an entirely impractical thing for a woman in my position ‘Look what love done to me,’ Mama used to say. ‘Look what love done to me.’ (Nottage, 32)

Esther follows the latest trends of fashions to find out at the end that she wears her apparel to the wrong man, who does not appreciate her. The paradox in the play is that Esther “is putting together lingerie for another type of person that she cannot imagine herself being”(Shannon, “An intimate look,198). She faces racial prejudice. She encounters obstacles caused by gender roles. Her dream of opening a beauty parlor is crushed when she accepts these gender roles. The tearing of her quilt represents the destruction of her hopes (Coley, 834). She struggles to free herself from the imprisonment of being an African American female. There are the social codes imposed on her as a single woman. There is the psychological prison she has put herself in by obeying the patterns of other people.

Throughout play, Nottage depicts non-African American characters, who are engaged in relationships with African American women. These multicultural communities shape both African and non-African American women insights of their own identities. Mrs. Van Buren is a white, married woman. She is “an attractive white woman in her early thirties” (Nottage,11). Van Buren purchases intimate apparels from Esther, hoping to excite her abusive husband. She occupies a more privileged position than Esther, because of her race and marital status. Still, she is unhappy wife. “But what does it matter? Has he spent an evening at home? Or even noticed that I’ve painted the damn boudoir vermillion red.” (Nottage,11) Although red cannot be overlooked because of its high visibility, yet the husband ignores it and chooses not to comprehend its meaning, which is related to passionate love and sacrifice (De Portal and Inman, 10).
Mrs. Van Buren is childless. All people “want to know. All of them do. When are you going to have a child, Evangeline?” (Nottage,12) Her answer is always the same: “Why we’re working on it, dear, speak to Harold.” (Nottage,12)

She is viewed as barren land:
I’ve given him no children. (Whispered.) I’m afraid I can’t. It’s not for lack of trying. One takes these things for granted, you assume when it comes time that it will happen, and when it doesn’t who is to blame? They think it’s vanity that’s kept me childless, I’ve heard the women whispering. If only I were that vain. But it’s like he’s given up. (Nottage,13)

Her husband himself blames her. Later, she tells Esther that her husband spits on her every month when she tells him that she is not pregnant. All female characters in the play feel that they are being enslaved by the unfair and unjust social codes of society; their victimization binds them together (Ozieblo and Hernando-Real, 2). Their solidarity is beyond the limitations of race and color; such behavior emphasizes the multicultural dimension of Nottage’s perspectives.

The corset plays a major role in the play. It is a manifestation of social codes imposed by society on women. The corset appeared during the 14th century, during the Victorian Age, the late 19th, and early 20th century; corsets were worn underneath dresses as decorum (Steele, 35). In “Patterns”, a poem by Amy Lowell (1874 –1925), the poet reflects the rigidity women feel wearing corsets at that time:

My dress is richly figured,
...
Tripping by in high-heeled, ribboned shoes.
Not a softness anywhere about me,
Only whale-bone and brocade. (Lowell, et al,5 ll 10-18)

The poem points out the patterns drawn for women to follow. In Intimate Apparel, women wear corsets, because they have to obey the gender codes of the 1905 Manhattan. It represented another form of slavery all women share in general. They obeyed patriarchal rules. Esther creates the corset to confine and to constrict herself and her clients (Shannon, “An intimate look”, 197). She makes intimate garments for the ladies she knows, even Mayme the woman with whom her husband has an affair. Mrs. Van Buren buys expensive pink-silk-and-crepe-de-Chine-gardenia ball corset to compete with other ladies. Though the corsets are uncomfortable and obstruct women’s movement, they yield to the male-controlled fashion and social values. Mrs. Van Buren hates the very low corset. But her disapproval gradually fades away, due to her strong desire to look like the singer from the “Tenderloin” (Nottage,11). She wants to retain the image of the fashionable belle; still, she thinks it “hardly seems decent.”( Nottage,12) The bride, Corinna Mae, wears white satin, with pink roses wedding corset on her wedding night. Moreover, the prostitute, Mayme, wears a beautiful pale blue corset like Mrs. Van Buren’s. She feels herself “like Fifth Avenue” (Nottage,22). Esther wears a splendid white satin embroidered with orange blossoms wedding corset on her wedding night.

In public, women are required to wear corsets beneath their dresses. Despite the fact that they do not like them, they preserve such dress code generation after generation. Mrs. Van Buren considers any attempt to break from the traditions of wearing corsets as inappropriate and she refers to the women right’s movement:

ESTHER. Most gals don’t like ‘em, even fine ladies like yourself. Truth is I ain’t known a man to court pain for a woman’s glance.
MRS. VAN BUREN. You’re not one of those suffragettes, are you?
ESTHER. Oh God no, Mrs. Van Buren. ( Nottage,12)

When Mayme appears for the first time on the stage, her appearance labels her as a Jezebel, the seductive woman:
Another bedroom...Mayme, a strikingly beautiful African American woman (30) sits at an upright piano. She plays a frenzied upbeat rag. Her silk robe is torn, and her face trembles with outrage. Esther bangs on the door, then finally enters carrying a carpetbag. (Nottage,18)

The factors that lead a woman to be in such a situation are tackled. As Mayme plays the piano, she recalls the physical abuse of her father. She is a prostitute, due to her father’s strict behavior.

ESTHER. Oh, pretty. Did you write that Mayme?

MAYME. Yeah... My daddy gave me twelve lashes with a switch for playing this piece in our parlor. One for each year I studied the piano. He was too proper to like anything colored, and a syncopated beat was about the worst crime you could commit in his household... I woke up with the sudden urge to play it. (Nottage,19)

Mayme defies the standard her father establishes for appropriate behavior, yet she acknowledges that she behaves outside the appropriate behavioral standards: “Yeah, baby, I wasn’t born this black and blue (Mayme picks up a bottle of moonshine and takes a belt.)” (Nottage,19) She talks to Esther, who does not accept her behavior: “You don’t approve of me, Esther. I don’t mind.” (Nottage,18)

Mayme needs, as any other woman, to be treated with dignity and respect. She wants to break her father’s cage. She believes that she is the sole master of her own decision: “Let me tell you, so many wonderful ideas been conjured in this room. They just get left right in that bed there, or on this piano bench. They are scattered all over the room. Esther, I ain’t waiting for anybody to rescue me.” (Nottage,22) Concerning her musical talents, she says about her dream: “I am a concert pianist playing recitals for audiences in Prague and I have my own means” (Nottage,20). As a pianist, Mayme’s value depends on audience’s appreciation of her skill in music. Her fantasies about liberation suggest acceptance of her current state, since marriage is not an option for her. She cannot be a wife and a mother; she leads a life beyond conventional boundaries.

Esther’s quilt has a significant role in the play. Susan Glaspell’s quilt in Trifles is a means of confinement and liberation for the heroine of the play. According to Elaine Hedges, the quilt signifies “both the hardships and the heroisms of pioneer life. More specifically, it became a celebration of women's civilizing role” (Quoted in Miriam López Rodriguez, 14). It symbolizes the woman’s life in Glaspell’s play, which is shattered by the brutality of her cruel husband. Quilting represents a creative expression of history in the African American feminine community. In Nottage’s play the quilt unites Esther’s past and present. It symbolizes her journey and her work as a seamstress. It stands for her work, strife, and independence. At the beginning of the play, the quilt is seen on the bed within the background of the stage. It changes from a blanket to a character with an essential role. Ultimately, the quilt is physically torn apart and remade to have a new beginning. It represents the foundation of future business, dreams, life, and identity. It functions as a bank: “This quilt is filled with my hard work, one hundred dollars for every year I been seated at that sewing machine. It’s my beauty parlor” (Nottage,25). Esther’s decision, to tear up the quilt and give her husband her money, is wrong because she abandons her dreams to please another person. She starts to make a new quilt, which will be the first step to her new independent life.

She walks over to the old sewing machine and begins to sew together pieces of fabric, the beginning of a new quilt. Lights shift: sepia tone, the quality of an old photograph. A slow gentle rag plays in the distance. As the lights fade, projected title card: “Unidentified Negro Seamstress, Ca. 1905.” (Nottage,56)

Another symbol in the play is the sewing machine. In an interview, Nottage says:

I wanted the play to begin with a woman sitting at a sewing machine and end with a woman at a sewing machine. In the beginning that sewing machine was a symbol of oppression, and at the end it was a symbol of liberation. So I knew
that was the journey and somehow I had to get that character from there to here.
(Tichler and Kaplan, 97)

Esther can be liberated from the social codes that restrict her life and hinder her progress as a woman. The injustice of her society and her environment force her to depend on a weak man for help and support. de Beauvoir believed that “the curse weighing on marriage is that individuals too often join together in their weakness and not in their strength, that each one asks of the other rather than finding pleasure in giving.”(De Beauvoir, 643) That is why her marriage is a failure. The person she relies on proves to be an opportunist. George is a black man, ends up hurting Esther. She is abused by her husband, who is supposed to support her. Nottage’s comment is that:

It was the bravest play that I could write because it was so fundamentally different from anything that I had been seeing. I felt there was a style of theater that was in your face, that was misanthropic or cynical, and I didn’t want to do that. I wanted to write something for my mother that reflected who she was (Tichler and Kaplan, 95-96).

In accordance with Michel Foucault’s theory of power and resistance (Quoted in Taylor, 24), Esther becomes more powerful to resist the social barriers of her society. Now, Esther has nothing to lose. She no longer hides her true affection. The relationship with Mr. Marks is the true romance of the play (Greene,125). He has a different personality but human feelings unite them. She visits Mr. Marks again to give him the Japanese silk smoking jacket—the wedding gift meant for her husband. When she offers to smoothen the garment for him: “Mr. Marks does not move. Silence. Their eyes fix upon each other” (Nottage,72). Esther expresses where her mind belongs by her body language.

Nottage encourages female playwrights to write about women’s rights:

We do not yet have a theater where the problems of a female central character are seen as universal. A female character has a better chance of being admired if she is required to “fight” in the play, thus exhibiting more universal (“male”) behavior. A female character accepting a loss, going through a life passage, responding to or easing the pain of another, risks being described by critics as passive. In other words, female characters face the same difficulties real women do in a world where being beautiful, weak, and tragic makes the headlines...Unfortunately, some of the greatest qualities often seen in real women—endurance, intelligence, compassion, tolerance, and strength—are very hard to dramatize. (Ibid,5)

Esther has integrity. She is able to support herself financially. She goes on in her life freely. When Mrs. Dickson forces her to accept the terrible candidate left available for her, Esther protests: “I ain’t giving up so easy” (9). She stands strong for her own principle. She saves enough money to buy a beauty parlor. That money and that dream energize her independence. Esther changes now. She is able to fulfill her dreams.

Works Cited


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