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### Mama Nadi Is a Hero in the Play *Ruined*

The play *Ruined* was written by Lynn Nottage. Mama Nadi is one of the primary characters. Her role in the play brings a lot of contention on whether she is a hero or a villain. Some people regard the play, as more of a romantic play while others perceive it as a warning on the adverse consequences of war on the society. The play is based in Democratic Republic of Congo where Mama Nadi operates a brothel. The play takes place inside Mama Nadi's bar where she also operates a brothel. She takes young girls to serve as prostitutes in her brothel in exchange for shelter and protection. Moreover, the women have all suffered immensely in the hands of men waging war against each other. Some people might regard Mama as a villain because of the nature of her business.



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However, considering the hostility in the region, it can be unfair to judge her for surviving during the hard times. Mama Nadi is a hero in the play because she chose to survive with the other women despite the war, her character transformation portrays her as a caring person and considering the hostility in the region her kind of business was the only way to stay alive.

Mama Nadi's choice of business is a means of survival because she had limited options to survive together with the girls (Bradford n.p). The disputes because of the existing natural resources compelled people to adopt various lifestyles to survive. Mama Nadi did not force the girls to work for her. From the text by Mama Nadi, *"Did you at least tell them this time?"* (Nottage 9), she is asking Christian whether she informed the women about the nature of her business. Some of the villains in the society were forced to live an evil life because of the trauma they underwent because of the war. The play involves the atrocious acts of rape and other sexual violence against the women like Salima and Sophie. Despite the hostile living environment, there were still some good people in the society. Mama offers refuge to the women who have undergone traumatizing situations during the war. The women had been raped, and as a result, the community regarded them as a bad omen (Rooney 23). Mama is resilient to the occurrences in the society and primarily focus on her business. Some people deem her business as immoral. However, she justifies her enterprise by ensuring that the girls who work at her brothel are safe from the hostility meted on them by the society. Mama suffered the same fate as the women who work in her brothel. Sophie states *"There is a war going on, and it isn't safe for a woman alone. You know this! It's better this way. Here"* (Nottage 22) confirming that working at the brothel was the safest place to stay during the war. The women are susceptible to rape from the men who infringes on their rights to the extent that they lose their ability to bear children. Therefore, the



brothel provides solace to the women who derive their strength from each other. Thus, Mama Nadi can be regarded as a survivor and a hero because there were limited choices on the type of business to undertake during the times of war.

The transformation of Mama Nadi from a person who is solely focused on her business to a caring person is evident in the play. From the play, she states *"Josephine! Josephine! Where is that stupid woman?"* (Nottage 9), confirming her arrogance towards the Josephine. In the initial parts of the play, Mama Nadi advocates for the slave trade by buying the girls for her brothel. However, later in the play, she transforms into a mother figure to them. Her encounter with Christian and Sophie influences her to be a better person. Mama Nadi encounter with Sophie brings a new perspective on her personality. She allows Sophie to stay at her brothel and sing because of her inability to bear children would be a hindrance towards getting a man. Sophie does not only sing but also assist with the keeping of financial records in the bar. Mama's humanity is witnessed when she cares for Sophie upon knowing the painful experiences she underwent. Mama Nadi's business is booming in the hostile environment because of the nature of her trade, which is deemed immoral. In the play, Mama Nadi does not care about the ongoing conflicts and only focuses on surviving (Feingold 27). The military goes to her bar without any hindrance. Afterward, the rebels also visit the same facility. Therefore, Mama is a survivor who pretends to support either side of the forces to protect her life. She employs her survival tactics to guide the women in her bar on how to survive a war infested area. Mama states, *"I have ten girls here. What will I do with them? Is there enough room for all of us in the car?"* Nottage (61) asserts the notion that there was no safe place for the girls outside the bar. When the war was getting close to the camp, she preferred to flee with the girls to other areas. Towards the end of the play, Mama Nadi is driven by the compassion for humanity to care for the women working in



her brothel (Gener 122). Hence, considering her character transformation, it can be deduced that Mama Nadi was a caring person even though she was operating a brothel.

The women in the play had painful experiences in the hands of men. Therefore, Mama Nadi's brothel was perhaps the safest place to stay. They suffered greatly both in the hands of the soldiers and the rebels. Christian states that *"She's my sister's only daughter. Okay? I told my family I'd find a place for her ... And here at least I know she'll be safe"* (Nottage 11), confirming that Mama Nadi was the safest place to stay. The soldiers sexually molested Josephine. However, she was a daughter of a chief who probably lived a good life. The rebels also took Salima captive after raping her and killing her child. Sophie also suffered inhuman sexual violence. The women are not only raped, but some undergo genital mutilation that makes them unable to conceive like Sophie (Katrak 32). The women who worked at her brothel had been sexually molested during the war. Perhaps their only way to survive was to submit to the soldiers and rebels sexually at the brothel. Their painful ordeals outside the brothels could not be compared to prostitution inside the brothel. The men from the different sides of the war were both sexually molesting the women. Therefore, there was no place to act as a refuge. Mama Nadi provided a haven for the girls in return for having them work for her as prostitutes. The text by Mama Nadi's *"Then go somewhere else, and mind your tongue"* (Nottage 15) confirmed her authority in the bar when she wanted to turn away a soldier for not having money and using disrespectful language. The deliberation on whether Mama Nadi is a villain is a complex issue that requires thorough consideration. The violence in the society limited the choices of people. Therefore, Mama Nadi's choice of business might have been prompted by the need to protect the girls from the harsh treatment by the men. Even though the young girls never had the opportunity to live a decent life, Mama gave them a chance to live a better life. Therefore, her ability to



provide for the girls can make her be perceived as a hero. Despite the political instability in the country, Mama Nadi was able to maintain the sanity in the bar by setting house rules. The military and the rebels who wanted to spend time with the women were compelled to leave behind their guns to enhance the safety of the place (Reid n.p). The horrendous incidences that occurred to the women can be used to vindicate Mama Nadi from being a villain because the violence never gave her the opportunity of the kind of life to live.

There is a significant difference regarding the role of Mama Nadi in the play *Ruined*. Some people view her as a hero for taking in the women who have been molested by the soldiers and giving them shelter in exchange for working for her. The brothel and the bar business are a means of survival for the women in the war zone country. Moreover, there was no secure place to stay apart from the brothel. The play shows the humane side of Mama Nadi when she accepts Sophie to work for her although her genitals were mutilated, hence could not work as a prostitute. Mama Nadi also acts as the protector for the women when the war gets closer to her business premises. The women who got the opportunity to work for Mama Nadi were not compelled to work in the brothel. Hence, that could be the only place and way to survive during the war.



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