



SUPERSUMMARY™

IN-DEPTH  
STUDY  
GUIDE

# RUINED

LYNN NOTTAGE

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# ESSAY TOPICS

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## PLOT OVERVIEW

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*Ruined*, by Lynn Nottage, winner of the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, defies easy categorization. To some, the play is an unconventional love story set in a war zone, while to others, it is a melodrama warning society of the irreparable damage war can inflict upon women and men. Either way, *Ruined* is a play that sends a global political message no one can ignore: rape as a weapon of war is profoundly damaging, and a practice that must be stopped.

*Ruined* takes place in an unnamed mining town in the Democratic Republic of Congo, in Mama Nadi's place, a bar and brothel run by the indomitable Mama Nadi herself. A cast of characters accompany Mama Nadi through several grim episodes, culminating in a tragic climax, as the war over natural resources in this part of the Congo gains momentum, taking more and more lifeblood from individuals doing everything they can to survive. Villains operate on both sides of the fight, and some of the villains are victims themselves, men who have sustained too much trauma to maintain their own decency.

With impeccably researched, true-to-life dialogue and a commitment to represent "the sacred with the profane, the transcendent with the lethal, the flaws with the beauty, and selfishness with generosity" (xii), Nottage brings to the stage an intensely emotional and dramatic series of conflicts. Sacred acts of love, like the ones Christian tries to offer Mama Nadi, are juxtaposed against horrific rape scenes and vicious sexual attacks on innocents like Salima and Sophie. Every character that shows a will to survive the violence displays a resilience that transcends the suffering and death that are inevitable during times of war. Though every character in *Ruined* is flawed, beauty can and does exist in their lives, especially when unexpected moments of selflessness mitigate blind ambition and power-mongering.

Mama Nadi, the dynamic protagonist of *Ruined*, models for her girls a cool, and sometimes cruel, focus on rational thought and reason. She refuses to give in to emotions that she has never experienced as reliable. Her focus on her business draws criticism, but she defends herself by reminding her critics that without her and without the bar, her girls—Sophie, Salima and Josephine—would not enjoy safety and shelter, as well as the agency to choose the way they live their sexual lives. Outside of the bar and brothel, women are vulnerable to sexual attacks by random men who may seek to violate them so violently they cannot bear children,

or even have sexual intercourse, such as in Sophie's case; at least at the bar, they have dignity, warmth and the support of each other, and these qualities are just as important to their survival as the basic structures that provide them with safety and shelter.

As the war comes closer to Mama Nadi's place, Mama Nadi and her girls (and the men like Christian and Mr. Harari, who are friends of Mama's and frequent her establishment) all experience firsthand the harshness of the conflict in the Congo. The villains are obvious, and though their ostensible grudges are with each other, Kisémbé and Osembenga are evilly united in their aggressive treatment of women and other innocents who stand in their way. Though the circumstances seem insurmountable, by the end of the play, Mama Nadi just might find hope in a man who is worthy of her love, which means that resilience is a virtue that can and will be rewarded, sometimes in the most beautiful and unexpected of ways.

## ACT SUMMARIES AND ANALYSES

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### Introduction

#### Introduction Summary

Kate Whoriskey, the director of the 2008 world premiere of *Ruined*, writes in her Introduction that she and Lynn Nottage, the playwright, were “compelled by the notion of staging a woman’s complicated relationship to war” (ix), taking inspiration from Bertolt Brecht’s 1939 play *Mother Courage and Her Children*. Nottage chose to set the action in the Congo, where “[a] violent war over natural resources had been raging” (ix), a war that Nottage felt deserved more than “the lack of interest the international community showed for such a devastating conflict” (x). Together, Nottage and Whoriskey traveled to Uganda and coordinated with Amnesty International in Kampala, so they “could use contacts to set up interviews with Congolese women who had crossed over the border to escape the violence” (x).

The interviews with the women and with other people Nottage and Whoriskey met, like their driver and a lead doctor at a hospital, revealed that “rape is integral part of any war” (x), “a tool to humiliate the women and to degrade the opposing side’s masculinity” (xi), as well as a way to ensure that the women “were left without the ability to produce children” (xi). As well, Nottage and Whoriskey learned that, often, the rapists “were themselves victims of unspeakable violence” (xi). The men and boys participating in the genocide “are so psychologically scarred that from the point of the trauma forward, they spend the rest of their lives terrorising and destroying others” (xi).

Whoriskey links the atrocities in the Congo with “what was done in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay” (xi), specifying that “[i]n the United States, we have the money to create weaponry that removes us from the violence we enact” (xi). In contrast, the impoverished state of the Congo means that “the human body becomes the weapon” (xi) and “a woman’s womb ‘the battleground’” (xi). Upon realizing these truths about the war in the Congo, Nottage decided that she was more interested in telling the story of the lives of Central Africans than writing an adaptation of *Mother Courage and Her Children*, so she decided to focus on “the full story, the positive alongside the negative” (xii).

Whoriskey credits the women they met in Uganda, most of whom were members of a group called Isis who were “dedicated to documenting the violence against women” (xii) and providing care for communities impacted by the violence. As well, she applauds the efforts of doctors and child-minders looking after orphans, as well as artists and musicians who carry on with their creative pursuits. Whoriskey explains that “[t]he core commitment of *Ruined* is to celebrate and examine the spectrum of human life in all its complexities” (xiii) and that theatre “can activate change, heal a bit of the horror, restore hope and give voice to the silent and unseen” (xiii).

## Introduction Analysis

The Introduction to *Ruined* reveals the powerful emotional connection between both the director and the playwright and the sensitive subject matter of the play. Real lives of real women and their all-too-real personal tragedies are the inspiration behind the play, and this personalization of art takes the play far beyond the aspirations of the political agenda that inspired Nottage in the first place.

The success of *Ruined* means that Nottage has successfully drawn more attention to the war as well as to the ravaging of the Congo’s women, which is taking place as a direct consequence of the war. Delegates from the United Nations and the United States Senate, as well as human-rights organizations, have attended performances of *Ruined*, and a Senate subcommittee “designed to examine the use of violence against women, particularly rape, as a tool of war in conflict zones” (xiii) invited Lynn Nottage to attend a hearing on the issues at hand.

Whoriskey’s personal words describing her experiences interviewing the women in Uganda and hearing their stories are heartfelt. As well, Whoriskey makes clear her sense of privilege at having worked on this play so closely with Nottage and all the other collaborators they met in Uganda.

## Act I

### Act I Summary

Scene 1 introduces the characters of Christian, a traveling salesman who writes poetry, and Mama Nadi, the proprietor of the bar and brothel in which the play takes place. While they banter with each other about various items Christian has

neglected to bring Mama Nadi, Christian alludes to “this damn chaos” (6), which has prevented him from delivering everything he promised. After Christian changes the subject to give Mama Nadi a lipstick and to offer Mama Nadi a romantic poem he has written “in lieu of the kiss you won’t allow me” (7), he acknowledges that he hasn’t “had a drop of liquor in four years” (8). His attention shifts to a gray parrot in a cage that Mama Nadi acquired when “Old Papa Batunga passed” (8), and then shifts back again to Mama Nadi, whom he instructs to “[t]ake a peek in the truck” (9). Her glance reveals two young women, Salima and Sophie; though Mama Nadi expresses reluctance because they both look “used” (9), she gives Christian “fifteen” (10) for both girls. She asks Josephine, another one of her girls, to show the girls where they can clean themselves. When Christian admits to Mama Nadi that Sophie is “ruined” (12), thanks to the militia who “did ungodly things to the child, took her with [...] a bayonet and then left her for dead” (13), Mama Nadi refuses to take Sophie as she is no use to her as a prostitute. Christian explains that Sophie, “a pretty thing” (11), and is his “sister’s only daughter” (15). Mama Nadi begrudgingly agrees to take them on despite her protest that she is “running a business, not a mission” (14) and when Mama engages directly with Sophie and learns that she is intelligent and able to sing, she warms to the young girl. She applies lipstick to Sophie’s mouth and explains the terms under which Sophie and Salima must live while in Mama’s employment, giving Sophie liquor to “help the pain down below” (17). Mama and Sophie each eat a chocolate from the box Christian has brought to Mama Nadi, and when Mama denies Christian a chocolate, Sophie laughs, which annoys him a great deal.

A month later, it is Christmas time, and Scene 2 opens with Sophie singing and Josephine dancing for Jerome Kitembe, the rebel leader, and a group of his soldiers. The rebel soldiers curse loudly and act obnoxiously despite Mama’s warnings to them to “[b]ehave” (21). Mama Nadi refuses to accept coltan, a type of metallic ore, as payment from one of the rebels, until the soldier becomes threatening and aggressive; at this point, she orders Salima to dance with the soldier, in order to appease him. Mr. Harari, a Lebanese diamond merchant and one of Josephine’s regulars, admires Sophie’s beauty, which irritates Josephine. Mr. Harari gently scolds Mama Nadi for taking “that poor man’s coltan” (25), worth enough money to Mr. Harari “to buy pussy for a month” (25).

They discuss a diamond Mama has been holding in safekeeping for a past customer, and Mama asks about its worth; they both lament the unreliability of their environment, which makes business uncertain. Mama explains that “[t]hings



slip from our fingers like butter" (27), which inspires her determination to keep her business intact. Josephine returns to Mr. Harari, distracting him with her new traditional dress and extracting from him a promise "to take [her] home with [him]" (28). When Salima stands up for herself in response to the rebel soldier who has bitten her neck, Mama calls her a "selfish girl" (29). Sophie comforts Salima, who is upset by the whole exchange, and the scene closes with another song by Sophie and a dance by Josephine.

Scene 3 takes place in Sophie and Salima's living quarters, which they share with Josephine. The two newcomers borrow Josephine's nail polish, and Salima states that "[s]he's gonna kill me if she find out I use her nail polish" (31). When Sophie makes a mistake on Salima's nails, Salima uncharacteristically loses her patience, explaining to Sophie that she struggles to tolerate the soldiers who "want more of you" (31), unlike the miners, who are content with "drink, company and it's over" (31). Salima reminisces about her life with her family, remembering her husband and her baby daughter, until Sophie reminds her that "[t]here is a war going on and it isn't safe for a woman alone" (32). Salima confesses to Sophie that she is pregnant, and Sophie reveals that she is stealing from Mama Nadi, promising Salima that "when there's enough, we'll get a bus to Bunia" (33).

Josephine interrupts the two young women, and Sophie hides Josephine's nail polish and the book in which she hides her stolen money just in time. Josephine complains about the lack of food, comments on Salima's visible weight gain, and then takes a hostile tone when she notices Sophie looking at a scar on Josephine's body. Her hostility increases when she asks, "why is my fashion magazine here?" (34), and despite Sophie's efforts to keep the peace, the situation deteriorates. Josephine claims that "Mr. Harari is going to take [her]" (36) to Kisangani, which leads Salima to feel competitive and mention her husband, whom Josephine describes insultingly as a man "going to sell his yams in the market" (36). The two women argue, and Josephine attacks Sophie, calling her "something worse than a whore" (37). Sophie is wounded into silence, and the scene closes with Josephine haranguing the other two women, insisting that because "[her] father was chief" (37), she should have received better treatment when her village was raided, and this fact proves that Sophie is no better than she is.

Another song by Sophie opens Scene 4, and while she performs for government soldiers and miners, Christian arrives to the bar, much to Mama Nadi's delight. He flirts with Mama Nadi, greets Sophie affectionately, and refuses a cold beer,

explaining that the “[l]ast time I had a drink, I lost several years of my life” (39). When Mama questions Christian about his recent whereabouts, he passes on some worrying gossip: “Pastor Robbins has been missing for a couple days” (40) and because the pastor has been “treating wounded rebel soldiers” (40) and “[t]hings are getting ugly over that way” (40), Christian is worried about the fighting. When he expresses his love for Mama Nadi and suggests they “build a nice business together” (41), he upsets her, and she responds by saying “I have my own business, and I’m not leaving it for a jackass who doesn’t have enough sense to buy a new suit” (41). Christian does not appear insulted, dancing a few steps just as Commander Osembenga, the government leader arrives. Mama Nadi insists he “leave [his] bullets at the bar” (42), asserting her rules about weapons and standing up to him in a way that appears to charm him. Osembenga asks Mama about Kitembe, and Mama denies that Kitembe has even been to her bar, claiming that she only “knows of him” (43). When Osembenga warns everyone in the bar of Kitembe’s treachery, Mama talks to him insolently, not realizing that he is a government commander. When Osembenga identifies himself, she apologizes for not knowing him, and offers him American whiskey. When one of Osembenga’s soldiers shows off by demanding a cigarette from Christian, the situation in the bar becomes even more tense. Osembenga calms his soldier and sends a drink to Christian, in a gesture of respect. Mama pressures Christian to drink, saying that “the commander has bought you a drink of whiskey and hopes that you’ll find prosperity” (48). Christian gives in and drinks the whiskey while Mama whispers to him of the commander’s power over them, and Christian drinks again reluctantly, while Mama Nadi asks him to trust her.

At the start of Scene 5, Sophie reads out loud to Josephine and Salima from a romance novel. Mama comments on Salima’s weight, which scares Salima, and Mama dismisses romance in general as “kissing, fucking, a betrayal” (51). Salima and Josephine engage in yet another petty argument, and Mama suggests “a good smack in the mouth” (52) to keep Josephine’s comments in check. While counting the money with Sophie, Mama Nadi shows Sophie the raw diamond she has been keeping safe for a “[s]tupid man” (53) who “said he’d be back for it” (53). Mama has been keeping the diamond as an “insurance policy, it is what keeps [her] from becoming like them” (53). At this point, Mama confronts Sophie about her theft and learns the truth behind Sophie’s motivations: “A man that came in here said he can help me. He said there is an operation for girls” (55). Mama Nadi accepts Sophie’s explanation and congratulates her for being “the first girl bold enough to steal from me” (55).

At the start of Scene 6, the morning light exposes Josephine's struggle with a miner, Salima's efforts to steal food, and Christian's panicked demands for whiskey. He has bad news: "The white pastor's dead" (56). To Christian, the death of the pastor means that "[t]hey're pushing this way. They won't think twice about killing us" (57). When he tries to convince Mama to leave with him, "to Kinshasa where there's no trouble" (57), she refuses. A soldier named Fortune arrives, his cousin Simon by his side. Mama enforces her rule and makes the soldiers "[e]mpty their weapons" (58) before agreeing to feed the soldiers. When Sophie emerges, she is surprised to see Christian, and the soldiers greet her politely. Fortune explains that he is looking for Salima, and Mama says she will go and "ask around" (61) when Fortune identifies himself as Salima's husband. Mama returns from the back rooms, explaining that "[t]here is no Salima here" (61), and when Fortune is violent in his disappointment, she throws him out.

## Act I Analysis

These scenes reveal important aspects of the various characters involved in the play and their relationships with each other. Christian is a regular visitor to Mama Nadi's place, and they enjoy a business relationship as well as an affection that goes beyond friendship; Mama Nadi values Christian's friendship, and though she dismisses his romantic gestures, they do not mean nothing to her. The times at which she is upset by his suggestion that they share a life together are when she feels her independence and business are under threat. These moments reveal Mama's ferocious need to stand on her own two feet, which suggests that she has had experiences in her life that have compromised her, and she is unwilling to be in that position again.

As well, the dynamics amongst the three women in Mama Nadi's care—Sophie, Salima, and Josephine—reveal the fighting spirit and resilience in all three women, even though their arguments are not necessarily productive. Josephine looks for opportunities to express her rage at everything she has lost, while Salima competes with Josephine for the men in their lives; ironically, both women have been let down by the men who have promised them comfort and love, and they take out their pain, anger and frustration out on each other. Sophie's inner strength is acknowledged by even Mama Nadi, who admires Sophie for being so brazen as to steal from her in order to be able to afford an operation that will give Sophie the future she wants.

The soldiers and their leaders resemble each other, despite the fact that they are on opposite sides of the conflict. The leaders are both authoritative, swaggering and dangerous, and the soldiers are all consistently rough and aggressive with Mama Nadi and her girls. Only the miners seem to maintain a respectful manner with the women, which suggests that they have experienced less trauma than the soldiers; it is possible that the soldiers who act out do so as a result of the violence that has engaged them, according to Salima's description of the soldier who wanted her to hold him after confessing the horrors he had seen.

Act I closes with a sense of growing anxiety; the war is gaining momentum and according to Christian, the violence is creeping closer and closer to Mama Nadi's place. Soon she must choose a side, and if she refuses in the spirit of being a successful businessperson that meets the needs of all of her customers, she puts herself and her girls at risk. Her choice is between Kitembe and the rebels and Osembenga and the government soldiers, and neither option is ideal. Fortune and Simon's arrival, which takes place within moments of Christian's news of the murdered pastor, portends this violence; Mama Nadi's denial that Salima is present is symbolic of all of her attempts to keep the men—and the violence they undoubtedly bring with them—at bay.

## Act II

### Act II Summary

Scene 1 opens with Fortune still standing outside the bar. Mama Nadi and Sophie sing together, while Josephine engages with soldiers and a miner. Mr. Harari and Christian are present, and Christian is drunk. According to the stage directions, Josephine dances expressively, using her movements to communicate her intense emotions, which begin with playfulness and build up to fury. Sophie supports Josephine when she stops, as Josephine has exhausted herself.

At the start of Scene 2, Mama and Salima discuss Fortune. When Sophie expresses some optimism, innocently saying "[i]f he doesn't love you, why would he still be there" (66), Mama Nadi scolds her with a harsh reminder of the reality of the situation: "The woman he loved is dead" (66). Mama comforts Salima by taking her into her arms and reminding her that "Mama takes care of you" (66). When Mama leaves to tend to the miners in the bar, Salima explains her story to Sophie, lamenting that Fortune does not know she is pregnant. Salima begins by

describing the dishonor Fortune experienced when she returned home, she who was “made poison by their fingers, that is what he said” (67).

Salima loses patience when Sophie tries to defend Fortune, and in an emotional outburst, she tells Sophie every brutal detail of her captivity, from the soldier who couldn’t tolerate the sound of her baby crying and “stomped on her head with his boot” (68) to her powerlessness as she “lay there as they tore [her] to pieces, until [she] was raw” (69). Salima feels extreme pain as she tells the story, and “[s]till [she] close[s] [her] eyes and [she] see[s] such terrible things. Things [she] cannot stand to have in [her] head” (69). Sophie tries to reassure Salima that she did nothing wrong, but Salima cannot let go of the fact that her pregnancy will bear “the child of a monster” (70). Salima finishes her outburst to Sophie with a sense of resolve that comes from the memory of Fortune’s bad treatment of her, upon her return to the family compound: if Fortune continues to stand outside the bar, then Salima is “sorry for him” (70).

Scene 3 begins when Fortune gives Mama Nadi a message of love for Salima as well as a pot that takes the place of the cooking vessel she sent him to buy on the day she was taken by the soldiers. Mama, misunderstanding the gesture, mocks Fortune, as two government soldiers make a scene. Fortune scolds the soldiers, and Simon approaches him to tell him that “[t]he commander is gathering everyone” (72) in preparation for a march on to the next village. Fortune resists, wanting to wait for Salima, and Simon responds to Josephine, whose lascivious behavior has been a distraction to him throughout this scene. Simon and Fortune have words, and Simon reminds Fortune of their orders while pressuring Fortune to “consider that maybe she’s dead” (73). Fortune attacks Simon when he hears that “the men are making a joke of [him]” (73), explaining to his cousin that he is a farmer and that he wants his wife and family. Simon responds by reminding Fortune of the commander’s orders “to kill all deserters” (75), and leaves Fortune in the rain when Fortune challenges him to do so.

Christian is drunk at the start of Scene 4, loudly complaining about Osembenga, who evilly “plays at democracy” (75). During Christian’s rant, Mama Nadi unsuccessfully tries to quiet Christian, and, finally, she desperately insists that Christian “[l]eave the philosophizing and preaching to the wretched politicians” (76). Two rebel soldiers arrive, and Josephine and Kitembe emerge from the back room. Christian and Kitembe engage in a discussion of Osembenga, who has been giving Kitembe and his rebels “some trouble” (77), and Kitembe launches into an intense tirade against Osembenga. Mr. Harari, whose presence confuses



Josephine, introduces himself and gives Kisémbé his business card to ease the tension that has built in the bar. Kisémbé leaves with his men, as “duty calls” (79), and Christian drunkenly mocks him after he leaves, which makes Mr. Harari nervous.

Mere moments after Kisémbé leaves with his men, Osembenga arrives with Laurent, his assistant, and Osembenga voices his appreciation of Christian’s parody of Kisémbé, unaware of the anxiety he provokes when he wonders out loud about the expensive-looking truck he saw leaving moments before. When Mama Nadi appears, he flirts with Mama and then with Sophie, who resists his advances. Sophie spits on Osembenga’s feet, shouting “I am dead! Fuck a corpse! What would that make you?” (83). Christian tries to protect Sophie from Osembenga’s consequent anger, and Mama Nadi goes with him to the back room while Christian scolds Sophie for her rash words and actions. When Mama Nadi comes back, she slaps Sophie and orders her to go to the back room with Osembenga. Mama Nadi defends her choice to Christian, asking “[w]ho would protect my business if he turned on me?” (85), and when Christian scoffs at her mention of her business, Mama mocks him. He orders a beer, and Mama Nadi defiantly defends herself to Christian, explaining that the girls would “rather be here, than back out there in their villages where they are taken without regard” (86). Christian dismisses her rant with a poem and leaves the bar, vowing never to return.

When Osembenga and Laurent leave Mama Nadi’s at the start of Scene 5, Fortune interrupts them to tell Osembenga that he has seen Kisémbé at the bar. Fortune explains that “[s]he was hiding him” (87) and that Mama Nadi “is holding [his] wife” (88). Osembenga orders Laurent to “prepare the brigade to move out” (88).

Scene 6 opens at dawn, and Mr. Harari is nervously waiting for a ride over the border to Uganda with an aid worker because his “driver, fucking idiot, took off last night” (88) after hearing gunfire. Mr. Harari reminds Mama Nadi that “[t]here is no shame in leaving” (89) and “[p]art of being in business is knowing when to cut your losses and get out” (89), especially as “[t]he commander knows that Kisémbé was here” (89). Mama Nadi resists his rationale, but Mr. Harari reminds her that someone like “a lovely girl like Sophie” (89) lacks Mama’s optimism and strength, which causes Mama to experience a change of heart. Just as Mr. Harari is about to leave, Mama Nadi convinces him to take the raw diamond in her safekeeping and spend the money he can get from it on Sophie and her

operation, but Mama is too late. The aid worker leaves with Mr. Harari in a panic, and Sophie loses her opportunity moments before the bar is sieged by Osembenga and his soldiers. Osembenga accuses Mama Nadi of lying to him, gesturing towards Fortune when the commander says "[t]his soldier said he saw Jerome Kitembe here" (93). Mama Nadi denies the claim, and chaos ensues. Government soldiers attack the women, and as Josephine pleads with Mama Nadi to "[t]ell him, Mama. He was here" (93), Salima enters, bleeding from the middle of her dress and screaming "STOP!" (94). Fortune holds Salima in his arms, and within moments of their reunion, Salima directs her last words to all of the men in the room: "You will not fight your battles on my body any more" (94).

Scene 7 begins peacefully, with Sophie singing and cleaning the bar alongside Josephine. Mama worries about rebuilding her establishment after the siege, asking herself "[h]ow the hell are we supposed to do business?" (95). When Christian arrives to the bar in a new suit, bearing a letter for Sophie from her mother, Mama Nadi tries to contain her pleasure; they banter as they used to, at the start of Act I. He acknowledges the siege to Mama Nadi and she replies that "Salima was a good girl" (97). Christian and Mama talk, and Christian admits that he has missed Mama Nadi, even though he feels he shouldn't "expect the sun to shine where only mold thrives" (98). Mama offers him a cold beer, but he opts for a Fanta instead, and Mama approves of his sobriety. When Mama offers to put on some music, Christian responds "[w]hat's the point" (99), as Mama always refuses to dance with him. She explains the practical reasons behind her resistance to his overtures, and Christian expresses his desire to "stay, help you run things" (99) and fix problems that need fixing. He pledges his love to Mama Nadi, and she responds with anger: "'Love.' It is a poisonous word. It will change us. It will cost us more than it returns" (100). As Christian turns to leave, finally beaten by Mama's cruel rejection, she panics and tries to get his attention; finally, in defeat, he asks her, "[w]hy not us?" (100). Mama Nadi answers: "I'm ruined. I'm ruined." Christian, with this new understanding of Mama Nadi, expresses sympathy and love, trying to comfort her, and Mama weeps as Sophie walks in and interrupts them. When Sophie leaves again, Christian asks Mama to dance one last time and recites to her one more poem. They dance. Sophie and Josephine watch them happily.

## Act II Analysis

Act II moves speedily through several significant events that drive the plot forward to the climax in Scene 6. The significance of Fortune's arrival at the end

of Act I comes into clear focus. His constant presence standing guard outside Mama Nadi's door incites powerful emotion in his wife, Salima, and the other women in the house are also made nervous by his unusual behavior. Fortune's unrelenting manner becomes a worry to everyone, even his cousin, Simon. As Fortune's position allows him to observe the comings and goings of other patrons of Mama Nadi's place, his choice to tell Osembenga about Kitembe's presence leads directly to the climax of the play, during which his wife dies of possibly self-inflicted wounds. The irony of Fortune's name and his unlucky decision to seek help from Osembenga in order to take down Mama Nadi and retrieve his wife is made clear when Salima dies tragically in his arms; had Fortune not told Osembenga that Mama Nadi was hiding Kitembe, Osembenga may not have acted so aggressively. Had the commander not acted so aggressively, Salima may not have felt coerced into such desperate measures as harming herself and her unborn baby.

Christian's relapse and his reckless drunken behavior also heighten the tension of Act II as it moves towards the climax. He is a changed man when he drinks, and his behaviors are risky to himself and to others. When he mocks Kitembe only moments after Kitembe leaves, he displays a sort of self-sabotage; if Christian had been overheard, he surely would have been killed instantly. Other characters also display behaviors that reveal they are on the brink; Sophie spits on Osembenga's feet and screams out loud, only to be forced later into the back room with him by Mama Nadi. Josephine dances madly, exorcising her own rage and helplessness. In contrast to these desperate figures, Mr. Harari, the most practical-minded and wealthy of all the characters, is able to flee thanks to an aid worker with a reliable vehicle, leaving behind Josephine, his favorite of all of Mama's girls, and Sophie, whose operation must then remain only a dream.

The ending of the play, during Scene 7, is quiet and peaceful, allowing Mama Nadi and Christian time to talk openly and sincerely about their feelings for each other. Their dance is open-ended; Mama has not agreed to do anything Christian has suggested, but she has softened towards him. She accepts his comfort and allows herself to be supported by him, if only for a moment, while they dance. The dynamic qualities both of these characters bring to the play are deeply moving. Despite everything that has happened, all the terror and suffering, Christian still has the strength to be vulnerable with Mama Nadi, and Mama Nadi has somehow found the strength to be her true self with Christian, ruined or otherwise.



## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

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### **Mama Nadi**

A strong and fiercely-independent woman, Mama Nadi is described as “[a] madam, a businesswoman, attractive, early forties.” Mama Nadi’s past experiences, before she became the proprietor of the bar and brothel, are not described in detail, but by the end of the play, Mama Nadi is revealed to be as much a victim of sexual violence as the girls in her employment. She is at times cruel and selfish, seemingly obsessed with money and the success of her business, and yet, at other times, she displays extraordinary generosity and genuine vulnerability. Mama Nadi is desired by both Christian, the travelling salesman, who truly loves her, and by Commander Osembenga, the government leader who seems to admire Mama Nadi’s strength and natural confidence in the face of powerful figures like himself.

### **Josephine**

Angry, sullen, and aware of her seductive power over men, Josephine is described as “[o]ne of Mama’s girls, early twenties.” Josephine’s father was the chief of their

village, so she still feels a pride and a sense of entitlement befitting her position as the chief's daughter, even though she now works in a brothel. She enjoys a special connection with Mr. Harari, who frequents Mama Nadi's bar and brings Josephine presents and promises of a fresh start elsewhere. Josephine exhibits signs of jealousy when Sophie gets too much attention for her youthful beauty, and she frequently argues with Salima over petty matters and men.

## **Sophie**

Sophie is Christian's niece and a young woman who is still hopeful, even while recovering from a horrific sexual assault. She is described as "[o]ne of Mama's girls, eighteen." Christian, Sophie's uncle and a travelling salesman, brings Sophie to Mama Nadi along with Salima. Sophie is exceptionally pretty, and she has a lovely singing voice as well as natural intelligence, all qualities that Mama Nadi can use at her bar and brothel. Sophie is young and damaged, but her experiences have not extinguished her strong spirit and her resilience; she displays her boldness and her powerful survival instincts at several times throughout the play, such as when she steals money from Mama Nadi in order to pay for an operation that she hopes will repair the damage done to her body by the soldiers with the bayonets. Sophie often plays the role of peacekeeper when Salima and Josephine engage in one of their arguments, and she misses an opportunity to escape to Uganda when the aid worker drives away without her.

## **Salima**

Imprisoned for five months by rebel soldiers and pregnant as a result of her captivity, Salima is described as "[o]ne of Mama's girls, nineteen." Salima's rough hands reveal her status as a peasant woman when she and Sophie arrive to Mama Nadi's bar at the same time, delivered by Christian. Salima's experiences as a prisoner have damaged her in significant ways, and even though Mama Nadi does provide her with food and shelter, she experiences significant stress coping with life as one of Mama Nadi's sex workers. Her stress worsens as time passes and her pregnancy develops, and, ultimately, the pressure builds in Salima to tragic ends, and she dies of possibly self-inflicted wounds to herself and her unborn baby.

## **Christian**

Handsome and persistent, Christian is a recovering alcoholic and amateur poet who optimistically pursues Mama Nadi, despite her cynical attitude towards love

and marriage. Christian is described as “[a] traveling salesman, early forties.” Christian frequents Mama Nadi’s bar as a friend and a customer, and as a supplier who brings Mama Nadi goods she requires to keep her business running. He also brings Mama Nadi two young women for her to protect and employ as prostitutes: Sophie, his niece, whom he cares for deeply, and Salima. Christian refuses to drink alcohol, until one point in the play when Mama Nadi coerces him into accepting whiskey from Commander Osembenga. This single drink changes Christian dramatically. When he finds sobriety again, he returns to Mama Nadi’s bar with a clear head and proposes they share their lives together one more time.

### **Mr. Harari**

A married man who regularly visits Josephine at Mama Nadi’s, Mr. Harari is described as “[a] Lebanese diamond merchant, early forties.” Mr. Harari speaks directly with Mama Nadi about her profiteering from the chaos that surrounds them; at first, Mr. Harari acknowledges Mama Nadi’s cleverness in a friendly way, but later, when Mama Nadi refuses to accept that she and her girls are in danger, he reminds Mama Nadi that not everyone is as strong and survival-minded as she is. His words impact Mama Nadi because he speaks to her like an equal, but they come too late; just as Mama Nadi wakes up to her desire to help Sophie by sending her away with Mr. Harari, the aid worker who could transport her safely to Uganda leaves in a panic.

### **Jerome Kitembe**

Erratic, dangerous, and unpredictable in his brutality, Kitembe is described as “[a] rebel leader.” Kitembe and his soldiers come to Mama Nadi’s bar, and his rough manner enables his soldiers to treat the girls roughly, using their strength and their propensity for violence to intimidate them.

### **Commander Osembenga**

An imposing man with an authoritative air, Osembenga is described as “[a] military leader for the current government,” and his role is to find and destroy Kitembe and the rebel movement. He holds himself arrogantly, and when he and Mama Nadi first meet, he finds Mama Nadi’s enforcement of her house rules charming. They flirt with each other at several different points throughout the play. Osembenga also finds Sophie attractive, but Sophie resists his overtures, eliciting the ire of Mama Nadi, who forces Sophie to do what is expected of her.

When Osembenga finds out that Mama Nadi has been lying to him about knowing Kiseembe, he becomes enraged. During the siege of Mama Nadi's bar, Osembenga and his soldiers stop their violence only when Salima appears, bloody and dying.

### **Fortune**

In the list of characters, Fortune is described as "[a] government soldier, Salima's husband." He comes to Mama Nadi's bar with his cousin, Simon, because he has heard that a woman named Salima is there. Having heard the story of Fortune's rejection of Salima after she came home to him, Mama Nadi protects her by denying the presence of Salima. Fortune refuses to listen and stands outside the door of the bar, waiting for Salima to appear. From this position, he observes Kiseembe patronizing Mama Nadi's bar; Fortune alerts Osembenga to the presence of the rebels, which makes him responsible for the siege that becomes the backdrop to his wife's death.

### **Simon**

In the list of characters, Simon is described as "[a] government soldier, Fortune's cousin." Simon accompanies Fortune to Mama Nadi's bar to find Salima. He tries to reason with Fortune, reminding him that the soldiers are to blame for his pain and his loss of his wife, not Salima herself.

### **Laurent**

In the list of characters, Laurent is described as "[a] government soldier, Osembenga's assistant." Laurent is with Osembenga when Fortune approaches the commander with the news that Kiseembe has been seen patronizing Mama Nadi's establishment.

### **Rebel Soldiers**

Kiseembe's soldiers are frequent customers at Mama Nadi's bar and brothel. They drink and joke amongst themselves, led by Jerome Kiseembe, and exhibit rude and aggressive behaviors towards Mama Nadi's girls and other customers.

### **Government Soldiers**

Like Kiseembe's soldiers, the government soldiers also frequent Mama Nadi's place. They also drink, joke, and exhibit rude and aggressive behaviors towards the women who work at the bar, and toward other customers.

## Aid Worker

The aid worker offers Mr. Harari transportation over the border to Uganda in his vehicle; they leave Sophie behind in their urgency to leave Mama Nadi's bar, before more violence arrives.

## THEMES

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### Rape as a Weapon of War

The play's Introduction, by Kate Whoriskey, makes clear the significance of rape during wartime: "it was not just a tool to humiliate the women or to degrade the opposing side's masculinity, it was a way to strip women of their wombs" (xi). All of the women in the play suffer from a rape-related physical injury and/or the psychological effects of rape. Sophie's injuries via a bayonet attack have rendered her incapable of having sexual intercourse, which means that at the age of eighteen, she has already been stripped of the opportunity to bear children. Salima's imprisonment by soldiers results in an unwanted pregnancy of uncertain paternity, and in desperation, Salima appears to kill the baby and herself in a powerful display of the knock-on emotional effects of her imprisonment. Though the soldiers allowed Salima to live, ultimately, they directly contribute to her cause of death. Even Mama Nadi, despite all of her strength and brazen ambition, admits in a vulnerable moment to having been "ruined" earlier in her life; she

feels undeserving of the marriage and happy life Christian offers her, due to her own experiences with sexual violence. No matter if they are rebel soldiers or government soldiers, all of the men who take part in the conflict treat Mama Nadi and her girls disrespectfully, overpowering them with their physical strength and the threat of violence. The constant presence of these kinds of men in the play remind the audience of the ubiquitous threat these women must live under while trying to survive.

### **The Healing Power of Hope and Resilience**

Despite the themes of rape and sexual violence that permeate the play, a message of hope and resilience does exist. For some women, this positive message has a healing effect; in Sophie's case, the healing effect is literal, as she steals from Mama Nadi in order to pay for an operation to repair her damaged body. In Mama Nadi's case, the healing is emotional. When Mama Nadi observes Sophie's determination to find the necessary money for the operation, she warms to Sophie and forgives the transgression, revealing a latent compassion for the strong young woman who refuses to give up on life. Both the ending of the play and Christian's persistence and optimism throughout the play also reflect a message of hope and resilience. He clings to his attachment to Mama Nadi, refusing to give up on her, even when she tells him that she herself has been "ruined." Christian's affection for Mama Nadi heals her cynical heart, at least to the point where she is willing to dance with him and engage in this physical act of love that he desires.

### **Marriage and Masculinity**

The play scrutinizes the meaning of marriage and the role of a man within the institution of marriage through the perspectives of two couples in particular: Christian's proposals of idealized domesticity with Mama Nadi, whose cynicism towards love and marriage only lifts slightly at the end of the play; and Salima and Fortune's disappointment in their damaged marriage.

Throughout the play, Christian makes overtly romantic gestures towards Mama Nadi, bringing her poems and asking her to dance with him. Though Mama Nadi may not be aware at first of her own attachment to Christian, she accepts his gestures, although in a rather bad-tempered way. Christian refuses to be cowed by Mama Nadi's dismissive responses, and by the end of the play, Mama Nadi confesses to him the real reason behind her resistance: she, like the other

women, has been “ruined.” Christian’s apology for the terrible behavior of the man who hurt Mama Nadi is genuine, and he promises Mama Nadi that his particularly sensitive and loving way of being a man is different.

Salima’s dismay at the behavior of her husband, Fortune, upon her return home from her five-month imprisonment, communicates the pain and the disillusionment she has experienced at the hands of men. Although she hates the soldiers for abusing her, she loves Fortune, and his abuse of her hurts her even more deeply, due to the previous closeness of their relationship. When Salima finds out that Fortune has come to find her at Mama Nadi’s, she cannot bear the shame of exposing her pregnancy to him. Additionally, Mama Nadi reminds Salima that she is no longer the wife he knew. These truths combine to drive Salima to tragic desperation, and she dies in her husband’s arms. Fortune, in his pride and his stubborn inability to see Salima’s innocence, offers his wife comfort too late.

## SYMBOLS AND MOTIFS

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### **Birds**

Birds appear frequently throughout the play, and the motif of birds reveals some interesting patterns about different characters. For example, Sophie’s singing emphasizes a parallel between her and Papa Batunga’s parrot. Like the parrot, who lives in a cage in Mama Nadi’s bar, Sophie is trapped in a life that she must endure through no fault of her own. Also like the parrot, who chatters at will at different points throughout the play and even has the last word at the end of the play, Sophie continues to sing and to express herself. Their voices are signs of hope, as both Sophie and the parrot live in their respective cages and carry on the best they can with the limited resources at their disposal.

Birds also appear at other significant points in the play. Salima describes a peacock that distracted her in the moments she became vulnerable to the soldiers

who imprisoned her and kept her for five months. A stage direction compares Osembenga to a peacock, giving the director and any reader of the play insight into the threatening and powerful nature of the commander. As well, Christian is compared to a hawk in another stage direction, after his having mentioned the absence of birds in the jungle, and how such an absence portends the violence to come. Finally, the stage direction at the end of the play indicates that a guitar solo titled "A Rare Bird" is playing while Mama Nadi and Christian dance. Perhaps they are each rare birds in their own right, having survived the war and the violence in their own ways, and their love, though flawed, may turn out to be as resilient as they are.

### **Mama Nadi's Bar and Brothel**

Mama Nadi's bar and brothel holds a unique symbolism for Mama Nadi and her girls. Rather than representing a life of shame for the women, as brothels are where women must endure the commodification of their sexuality, the bar represents a type of freedom for Mama and her girls. The bar is actually a safe haven for Mama Nadi, Sophie, Salima and Josephine, despite their sale of their bodies in exchange for safety and shelter. For the girls, the ability to hide here is a positive one for which they are grateful. Mama Nadi and her rules are another boundary between them and the men who seek to violate them for their own gains.

For Mama Nadi, her business is her lifeblood, a guarantee that she can live independently of men and by her own brutal system of self-sufficiency, agency and control. Mama Nadi's personal history is not revealed in any detail, but when she confesses to Christian that she herself was "ruined" at one point in her early life, the audience is suddenly better able to understand why the bar means so much to Mama Nadi: she feels sure that she will never be able to rely on a man to support her as she cannot offer any man a family or even a healthy, loving relationship. Her business allows her to support herself, and so she clings to it desperately.

Mama Nadi's bar and brothel also holds significant meaning to the men in the play. Her place provides the soldiers and miners with a pleasant environment in which they can escape their realities and feel like men who have some control over their lives.

### **Dancing**



Dancing is another motif that suggests hope and resilience. Christian's repeated requests to dance with Mama Nadi accompany his romantic language and his poetry, communicating to both Mama and to the audience his persistent hope that she will eventually say yes. Christian's desire to dance with Mama Nadi never falters, even after he has a relapse and drinks heavily to escape his fear of the growing violence that surrounds them. When the play closes with Mama Nadi and Christian dancing together, the image suggests that the two do have a future together—a man and a woman coming together despite the horror of the times and the injuries both have suffered as a result of war.

As well, dancing provides the environment of the bar with a festive atmosphere; this atmosphere contributes to the positive experience Mama Nadi's customers rely on when they come to her place for a drink and a meal. While Sophie sings, Salima and Josephine often dance for the men in the bar; Christian, too, dances at times, unable to resist the music and the high spirits that move him even as the war creeps in.

## IMPORTANT QUOTES

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1. "I don't know. They look used. Worn." (Act I, Page 9)

*When Christian arrives to Mama Nadi's bar with supplies, he brings with him two women named Salima and Sophie, in the hopes that Mama Nadi will take them into her care and employ them. Here, Mama Nadi's comments describe Salima and Sophie in the moments before the audience finds out that she is describing two women. Mama Nadi's comments emphasize the notion of women as a commodity or as objects to be bought and sold.*

2. "Yes, you're very pretty. I can see how that caused you problems. Do you know what kind of place this is?" (Act I, Page 17)

*Mama Nadi speaks to Sophie directly after learning that Sophie has been brutally sexually abused, to the point where she is unable to work for Mama Nadi as a prostitute. Mama Nadi reminds Sophie of the nature of the bar, preparing Sophie for interactions she may have to have with men who will likely find her attractive.*

3. "This is a nice place for a drink. Yeah? I don't abide by bush laws. If you want to drink like a man, you drink like a man. You want to behave like gorilla, then go back into the bush." (Act I, Page 22)

*In an attempt to set boundaries, Mama Nadi admonishes a rebel soldier who is acting aggressively in her bar, reminding him that his hypermasculine behavior is not welcome. She compares him to an ape, insulting him in a show of authority as the proprietor of the bar.*

4. "Well, my darling, in this damnable age of the mobile phone it's become quite the precious ore, no? And for whatever reason, God has seen fit to bless your backward country with an abundance of it." (Act I, Page 25)

*Mr. Harari challenges Mama Nadi's casual attitude toward the mining boom in the Congo while explaining to the audience the reasons behind the ongoing war over natural resources. He addresses Mama Nadi as "my darling," revealing his affectionate feelings towards her and his superior attitude as an outsider taking advantage of business opportunities he observes.*

5. "These, these idiots keep changing the damn rules on us. You file papers, and the next day the office is burned down. You buy land, and the next day the chief's son has built a fucking house on it. I don't know why anybody bothers. Madness." (Act I, Page 27)

*Mr. Harari describes the rebel soldiers as "idiots," while he describes the chaos of the current situation to Mama Nadi. His comments suggest that even when he tries to operate his business lawfully, he cannot make progress; his troubles are a warning to Mama Nadi, who is a business owner as well.*

6. "Them soldiers don't respect nothing. Them miners, they easy, they want drink, company, and it's over. But the soldiers, they want more of you [...]." (Act I, Page 31)

*In an emotional moment, Salima speaks to Sophie about the stress of dealing with the soldiers who patronize Mama Nadi's bar. Salima becomes upset while the two young women are talking and using Josephine's nail polish. Salima doesn't specify which soldiers are disrespectful to her, as all of them, in her experience, are guilty of treating women badly.*

7. "While I'm singing, I'm praying the pain will be gone, but what those men did to me lives inside 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." (Act I, Page 32)

*Sophie talks openly with Salima of her own struggles, referring to the brutal rape she endured and the constant pain she experiences as a result of the attack. Sophie is only eighteen years old, and she feels that the damage to her body will impact her for her whole life. This insight into Sophie's mindset makes her stealing money from Mama Nadi to pay for an operation to repair the damage more understandable.*

8. "Don't worry. Mama may be many things, but she don't count so good. And when there's enough we'll get a bus to Bunia. I promise." (Act I, Page 33)

*Sophie admits to Salima that she has been stealing money from Mama Nadi, a brazen move considering the power of Mama Nadi's personality and the relative safety she has provided both Sophie and Salima. Sophie tells Salima of her intention to take Salima with her when she has enough saved for both of them to escape. Sophie reveals an unexpectedly courageous and desperate side to her personality by taking money from the powerful and intimidating Mama Nadi.*

9. "A mere trick of fate. I'm sorry, but let me say what we all know, you are something worse than a whore. So many men have had you that you're worthless." (Act I, Page 37)

*Josephine insults Sophie in misdirected anger, misunderstanding the cause of Sophie's pain and inability to have sexual intercourse and insulting her for it. Josephine's anger comes from a place of pain, as she too has experienced the horror of the war in the Congo, and she takes her rage out on Sophie, who is weaker and younger than Josephine.*

10. "Forgive me, I bring you an early poem, but I'm afraid it's running away from my memory. I still hope one day you will hear the music and dance with me." (Act I, Page 39)

*Christian, in one of his many romantic gestures towards Mama Nadi, offers her a poem he has written as an expression of his affection for Mama Nadi. Mama dismisses Christian's earnest words, as she usually does. Christian reveals himself to be a sensitive and emotional man by offering Mama his poetry and his love, a brave choice that proves that his version of masculinity is a softer one than the aggressive manliness suggested by the soldiers and miners who visit Mama Nadi's bar.*

11. "I was just by Yaka-yaka. When I was there six months ago, it was a forest filled with noisy birds, now it looks like God spooned out heaping mouthfuls of earth, and every stupid bastard is trying to get a taste of it. It's been ugly, chérie, but never like this. Not here." (Act I, Page 40)

*This is Christian speaking to Mama about the impact of the mining he has observed in his travels as a salesman. His words are a warning to Mama Nadi; the greed and ugliness that has affected other parts of their country are creeping closer, and Mama Nadi must learn to be careful.*

12. "No, as I said, I know of him. His men control the road east and the forest to the north of here." (Act I, Page 43)

*When Osembenga questions Mama Nadi directly about Jerome Kisémbé, the rebel leader, Mama denies that she has ever met him even though Kisémbé was recently a customer in her bar. Her lie to the commander is a dangerous one, but Mama does not yet understand the implications of her refusal to take sides in the conflict. She believes she is protecting her place of business by maintaining neutrality.*

13. "Good news, the commander has bought you a drink of whiskey and hopes that you'll find prosperity." (Act I, Page 48)

*After one of Osembenga's men rudely demands a cigarette from Christian, the commander sends a drink to Christian as a gesture of good will. Mama Nadi insists that Christian must accept the drink, even though Christian does not drink alcohol; her forcefulness pressures Christian into drinking the shot of whiskey and he descends back into the alcoholism he was trying to manage up until this point.*

14. "Listen, listen, please listen, they can repair the damage." (Act I, Page 55)

*When Mama Nadi confronts Sophie about her theft, Sophie explains that she was stealing money in order to pay for an operation that she believes will repair the damage to her body. A man who came into the bar gave Sophie a piece of paper explaining the process, and Sophie shows this paper to Mama as proof of her intentions. Mama's anger seems to subside at this point, and she congratulates Sophie for her boldness.*

15. "I don't want a Fanta. They've killed a white man. Do you know what that means? A missionary. They're pushing us this way. They won't think twice about killing us." (Act I, Page 57)

*Christian refuses the beverage Mama Nadi offers him, demanding liquor instead. He is in a panic about Osembenga's soldiers and the violence they are exacting; their killing of a white man shows that they have no fear of reprisal, and this audacity scares Christian. Osembenga is proving to be a dangerous man, unworthy of trust, and Christian fears for his life and the lives of Mama Nadi and her girls.*

16. "And, chérie, don't look away from me, will you be able to tell him the truth? Huh? We know, don't we? The woman he loved is dead." (Act II, Page 66)

*Mama Nadi speaks painfully but honestly with Salima about Fortune, Salima's husband, who has come to the bar to find Salima after shaming her and rejecting her. After Salima's experiences being abused by the soldiers who captured her and her work as a prostitute at Mama Nadi's bar, she is*

*no longer the innocent girl whom Fortune first met and loved. Mama Nadi's words foreshadow Salima's death later, in Act II.*

17. "I walked into the family compound expecting wide open arms. An embrace. Five months, suffering. I suffered every single second of it. And my family gave me the back of their heads. And he, the man I loved since I was fourteen, chased me away with a green switch. He beat my ankles raw. And I dishonored him? I dishonored him?!" (Act II, Page 70)

*Salima explains to Sophie the details around Fortune's betrayal after Salima finally became free of the soldiers who captured her. Upon her return home, Salima was met with more punishment and shame instead of the warmth and healing she expected. Salima's disillusion is deep, and her repetition of the point about dishonor reflects her intense confusion and pain.*

18. "If you are angry, then be angry at the men who took her. Think about how they did you, they reached right into your pocket and stole from you." (Act II, page 74)

*Simon, Fortune's cousin, tries to speak sensibly with Fortune about Fortune's loss; he encourages Fortune to direct his anger at the rightful villains, not at Salima, who is a victim of the soldiers. Simon's suggestion that Salima was stolen from Fortune reinforces the notion that women, whether they are loved or they are abused, are objects to be possessed by men.*

19. "And then I'll shut it. People come here to leave behind whatever mess they've made out there. That includes you, professor." (Act II, Page 76)

*When Christian drunkenly warns Mama Nadi about the inevitability of trouble at her door, she insists that she can maintain a distance from the conflict. She sees her bar as a refuge for all of her customers, no matter which side of the conflict they take; while her faith in herself is admirable, it also suggests denial. Mama Nadi does not want to admit that danger is coming closer to her, nor does she want her false sense of safety challenged.*

20. "You're lucky the commander is generous. I had to plead with him to give you another chance." (Act II, Page 85)



*In an excessively cruel moment, Mama Nadi forces Sophie to meet Commander Osembenga in the back room, after Sophie takes a stand and refuses to be manhandled by the commander. This conflict takes place in front of Christian, Sophie's uncle, who is shocked by Mama Nadi's actions and drinks to cope with his horror. He confronts Mama Nadi about her obsession with money, and, in response, she lectures him about the freedom her girls have to leave her if they are unhappy with the version of safety they enjoy in her employment.*

21. "You are the most devilish of optimists. You—I don't worry so much about you. But what about a lovely girl like Sophie?" (Act II, Page 89)

*Mr. Harari speaks directly with Mama Nadi, and his treatment of her as an equal reveals his concern for young and damaged Sophie. His comparison of Mama Nadi's stubborn resilience to Sophie's young vulnerability changes Mama in an instant, and she decides to send Sophie away with Mr. Harari, so she can have the operation she wants.*

22. "No, listen...I'm talking about Sophie. This will raise enough money for an operation, and whatever she needs to get settled." (Act II, Page 90)

*Mama Nadi experiences a change of heart, and she gives Mr. Harari the diamond she has kept as insurance to cover the costs of looking after Sophie. Mama's kindness comes too late, however, as the aid worker who can transport both Sophie and Mr. Harari over the border leaves before Sophie can make it to the vehicle.*

23. "I'm surprised to see you. I thought you were through with me." (Act II, Page 97)

*Some time after the arrival of the government soldiers and ensuing violence at the bar, during which Salima dies, Christian enters the bar with a letter for Sophie from her mother. Mama Nadi is excited to see him, but she tries to hide her pleasure. Christian soon admits that he has missed Mama Nadi, which flusters her, revealing that she has missed him, too.*

24. "Because, it isn't what I want? Bring me a Fanta, please." (Act II, Page 98)

*After Christian shocks Mama Nadi with another proposal that they settle down together, he refuses her offer of a cold beer. He has again found his sobriety, so his proposal to Mama Nadi takes place while he is of sound mind. This mental clarity reveals his longstanding desire for Mama Nadi and the depth of his love for her.*

25. "God, I don't know what those men did to you, but I'm sorry for it. I may be an idiot for saying so, but I think we, and I speak as a man, can do better." (Act II, Page 101)

*Christian asserts his sensitive and tender masculinity to Mama Nadi while acknowledging her pain upon her admission that she, like Sophie, has been ruined by rape and abuse. He apologizes for the treatment Mama Nadi has endured at the hands of other men, and his empathy and love for Mama Nadi are contained in his promise to treat her better than she has been treated in the past.*



## ESSAY TOPICS

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1. At several moments in the play, the playwright does not clarify if the soldiers who commit brutal acts of rape and murder are rebel soldiers or if they represent the government military. Why do you think the playwright decided to make this omission?
2. Who is the more dynamic character, Mama Nadi or Christian? Why? Support your response with evidence from the play.
3. Analyze the character of Josephine. Why does she treat Sophie and Salima so badly? What is behind her outbursts about her father? Support your responses with evidence from the play.
4. One definition of a melodrama is "a play, film, or other dramatic piece characterized by exaggerated characters and a sensational plot intended to appeal to the emotions." Does *Ruined* meet the conditions of a melodrama, or is that an unfair genre for this play that dramatizes the horrors of war? Support your response with evidence from the play.
5. Kate Whoriskey, who directed the 2008 world premiere of *Ruined* in Chicago, writes that "[t]he core commitment of *Ruined* is to celebrate and examine the spectrum of human life in all its complexities: the sacred with the profane, the transcendent with the lethal, the flaws with the beauty, and selfishness with generosity." What sacred, transcendent and/or beautiful elements do you observe in the play? Are they enough to leave you with a hopeful message about humanity in general? Explain.
6. Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage* is a play that inspired Lynn Nottage, and it also concerns a woman who profits from war. Is the choice of both Brecht and Nottage to make the businesswoman a female character significant? Why or why not?
7. One definition of a profiteer is "a person who takes advantage of a situation in which other people are suffering to make a profit, often by selling goods that are difficult to get at a high price." According to this

- definition, is Mama Nadi a true profiteer? If so, what are her goods and how does she take advantage of the situation? If not, how can her work as a madam be otherwise explained?
8. Sometimes, more than one climax can exist in a work of literature. What events might be considered the climaxes of the play?
  9. Salima's death carries a poignant message. What is this message? As well, the playwright does not make the circumstances of Salima's death explicit; how does the possibility that her injuries are self-inflicted impact the message of this event?
  10. Compare and contrast Christian's version of masculinity to that of the soldiers and their leaders. Use their actions as well as their words to create your argument.