

Female identity from the perspective of acts of violence Rape as a weapon of war in contemporary drama

ANDA-FLORINA DRĂGAN*
“Babeş-Bolyai” University, Cluj-Napoca
ROMANIA

Abstract: In this paper, we intend to analyze how theatre addresses the extremely traumatic implications of sexual assault during military conflicts. Specifically, using the *close-reading* method, we will identify the ways in which contemporary drama brings the trauma of such an event to the audience. Rape and violence against women have become a topic of focus, implicitly in theatre, since the 1960s¹. The terrifying realities and stories of women who were victims of war have inspired many contemporary playwrights, their plays being also the subject of our research: *The Body of a Woman as a Battlefield in the Bosnian War* by Matei Vişniec, *Ruined* by Nottage Lynn and *9 Parts of Desire* by Heather Raffo. These texts help us to outline an overview of how theoretical studies and analyses of the rape of women as a strategy of war are reflected in contemporary drama, as these are three plays that deal with different wars. Through their analysis, we want to answer several questions: How is the female character constructed? How are the subject of war and the atrocities committed against women presented? How accurate is the historical context? How does theatrical style relate to this controversial subject? As the title suggests, the paper aims to investigate the relevant subject of war and how it is treated in contemporary drama, with an emphasis on the victim, most often a female character.

Keywords: female, identity, violence, drama.

Introduction

Rape represents an invasion, the destruction of an intimate, personal place, in a violent and destructive way. Beyond the physical horror that the term literally defines, rape can be the rejection of the other, of their way of thinking, of expressing themselves, of being, and the imposition of other ideas through their dehumanisation. Often, rape and sexual violence are used to communicate an idea or convey a message. In an ethnic war, this becomes paramount for the attacker. Rape used as a strategy of war knows no boundaries or historical periods. In critical times, rape becomes a weapon against the enemy.

One of the major themes of contemporary theatre, frequently addressed by both playwrights and stage practitioners: war, which, although it reminds us of the horrors of the past, is still part of recent reality, and theatre seeks to fulfil its purpose, that of being a “mirror” of the world we live in, bringing harsh

* anda.dragan@ubbcluj.ro

¹ Lisa Fitzpatrick (2018). *Rape on the Contemporary Stage*, Palgrave Macmillan, UK.

realities to the audience, which we sometimes perceive in a fragmented or distorted way. Theatre often proves to be an effective means of information and dialogue, of revealing sensitive or controversial topics in a world characterised by scepticism, misinformation and manipulation, especially on the part of what we call the 'official media'.

Social and historical context

The traces left by war in the lives of its victims is a subject that has been addressed by many playwrights, regardless of the conflicts they have chosen to talk about. The characters' lives are directly affected by war, and one thing is certain for all of them: nothing will ever be the same again. Theatre is a constant dialogue between what happens on stage and its audience. It speaks, or at least it should, about the society of the moment, its tensions, realities and shortcomings. Although our society is constantly changing and evolving, we see recurring themes and subjects that have remained a constant in theatre since its inception, and war proves to be one of them, regardless of the historical period.

While the first text talks about the traumas of the Bosnian War, *Ruined* is based on interviews with Congolese women who were sexually abused and assaulted during the armed conflict in Congo, and *9 Parts of Desire* is the voice of Iraqi women in their struggle for justice, peace and freedom.

In all three texts, rape as a weapon of war is the main subject. Each female character faces a drama of the traumatic consequences of war. As part of the humiliation and annihilation of the opponent's identity, rape is one of the most commonly used methods by which soldiers show their dominance over the other. In one of the chapters of the book *Sexuality and Society. History, Religion and Literature* by Andrei Oișteanu, which is dedicated to rape as a weapon of war, the official report of the commission sent by the Council of Europe on the violence during the Bosnian conflict is presented: the rapes and sexual abuse committed by Serbian military troops must be placed in the same context as the other atrocities (massacres, mass graves, looting, destruction) and cannot be analysed as isolated actions, intended only to satisfy the sexual urges of the rapists. Given the manner in which the rapes were committed and the scale of the phenomenon in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is clear that the aim of the rapists was to denigrate human dignity and to subject women, families and the entire community to a humiliating and degrading treatment. The rapes of Muslim women are committed on such a scale and in such a manner that they form part of an easily recognisable pattern that is an important element of the strategy of war: rape is seen as a weapon of war.²

Since ancient times, the captivity or assault of women has been a means by which men have secured their power and domination. The violence of war goes beyond the front line and spills over to the families and women of the adversaries, who are often subjected to rape, torture and other reprehensible and degrading acts by the victors, or rather, by the invaders. In Ancient Greece,

² Andrei Oișteanu (2016). *Sexualitate si societate* [Sexuality and Society], Polirom, Iași.

it was common for the women of the defeated to be taken hostage by the aggressors, a subject also found in the writings of the Greek tragedians.

Some wars were fought for women and to win their love, and others to defend their dignity. However, in most cases, the results of wars leave indelible marks. Women were often traumatised, raped, assaulted or taken hostage as a result of conflicts. One of the ways of celebrating victory was even the mass rape of the women of the defeated. Rape during wars is also mentioned in the Bible and in Homer's Iliad: "Sexual violence during wars is not a new phenomenon of the 20th century. We find references to the capture of women in wartime in both Homer's Iliad and the Hebrew Bible."³ The outbreak of war therefore intensifies this problem, given that, generally speaking, during a war, women become subordinate to male power.⁴

In *Gender and New Wars*, we find a good observation that we can use to summarise the above: "Men and women tend to experience war differently, especially in terms of how men and women are predisposed to violence and experience it as a result of their gender."⁵ Whether we look at wars long past or contemporary ones, mass rape and aggression against women can be seen as a military strategy. Women, or more precisely their abuse, often become a motivating factor for soldiers, but also a reason for the psychological and demographic destruction of the enemy.

With regard to rape during armed conflict, studies have recorded the following rationales: the rape of women from the defeated camp as an additional demonstration of strength by the victorious side, rape as a reward for victorious soldiers by turning women into "war trophies", sexual assault to demonstrate the inability of defeated men to protect their women, rape as a means of humiliation, subordination and depression of the defeated.⁶

Added to this observation are concrete examples from wars in which women became a clear target. Rape as a strategy of war has never been limited to a particular historical period or geographical area. During the Second World War, Nazi soldiers raped countless Jewish women, despite the Nazi idea of "racial defilement", which also happened on their way to invade the USSR. In turn, Russian soldiers committed the same abuses on their way to Berlin.⁷

³ Robert Masterson, Sayan Dey (2018). *The Indigenous Voice of Poetomachia: The Various Perspectives of Textuality and Performance* Cambridge Scholars Publishing, UK, p. 80, in our translation "Sexual violence in wartime is not new to the twentieth century. We find references to it in Homer's Iliad, as well as references to the capture of women in war in the Hebrew Bible".

⁴ Penny Summerfield (1997). *Gender and War in the Twentieth Century*, "The International History", Vol. 19, No. 1, Taylor & Francis, Ltd., p. 3.

⁵ Christine Chinkin, Mary Kaldor (2013). *GENDER AND NEW WARS*, "Journal of International Affairs", 67, no. 1, pp. 87-167.

⁶ Dorian Furtună (2015). *Homo Aggressivus. Why wars and violence do not stop*, <https://adevarul.ro/blogurile-adevarul/violurile-ca-strategie-militara-1646440.html>, accessed on 28.01.2025.

⁷ Sabrina P. Ramet (1999). *Gender politics in the Western Balkans: women and society in Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav successor states*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, pp. 204-205.

Recent history also provides several examples of rape during wartime. In the Pakistani fight against Bangladesh's independence declared in 1971, about 200,000 women aged 8 to 60 were raped by Muslim soldiers who invaded the region. During the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974, there was a shocking and painful case in which twenty-five girls who told Turkish officers that they had been raped by soldiers were subjected to further sexual abuse. In Peru, the rape of women by law enforcement agencies is commonplace. In 1992, Human Rights Watch documented forty rapes committed by soldiers during interrogations in emergency areas in Peru. The same organisation also analysed numerous cases of rape committed by Indian security forces and militant groups in violent conflicts between Indian security forces and Muslims in northern India: "We received orders from our officers to rape you."⁸

During the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina between 1992 and 1995, tens of thousands of women were attacked and raped. A study of 68 women shows that the raped women who participated in the observation were Croatian and Muslim (Bosnian) women residing in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Forty-four of them were raped multiple times, 21 were raped every day during their captivity, and 18 were forced to witness rapes. Most of the rapes were accompanied by physical torture. Of the 29 women who became pregnant as a result of rape, 17 had abortions.⁹

In 2014, militants fighting to establish the Islamic State (ISIS) turned the sexual exploitation of women in conquered regions into a "normal" part of the state-building process. And one of the most recent wars, the war in Ukraine that broke out in 2022, has seen multiple cases of rape and assault against women, despite the fact that support for women's rights is increasingly present in every corner of the world. Female refugees who managed to escape the war have testimonies that are difficult to imagine: a survivor from Kharkiv recounts how Russian soldiers came after her and other family members in the basement of the school where they were sheltering. One of the soldiers took her away, raped her and assaulted her repeatedly for almost two days: "He took a knife and told me to do what he said if I wanted to see my child again. He raped me again, put a knife to my throat and cut the skin on my neck. Iso cut my cheek with the knife and cut off some of my hair. He hit me in the face with a book and slapped me repeatedly."¹⁰

Case studies

Taking as its starting point the war in Bosnia and the atrocities that took place there during the three years of war, Matei Vişniec's *Woman as a Battlefield* is a play about the disastrous consequences that remain in the wake of such conflicts. It is a harrowing text about trauma and conflict, about healing and wounds, about collaboration and support, about a cruel world, about

⁸ Sabrina P. Ramet, *op. cit.*, pp. 204-205.

⁹ Loncar M, Medved V, Jovanović N, Hotujac L (2006). *Psychological consequences of rape on women in 1991-1995 war in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina*, "Croat Med J", 4-7 February.

¹⁰ Verbal testimony of a Ukrainian woman during the war in Ukraine.

struggles for supremacy and power, about the interests of those in power who destroy and permanently mark the destiny of the many and often invisible. It is about Dorra, a woman from the former Yugoslavia, a victim of the horrors of war and revenge. Dorra is a woman who was raped and who has been included in a programme to help victims. She is trying to recover with the help of psychological therapy, supported in this endeavour by another woman, Kate, who has also been marked by the events around her. Two opposing worlds, two different histories, meet in a former American army medical centre on the border between Switzerland and Germany, travelling together on a path to healing.

Vişniec wrote the play while he was in Avignon in 1996, motivated by a desire to understand what happened in the Balkans and how these events transform “normal people into brutes and ordinary people into savages”. The drama is structured in 30 scenes that capture the dialogues between the two women and their most hidden feelings, deeply marked by the experience of war. In many moments, the historical context is reflected, with Dorra becoming a way of representing on a large scale the experience of war for women who were assaulted, raped and tortured throughout the Bosnian conflict.

At first, Dorra does not speak. The first time she does so is in scene 6, but she is alone, and it is not until scene 13 that she speaks to Kate for the first time. The previous scenes show how Kate tries to initiate a dialogue with Dorra through therapeutic methods and how she notes information about the patient in her diary. Reflecting further on the study *Psychological Consequences of Rape on Women in 1991-1995 War in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina*, the reality of Vişniec's character is supported by the consequences of rape presented here: the most common psychological symptoms experienced immediately after rape () were depression, avoidance of thoughts or conversations associated with the trauma, and suicidal ideation. Although none of the women had a history of mental illness prior to the rape, at the time of the study, 52 suffered from depression, 51 from social phobia, 21 from post-traumatic stress disorder, and 17 had sexual dysfunction.¹¹

The discussions between the characters provide a good opportunity to outline the social context of the Balkans. Throughout the play, Dorra often revives the portrait of the Balkan man: “This is the Balkans... A sentimental powder keg. In the Balkans, men know how to drink. Damn it, we haven't seen each other in three weeks, that's a long time, it's unbearable, let's have a drink. And drink, and drink until dawn.” “That's right, if you drink every day after work, between six and ten in the evening, yeah, that's okay, then you can go home and spend fifteen minutes with your kids. Or with your wife. Your wife is nothing but a baby-making machine.”¹² Whether or not Dorra presents a

¹¹ Mladen Lončar, Vesna Medved, Nikolina Jovanović, Ljubomir Hotujac (2006). *Psychological consequences of rape on women in 1991-1995 war in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina*, “Croat Med J”, Feb., 47(1), pp. 67-75, retrieved from https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC2080379/pdf/CroatMedJ_47_0067.pdf

¹² Matei Vişniec (2002). *The Body of a Woman as a Battlefield in the Bosnian War*, Romania: LiterNet, p. 26.

reality is explained to us by historians in their discourses on the Balkans: “It is or was an exotic peninsula with lively people who eat spicy food, drink strong drinks, wear brightly coloured clothes, love and kill easily, and have a wonderful talent for provoking wars. Westerners, less imaginative, looked at them with contempt, with hidden envy, snorting at their royalty, laughing at their pretensions and fearing their savage terrorists.”¹³

The character's frustration in this scene can be linked to the ongoing struggle that women in the Balkans are waging in the name of equality. Women have fought with various weapons for emancipation, status, recognition, and equality. This is especially true in the Balkan countries, where most studies conclude that women have the same status in the collective consciousness: submission to men, non-recognition of achievements to the detriment of the male line, a patriarchal society that has existed since the region's beginnings, lack of equality in various essential aspects of life such as education, politics, work, health, but especially high levels of violence and sexual abuse against women.

Dorra confesses that she was raped by five men, but does not know their identity: “There were five of them. But I don't know if they were Muslims, Croats or Serbs. You know, in Bosnia we all speak Serbo-Croatian.”¹⁴ This highlights one of the characteristics of rape in the Bosnian conflict: in a barbaric and unexpected way, women were raped and assaulted by their neighbours or friends, people with whom they had lived together until the outbreak of war. In most cases, women raped in the context of inter-ethnic wars are victims of attackers they know. Another aspect pursued by the attacker is to punish the victim if she is in a mixed marriage, married to a man from another ethnic group.

Sexual violence against women and girls during war is the most common form of oppression and remains a critical issue for women's rights. Despite the evolution of human rights discourse, abuses continue to exist in a violent and difficult to digest manner.¹⁵ This raises many questions about women's rights in general, as wars bring this harsh reality to light. This is also touched upon by the character Kate in one of her monologues: “In today's ethnic wars, rape is a form of blitzkrieg. Nothing can destabilise the ethnic enemy more effectively than when his women are raped.”¹⁶

People's lives change radically when it comes to war, and free will and choice become almost non-existent. The dehumanisation that occurs during a conflict leaves deep scars on society, and new mechanisms and ways of alleviating these traumas need to be found.

Another real consequence of sexual assault during conflict, which is reflected in the journey of the play's victim character, is the pregnancies

¹³ Antoaneta Olteanu (2004). *Homo balcanicus; features of the Balkan mentality*, Editura Paideia, București, p. 7.

¹⁴ Matei Vișniec (2002). *Despre sexul femeii – câmp de luptă în războiul din Bosnia [The Body of a Woman as a Battlefield in the Bosnian War]*, LiterNet, București, p. 30.

¹⁵ Cf. Miranda Alison (2007). *Wartime Sexual Violence: Women's Human Rights and Questions of Masculinity*, “Review of International Studies”, Vol. 33, No. 1, Cambridge University Press, p. 75.

¹⁶ Matei Vișniec, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

resulting from these violent acts. The unfolding of the story brings to the fore the fact that Dorra is pregnant:

„DORRA: It will never be my child. I didn't want it. Nobody wanted it. This child has no mother, no father. It doesn't exist, Kate.

KATE: Yes, it does. It's growing inside you. You are its mother.

DORRA: And the father? Who will be his father? If he ever asks me who his father is, what will I tell him? Who is his father?

KATE: The war. His father is the war”.¹⁷

The end of the play reveals how Dorra decides to keep the child, overcoming to some extent the trauma caused by the war and its aftermath, in order to find a new path and new possibilities. From her conversation with Kate, we learn that Dorra is applying to immigrate to Canada or Australia. She is heading towards a new world, far from the country where she was raped, leaving behind stereotypes and international tensions:

„DORRA: One day, after you left, I went for a walk along the lake shore. I was walking and looking at the water and the trees... And suddenly, an inscription on a tree caught my attention. I approached and read the following text: we inform you that this tree is dead. it will be felled between 2 and 8 april. A young tree will be planted immediately in its place, for your joy and happiness. signed: parks and gardens service. I read this text once, twice, several times. And then I decided to keep the baby”.¹⁸

The play has been translated into over 10 languages and performed in over 15 countries. The first performance took place in 1997 at the Avignon Theatre Festival (off), at the Théâtre des Roues, directed by Michel Fagadau. Reactions from around the world continue to pour in regarding this text: “given the horrific stories from Bosnia, it is a powerful thesis. Vişniec announced it journalistically and rendered it dramatically”; “it shows you the situation of these two women and then turns them into something more than symbolic victims”; “this work by Matei Vişniec circumscribes the Bosnian war, female victims, Balkan men and the Freudian nature of nationalism.”¹⁹

The terrifying realities and stories of women victims of war have inspired many contemporary playwrights. Soldiers in Congo have the freedom to kidnap and rape women, who are victims of unimaginable things. Based on interviews with women abused in the armed conflict in Congo, Nottage Lynn's *Ruined* brings to the fore characters with a particularly painful burden, women who have been raped and assaulted and who still suffer from the harsh reality they witnessed helplessly. The story takes place in a brothel, one that shelters

¹⁷ Matei Vişniec, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 97.

¹⁹ *The body of a woman as a battlefield in the bosnian war*, <https://www.visniec.com/pages/femmeenglish.php>, accessed on 28.01.2025, our translation: “given the horror stories that came out of Bosnia, it is a perfectly tenable thesis. My only caveat is that Visniec announces it journalistically and then proceeds to illustrate it dramatically”, “engages you with the plight of these two women and turns them into something more than symbolic victims”, “but this work by Matei Visniec, the exiled Romanian writer, is an impassioned two-hander that encompasses the Bosnian war, victimised women, Balkan men and the Freudian nature of resurgent nationalism.”

victims of rape and assault, women with no future, nullified as human beings and excluded from society. Mama Nadi, the character who owns this place, tries to create the illusion of hope for women left without a home, without a family, simply because they have been subjected to sexual abuse. The dialogues highlight the trauma these women have to live with: “Sophie: When I sing, I pray for this pain to go away, but what these men did to me lives inside my body. With every step I take, I feel them inside me. Punishing me. And that's how it will be for the rest of my life.”²⁰ The women in the play also suffer the humiliation inflicted on them by their families, as they are both victims of rape and expelled from society for this reason: “Mother: This is your home now. Mother takes care of you. If you want to go back, go, but they, your city, your people, won't understand. Oh, they'll think: she's ruined. She's been with too many men. She let those dirty men touch her. She's a whore.”²¹ Josephine, Salima and Sophie, three women whose destinies were decided by others, with no place in society, simply because they were raped and assaulted, find themselves in this brothel where they have sex to earn a living. However, Josephine believes she can start a new life with Harari, Sophie struggles, believing she will be able to remove the marks on her body, and Salima confronts her attackers: “You will no longer fight your battles on my body!”²² The play offers a realistic, unvarnished portrait of the lives of women in Congo: “When I started interviewing women, I was surprised by the physical destruction they had endured. We know there was emotional and physical destruction, but the hardest thing for them was to talk about the latter.”²³

A similar aggressor to the one in *Ruined* can also be found in *9 Parts of Desire*, namely an oppressive system that allows cruelty and injustice to be directed at defenceless victims. The author becomes a messenger for Iraqi women in their desire for justice, peace and freedom. The story, presented in the form of monologues in poetic language, shocks with the complexity of the emotions of the nine female characters: “I wanted the audience to see these women not as 'the other', but rather as someone like themselves.”²⁴

The play tells the story of nine women forced to face the tragedies of a war that will probably never end for them: Mulaya, a professional mourner,

²⁰ Lynn Nottage (2010). *Ruined*, Dramatists Play Service, New York, p. 23, our translation “SOPHIE. 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.”

²¹ Lynn Nottage, *Ruined*, p. 44, our translation: “MOTHER. (To Salima.) This is your home now. Mother takes care of you. (Mother takes Salima in her arms.) But if you want to go back out there, go, but they, your village, your people, they won't understand. Oh, they'll say they will, but they won't! Because, you know, underneath everything, they will be thinking, ‘She's damaged. She's been had by too many men. She let them, those dirty men, touch her. She's a whore”.

²² Lynn Nottage, *Ruined*, p. 63, our translation “You will not fight your battles on my body anymore.”

²³ Lynn Nottage on *Ruined*.

²⁴ Raffo Heather, *9 Parts of Desire*, p. 166, our translation: “I wanted the audience to see these women not as the 'other' but much more like themselves.”

Loyal, an artist, Amal, a middle-aged Bedouin woman, Huda, an elderly expatriate in London, a young doctor, a 9-year-old Iraqi girl, Umm Ghada, a mother who lost her son during a US military bombing raid, an American woman, and Nanna, a homeless woman. Although so different, what unites these nine women is the common experience they share and the trauma that has come to define their lives. The stories of the nine characters encompass a painful experience, with endless conflicts, spanning a long period of time, between the First Gulf War and the invasion of Iraq. The nine stories aim to bring to the stage experiences such as pain, fear, death, exile, defeat, terror, brutality, and the struggle for survival. The invaders occupy the place called “home” for these characters, a place that should be safe and welcoming, turning it into the most terrible nightmare. The stage is the place where the stories of the nine women come to life, where a part of history becomes reality again and where the atrocities of war are conveyed to the audience through powerful images that aim to confront a tragic past: “Laya: These stories live in me/ With every woman I meet or hear about/ I cannot separate myself from them”²⁵, referring to the painful memories that focus on the torture of one of her friends by the military. Another character, Umm Ghada, offers harrowing testimony about the bombing in which her family was burned:

“Umm Ghada: This is the Amiriya bomb shelter/ Here I write names/ With chalk over the burnt figures/ Here, on the ceiling, you can see/ Charred traces of hands and feet/ Of people/ And here the silhouette of a woman/ Vaporised by the heat/ This huge room became an oven/ And they threw themselves against the wall to escape the flames”²⁶

The analysis of the three plays that address the theme of rape as a strategy of war offers us a profound perspective on how theatre responds to human suffering and the impact that wars have on victims. Although each play takes place in different social and historical contexts, significant similarities can be observed between the drama experienced by each character, the way they are constructed, how they respond to trauma, and their respect for the historical context.

In all three texts, rape becomes an instrument of oppression and control used on a large scale, not just incidentally, highlighting not only the brutality of war but also the complexity of human relationships. The characters in the plays, whether victims or witnesses, are in a constant struggle for survival, equality and dignity. Approaching the subject through contemporary drama allows us to look beyond appearances and statistics.

This theme continues to be relevant and necessary, reminding us that art has the power to bring to the fore social issues, the shortcomings of human

²⁵ Raffo Heather (2006). *9 Parts of Desire*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, p. 9, our translation: “These stories are living inside of me/each woman I meet or I hear about and I cannot separate myself from them.”

²⁶ Raffo Heather, *9 Parts of Desire*, 29, our translation: “This is Amiriya bomb shelter. / Here they write names/ in chalk over the smoked figures. / Here, on the ceiling, you can see/ charred handprints and footprints / from people who lay in the top bunks. / And here a silhouette of a woman / vaporised from heat. / This huge room became an oven, / and they pressed to the walls to escape from the flames”.

beings and the dehumanisation to which we are subjected. These approaches urge us to reconsider our perspectives on war and violence against women in all its forms.

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