

**The Renovation of She-tragedy in Heather Raffo's  
*Nine Parts of Desire***

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**ABSTRACT:**

During the 1990's and the years of siege that followed, Iraqi women suffered from the oppression of the brutal misogynist regimes, and the cruel male-controlled ideals. Accordingly, through their suffering, these women portrayed the truth of being woman in a horrific atmosphere of war and how these traumatised women managed to survive. In her *Nine Parts of Desire*, Heather Raffo presents the characters of nine different women of different ages and professions linking them to show the dreadful reality of being woman in the times of war. In this play, Raffo renovated the She-tragedy genre. Even though that this genre deals with weak frustrated women who suffer from the effect of the long lack of stability, years of internal violence, external occupation and their cumulative generational effects, yet Raffo's characters are strong, confident and have a self-awareness and they stand face to face to the shocking values of war.

**Keywords:** Heather Raffo, *Nine Parts of Desire*, She-tragedy.

With the reestablishment of the English drama in the 1960's, a new genre of drama appeared known as She-tragedy. It is described as "the one important new mode established in the early eighties." (Hume, 1979, 350) The drama shifted from being a heroic masculine dominating tragedies revolving around heroes seeking glories and wars to a more touching ones. Consequently, drama shifted to emotional and more domestic apprehensions. This genre focused on the hardships of innocent women. Women and their sufferings became the center of the play rather than men's. This genre reflects the physical and psychological sufferings imposed on the innocent female victims. These victims undergo various injustices primarily sexual assaults like rape or adultery or facing humiliation and injustices. The playwrights would portray how these innocent women suffer after going through agonising times like losing a family member and being forced to raise children all by themselves, or taking care of their families alone. These women would end up mad or commit suicide. (Marsden, 2008)

As a term, She-tragedy was coined by the playwright Nicholas Rowe in (1674-1718) he employed the term in two of his famous plays *The Fair Penitent* (1703) and *Lay Jane Grey* (1715). He represented female protagonists suffering from the injustice of society by being raped, humiliated, ending up insane or ending their own lives. She –tragedy is unlike the male-centered plays in which the hero is in control of his destiny, acting passively and even executes violent deeds (Marsden,2008). The transition in theatre from the aristocratic Restoration heroic drama to the bourgeois tragedy along with the emergence of the middle class played a significant role in the emergence of She-tragedy. (Brown, 1982) The protagonists of She-tragedy “portrayed a new kind of heroine, whose victimisation provides the essential material of the plot and whose defenselessness constitutes a specific contrast to the defiance of the passionate and ambitious female characters in the preceding heroic plays.” (qtd. In Stewart, 2010, 50) This genre is meant to arouse the spectator's sympathy with the protagonist's ordeals. Its focal emphasis is on the "victimization" and "defenselessness" of the female character. (Stewart, 2010)

Unlike what is known about the protagonists of the She-tragedy, who is portrayed as being submissive, obedient and weak, as Marsden (2010) explains:

In the seventeenth century, men might rave under the effects of oppression, but their roles in drama were defined as active rather than as passive. Women, on the other hand, were expected to cultivate passive virtues such as patience and humility. In drama, the almost inevitable result of such qualities was inability to escape suffering.(237, 238).

Heather Raffo in her *Nine Parts of Desire* presented strong, confident, mature female protagonists. In this play, Raffo conveys the veiled truth of war that damaged the Iraqi women, yet showing their reality as being strong and not submissive women. She dramatizes the consciousness of her protagonists' pursuit to liberty, confrontation, besides how these women verbalized their experiences. Conveying their suffering, Raffo's female characters show the reality of war history where women are veiled. Raffo uncovered that reality, as explained by Terry Teachout (2005) in his "Invisible Women" saying that "[She] brings us closer to the inner life in Iraq than a thousand slick-surfaced TV reports"(Par.2)

Raffo chose the title of her play for a reason as she explains in the epigraph. She took the title from the saying of Imam Ali Ibn Abu Talib, cousin of Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him), 'God created sexual desire in ten parts; then he gave nine to women and one to men'. (Raffo, 2003, 15) As She-tragedy deals with women's

suffering especially due to a sexual sin, Raffo's heroines desire for liberty, integrity and peace. The play consists of five protagonists with nine monologues. Each character steps out on the stage to speak about her ordeal. In this play, Raffo is the playwright and the actress. She plays the whole nine characters so as, as she explains, "the time frames blur... driving the play towards a psychic civil war with the solo performer embodying the larger argument of what liberation means for each women" (NPD, 65)

The first character who is a symbolic figuration more than a character is Mulaya. (Romanska, 2010) She is a mourner who comes to funerals using 'improvised heart breaking verse about the dead to bring the women to a crying frenzy' (NPD, 3). She moves on the stage carrying a pack of shoes on her head that she throws to the river versing to the lost souls (soles). In her words she does not mean a specific dead person rather "to all of Iraq, she mourns the nation as a whole: its past, history, and culture" (Ramanska, 2010, 218).

MULAYA: Now the river developed an appetite for us  
Its current runs back  
Beneath Iraq  
Underneath my country. (NPD, 5)

Mulaya is a strong woman with a deep national affinity. She shows her awareness when she moves in the street collecting the shoes of the dead and throwing it to the river reflecting the unstoppable death devouring the Iraqi people due to wars.

Raffo's second heroine is Layal who is the primary speaker in the play. She stands for a real artist named Layla Al-Attar. Layal was the inspiration for Raffo to write this play. She saw her painting during her visit to Saddam Art Center in Baghdad in 1992. She was famous for Saddam's paintings as well as for "a painting of a nude woman clinging to a barren tree. Her head was hanging, bowed, and there was a golden light behind her like a sun".(Lahr, 2004, par.6) The painting was called "savagery". Layla was so brave being the only painter to paint nude women. This was defiance in itself to stand in the face of reality and to admit that she is being used and that the government drained her beauty and strength to become a hollow person.

Laya is unlike Mulaya. She does not stand as a collective figure representing repression yet she is the essential reason for writing this literary work, and she is the main speaker as well. Being the manager of Saddam's Art Center, and having the chance of being the royal family's painter, Layal had the privilege of painting nude women, "I mean nobody paints the woman like me, hardly anyone will paint nudes anyway" (NPD, 19). Through her paintings, Layal tried to make the audience realize that she is a victim not a whore as they think she

is. LAYAL:...you look at me like a whore for painting myself naked and you look at me like a whore for painting portraits of Saddam and now you look at me like a whore for thinking to do this mosaic for the Rashid Hotel--...

Your eyes say to me that I am a whore but their eyes say I am the most beautiful woman in Baghdad I am their fountain-I have been raped and raped and raped and raped and I want more because they need me.... You think am a whore...

If I did the same in your England or in America wouldn't they call me a whore there too? Your western culture will not free me from being called a whore not my sex women are not free. (NPD, 53,54)

Layal confesses that she is involuntarily lives an immoral life implicated by the sexual affairs with the royal family. She exploited her victimization and other women's suffering through her paintings. She conveyed her agony and other victims' anguish through her works, renovating "the oppression of women into submissive art work" (Stasio, 2004, 2) She identifies herself with her victims, "These stories are living inside me. Each one I meet her or I hear her and I cannot separate myself from them. (NPD, 21-22) She is like them, surrendering to the oppressor. Layal sacrificed herself for the sake of the Iraqi women: "She functions similar to the scapegoat in mimetic crisis". (Ozieblo & Hernando-Red, 2012, 148) Her artistic works became like a loud cry of criticism.

Amal is another character who reflects the painful sacrifices offered in the time of war. Her own sacrifice is losing peace in her own country. She reflects that such sensitive women like her "cannot have peace" (NPD, 20). She is torn out in inconvenient relations full of betrayal and misunderstandings. She moves from one place to another searching for peace and love yet in a country torn by war and violence it was impossible. She cannot have what she is looking for even in a foreign country. The reason is that women who cannot find peace in their own countries they will not find it anywhere else. She loves the men she met in her life for she truly loved them. She asks the audience to give their opinion about such women.

AMAL: And I see with my heart not with my eyes.  
I am Bedouin I cannot tell you if a man is fat or if a man is handsome  
Only I can tell you if I love this man or not and I think you see with your  
Heart like Bedouin  
I do very much feel this void and I have no peace always I am looking  
For peace  
Do you know peace?

I think only mens have real peace...  
womans cannot have peace

What you think? (NPD, 20)

The audience may understand Amal and the other characters' situation only if they reconsider the trauma they underwent. Hooda is like Amal, she reflects the tyranny and the horrible abuse that women faced during war. They were kidnapped and sexually abused and faced beheading if they become prostitutes. Such agony forced Hooda to find refuge in standing with the anti-forces during war. She is against war, yet she thinks that war against the ruling family is the solution. She stood and called for the anti-forces to end Saddam's government.

HOODA: I am for the war.

I didn't go to this war march

They said there was one million, two million in Hyde Park

I can't march with anyone who is pro Saddam....

I walked for peace in Vietnam and I walked for Chile

But this it is personal

It's against all my beliefs and yet I want it

It must be that he is a great enemy than, I mean Imperialism yeah,

I am for the war. (NPD, 47)

Raffo presented another character, the Doctor, who is also another example for women who are victims of their society. She represented all her women characters as the aloud voice of protest. She gave them the freedom to express the injustice they went through in their country, unlike the characters of the She-tragedy: who are submissive and weak. The Doctor stands for the educated Iraqi women who are strong and cannot be silenced. She suffered like the other character. She is surrounded by death and the deformities caused by war like the effect of the weapons of mass destruction. Little girls suffered from breast cancer because of radiation, babies born with two heads, and many more. Doctor did not suffer only from what she saw during her medical experience, her husband who was also a doctor, was one of the victims of war. He lost his legs. She explains her resentment against war saying "these things you cannot replace them when they are gone" (NPD, 46). She stands like the painful voice of the reality of war.

DOCTOR: most of our men are already deformed from the wars. My useless husband sitting at home without his legs. He can't make money sitting at home, what's left of the man- I can't even look at him now- he's my death sentence! And I don't care-no, I don't care what I say. I'm a little ashamed of myself but it sickens me. We're an educated people-I'm a doctor, if I can't do anything- I trained in America, we all trained in the West and we came back. You know what I'm talking about, we had the best hospitals in the middle East-everyone was coming to us but ... people, it's people who are

responsible because the world's people they have their eyes away-look at us- (Cancer- is that not the weapon of mass destruction everyone is searching for?) (NPD, 46)

As she echoes strong women characters in the time of war, Raffo employs another character, Samira, a nine-year-old girl who lost her father door and lives with her mother. She has been deprived from the right of education to be safe from the outside danger. Her mother claimed that she was stupid and did not let her go to school, yet the real reason was that the mother saw US forces paid recurrent visits to her daughter's school and she was worried about her. The girl was imprisoned in the house to be away from the violent events and their effects on her daughter, yet her daughter used to watch N-Sync ( a singer), and Oprah ( a TV presenter) through TV and Satellite. She used to listen to the sound of weapons and learned to distinguish them.

Girl: I am not stupid

I count bombs

I count between hissing when it is high

Until the sound becomes low

Then two seconds- and it explode!

If I hear the hissing I know it's in our neighborhood like in a few blocks

Then I hear glass breaking for 4 seconds after the hit.

I can tell if it is RPG's or American, tank or armor vehicle.

Kalashinkov or M16. (NPD, 26)

This girl is torn between two cultures. Raffo intended to reflect the dangers or war. The girl lost her father and did not receive any educational knowledge. Raffo tries to arise the audience' awareness concerning the dark future facing the young generation. Raffo then shifts from the image of the orphan girl who fears to lose her mother to the image of tragic women who lost her nine children in the bombing of Al-Amiriya Shelter. . She names herself Umm (mother of) Gheda.

UMM GHEDA: in Baghdad, I'm famous now as Umm Gheda because I do live here I fellow trailer

outside Amiriya bomb shelter

since the bombing

13 February 1991.

Yes I was inside

with nine from my family

talking laughing

then such a pounding shaking

everything is fire

I couldn't find my children

I couldn't find my way out

but somehow I did.  
 In the whole day later  
 I am searching, searching charred bodies  
 They were fused together  
 The only body I did recognize  
 is my daughter-Gheda  
 So I did take her name.

..... I am Umm Gheda. Mother of Tomorrow. (NPD, 36-37)

This woman died when her children died at the bombing, yet Raffo relives her to mirror the agonizing truths about war. "She loses herself in the symbolic order of communal memorial." (Ramanska, 2010, 229) Raffo personify Umm Gheda as a real witness for the viciousness of war. "She lost her entire family in the catastrophe with a stillness that helps to etch her grave some testimonial in the mind." (Isherwood, 2004) Umm Gheda addresses the audience directly to be the witness of what had happened to her in the moment of the bombing.

UMM GHEDA: come, I will take you to the roof. You can see how the

hole was made. Two bombs from U.S. airplanes come to this point of the roof

the first bomb is drilling bomb drilled this hole

second one come inside exactly same spot and exploded in fires. They wanted to kill as many civilian as possible.

These bomb had never been use before but it is special two bomb design

For breaking only bomb shelter. It is very purpose.

This grave of Iraqi people. All my family is here, head is here

So I am Umm Gheda, Mother of Tomorrow.

My full name is dead with them.

Come,

Now you sign the witness book. (NPD, 38)

Raffo presented another victim, but this time she is from a far distance. The American is an Iraqi-American woman who spends the war days watching TV just to know anything about her family living in Iraq.

I watch T.V.

Looking for faces of our family

So all I do is cry

I'm on my knees usually

In the middle of my apartment with my mom

I'm watching CNN

I want to pray

But I don't have words (NPD, 36-37)

This character resembles Raffo herself. She shows the suffering of the Iraqi women even in exile. She lives with the agonizing felling of being far away and alienated from her family.

She has grown to identify herself as an American, and now, she is asked

To view herself as the other, the enemy. Moreover, she describes the gap

Between what the narcissistic self-indulgence of the American talk-show

Of 'trauma circuit' and the actual horror of war-torn Iraq.(Romansaka, 2010, 229)

She describes the truth of war as being a 'cliff' and as 'A sudden extreme jagged edge', where anyone's end is so far away from his start. Like the desolation of the last character, Nanna. She is an old woman who earns her living by selling various objects to the US military men. She echoes the anguish of the Iraqi women who lived in poverty because of the political and economic chaos caused by war.

NANNA: Hallo Hallo

You like this painting?

It is very worth

Famous artist

Her name

Layal

I have to sell it

I have to eat

Two dollars? (NPD, 58-9)

The painting she is selling is the "savagery". The painting belongs to the Iraqi artists Layal. Nanna illustrates that this painting is of Layal who died when an " American bomb fell on her house...she is martyr, and the president used to love her and praise her, he put her painting in Baghdad Museum of Art." (NPD, 58) She took the painting, which is considered part of the Iraqi culture before the museum was burnt. She remarks that 'our heritage is finished" (NPD, 59) she wails her country the way that Mulaya did at the beginning of the play.

NANNA: I tell you

This her last painting alive

All the rest

They are burned dead in the museum

I see it

Our heritage finished

I run through

I took it before the people could burn it.

It is more worth.

I have to sell it

I have to eat

Two dollar?

Nanna's hand is outstretched and open. Black out. (NPD, 58-9)

In *Nine Parts of Desire*, Raffo reflected the ugly realities of nine different women of various social and educational backgrounds who were victimized to make the audience and the world realize how these women were suffering in a world that lacks peace and security. In this play, dramatizing these nine characters, Isherwood explains, Raffo creates a powerful theatrical collective portrait of Iraqi women in a problematic epoch in the history of Iraq. (Isherwood, 2004) All of her nine characters share the same struggle and distress and they all spoke out loud to make the world realize how much they suffer. Her characters "share the tragedy of war in their own struggle to keep their humanity"(Chelab, 2017, 206)

This enabled Raffo to bring the audience together into the world of these characters regardless of their sex, religion, and race. (Corone & Vavanaugh, 2009) Raffo explains

The audience plays a vital role in the show with each Iraqi character speaking directly to them in English as if they were a trusted western friend. I want the audience to see these women not as the 'other' but much more like themselves than they would have initially thought. I felt it was important to create a safe environment to experience both horror and humor, but ultimately to see the play as a celebration of life. (NPD9)

In this play, Raffo managed to unify all the characters with their anguish and suffering. She makes her characters speak directly in monologues to shock the audience in order to intensify the powerful reality of these women who struggle for survival. Unlike the old She-tragedy female protagonists, Raffo's characters share the power that makes the audience understand the agonizing reality of these women, standing in the face of tyranny and injustice. Her renovation of She-tragedy characters makes her the ambassador of all tyrannised women in the world.

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إعادة احياء مسرح هي - مأساة في مسرحية للرغبة اجزاء تسعة لهذر رافو

المدرس: بسمه عبدالحسن علي

حاصل على شهادة الدكتوراه في الادب الانكليزي

جامعة بغداد/ كلية الاداب

الخلاصة:

خلال تسعينات القرن الماضي وسنوات الحصار التي اعقبت ذلك، عانت النساء العراقيات من استبداد الانظمة الوحشية المعادية للمرأة، والمثل الوحشية التي يعاني منها الذكور. وعليه، ومن خلال معاناتهن، صورت هؤلاء النساء حقيقة كونهن نساء في اجواء حريمروعة وكيف تمكنت هؤلاء النساء المصابات بصدمات نفسية من البقاء على قيد الحياة. في للرغبة اجزاء تسعة، تقدم هيذر رافو تسع شخصيات نسائية من مختلف الاعمار والمهن لأظهار الحقيقة المروعة في كونهن نساء في زمن الحرب. جددت رافو في هذا العمل مسرح هي - مأساة وعلى الرغم من ان هذا النوع من المسارح يتعامل مع النساء المحبطات والضعيفات الاتي يعنين من التأثير الطويل لانعدام الاستقرار، وسنوات من العنف الداخلي والاحتلال الخارجي و آثارهما المتراكمة على الاجيال. الا ان رافو قدمت شخصيات قوية لديها ثقة ووعي بالذات والقدرة والقوة للوقوف وجهاً لوجه مع قيم الحرب الصادمة.