

## NAOMI WALLACE'S *IN THE HEART OF AMERICA*: THE PORTRAIT OF A WOMAN'S BODY AS AN IDEOLOGICAL TEXT

Amany Mahmoud El-Sawy  
Alexandria University  
amanyelsawy2@yahoo.com

Received 18<sup>th</sup> September 2012

Accepted 15<sup>th</sup> January 2013

### KEYWORDS

female body; nation's ideology; political violence and violations; imperial war.

### PALABRAS CLAVE

cuerpo femenino; ideología de la nación; violencia y violaciones políticas, guerra imperial.

### ABSTRACT

This paper shows how a female body, considered a representative of its nation's ideology, is often the main target of political violence and violations. Naomi Wallace's *In the Heart of America* uses the sexual frustrations of all its women characters to reflect the violent physical and mental pressures of imperial war and its consequent times. Their physical defects signal the hostile times they live in, which are usually reflected on the female body as carrier and displayer of the ideologies and social constructions of the era, turning women's bodies into representatives of their nation's sociopolitical ideology. They have their regions' ideology inscribed on their bodies as physical wounds, making these bodies battlefields on which colonizers and soldiers demonstrate their political muscle. Wallace demonstrates how the female body, through its sexual orientation, its color, its exposure, and its movements and gestures, can tell the whole story of violence and create a drama of great effect.

### RESUMEN

Este trabajo muestra cómo un cuerpo femenino, considerado representativo de la ideología de su nación, es a menudo objetivo principal de la violencia y las violaciones políticas. *In the Heart of America*, de Naomi Wallace, usa las frustraciones sexuales de todos sus personajes femeninos para reflejar las violentas presiones mentales y físicas de la guerra imperial y sus consecuencias. Sus defectos físicos indican los tiempos hostiles en que viven, que a menudo se reflejan en el cuerpo femenino como portador y estandarte de las ideologías y las construcciones sociales de la época, convirtiendo a los cuerpos de las mujeres en representantes de la ideología sociopolítica de su nación. Tienen la ideología de sus regiones inscrita

sobre el cuerpo como heridas físicas, convirtiendo a esos cuerpos en campos de batalla donde los colonizadores y los soldados demuestran su potencia política. Wallace demuestra cómo el cuerpo femenino, mediante su orientación sexual, su color, su exhibición y sus movimientos y gestos, puede narrar toda la historia de la violencia y crear un drama de gran efecto.

A female body, considered a representative of its nation's ideology, a carrier of that nation's honor, and also a producer of its human power, is often the main target of political violence and violations. Contemporary drama takes the issue of the political violation of women into consideration. In *Political Violence in Drama*, Mary Karen Dahl discusses how different forms of drama display different forms of political violence, its victims and its executioners. Dahl also considers in her discussion "the impact of the violent deed on the community that the deed ostensibly benefits" (10). In a general comment about the drama of contemporary playwrights, Dahl asserts that it "challenge[s] the spectator to move beyond identification and witness to analysis and action" (132). She further states that theatre, as a medium, allows us to "investigate the fundamental experiences of our existence, including those that we call 'political'" (132). Contemporary political drama aims to affect this fundamentality of people's political experiences. It is not only shaping their personal lives but also their whole nations' ideological perceptions.

The power of theatre, especially the political one, lies in the advantage of the live watching that is an essential part of the theatrical experience. Gilbert and Tompkins address this theatrical advantage of the *watching* particularly for the political theatre in *Post-Colonial Drama*. This book studies the history of post-colonial drama and its developments that affected its current thematic approaches and theatrical productions. The writers devote a whole chapter to the subject of body politics, illustrating how a body is like no other dramatic tool, demonstrating a person's gender, race, and class: all extremely loaded political identifications. The writers' ideas of how body politics shape political drama support my arguments throughout the paper, as I establish a connection between the female body and the specific forms of political violations it suffers. These invigorating yet problematic aspects of the political theatre are highly present in the drama of Naomi Wallace who displays profound dramatic awareness of the female body and its representation within a political context. Wallace's *In the Heart of America* employs a surrealistic, episodic style that creates many levels to the truth the play tries to represent, questions the history of imperial politics, and sometimes even rewrites it, in its violent approach toward the female body.

In order to clarify Wallace's idea, Edward Said's assertion concerning the past has to come into light. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said discusses the effect of the past in shaping our present and the authority of the present in formulating our view of the past: "past and present inform each other, each implies the other and [...]"

each co-exists with the other” (4). Questioning the historiography of the world, Said’s discussion of past and present is done within the context of colonial and imperial powers: their different means and common intentions. He focuses on imperialism as a more recent political approach, asserting that it is “a word and an idea today so controversial, so fraught with all sorts of questions, doubts, polemics, and ideological premises as nearly to resist use altogether” (5). Said defines imperialism as “thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others. For all kinds of reasons it attracts some people and often involves untold misery for others” (7). This geographical struggle, Said maintains, “is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings” (7).

All of the forms and historical instances of political struggle that Said describes above unite in their ideological ambition. Said states that “the era of high or classical imperialism [ ... has] more or less formally ended with the dismantling of the great colonial structures after World War Two, [and] has in one way or another continued to exert considerable cultural influence in the present” (7). Naomi Wallace’s *In the Heart of America* (1994) develops this notion of classical dominance to a more modern one displayed in the imperialism practiced and maintained by the dominant power in the world: America. Said talks about “the privileged role of culture in the modern imperial experience,” a notion clearly displayed in Wallace’s play, stating that “little notice [is] taken of the fact that the extraordinary global reach of classical nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century European imperialism still casts a considerable shadow over our own times” (5).

“The American experience,” says Said,

was from the beginning founded upon the idea of ‘an *imperium* --a domination, state or sovereignty that would expand in population and territory, and increase in strength and power.’ There were claims for North American territory to be made and fought over (with astonishing success); there were native people to be dominated, variously exterminated, variously dislodged; and then, as the republic increased in age and hemispheric power, there were distant lands to be designated vital to American interests, to be intervened in and fought over. (8)

This contemporary form of imperialism displayed in the politics of America is ethically questioned in *Heart of America*. Said asserts that “curiously, though, so influential has been the discourse insisting on American specialness, altruism, and opportunity that ‘imperialism’ as a word or ideology has turned up only rarely and recently in accounts of United States culture, politics, history” (8). Among these recent voices that try to “turn up” the notion of imperialism is the literary voice of Naomi Wallace in *Heart of America*, in which she tries to restore the ideological concept of imperialism into political literary discourse, questioning the allegedly unselfish humanitarian American approach in its recent wars.

Said further states that “the connection between imperial politics and culture is astonishingly direct” (8), which is a notion Wallace tries to emphasize throughout her play. He explains how the American culture formulates its imperial politics: “American attitudes to American ‘greatness,’ to hierarchies of race, to the perils of *other* revolutions (the American revolution being considered unique and somehow unrepeatable anywhere else in the world) have remained constant, have dictated, have obscured, the realities of empire” (8). Wallace demonstrates in her play how these “American attitudes” formulated the “realities of empire” through her dramatization of the circumstances of two modern American wars: the Gulf and the Vietnamese. As Said explains of the American attitude during the 1990 Gulf war: “in the American view of the past, the United States was not a classical imperial power, but a righter of wrongs around the world, in pursuit of tyranny, in defense of freedom no matter the place or cost. The war inevitably pitted these versions of the past against each other” (5). Such imperial reasoning is displayed in Wallace’s *Heart of America* in order to unite and justify the political intentions of dominance and expansion of both the Gulf and Vietnamese wars.

Dahl analyzes the contradictions in the concept of violence, especially those that result from war, stating that

As we have grown less confident of the sacred ground of existence, the relationship of violence to that ground has grown less certain. The process of desacralization has detached violence from divine judgment and reprisal, forced us to confront without comfort the contradictions of violence, and placed responsibility for changing the human condition on man alone. The definition of limits has at the same time grown more and more complex. Thus violence on the scale of two world wars, Auschwitz, and Hiroshima astonishes and terrifies us at the very time that psychologists argue that aggression --including violence-- is a normal and even beneficial component of human behavior. Yet in this changed world the crucial question continues to be “How shall man be saved? (1)

Wars have specifically succeeded in detaching the concept of violence from moral judgment, creating many contradictory perceptions that have tortured all war participants both physically and mentally. These contradictions of war emphasize the role of the human being as the only one capable of “chang[ing] the human condition,” since these contradictions have eliminated divine morality as a judging concept, leaving the solution to be a total burden upon humans’ shoulders. In my examination of *In the Heart of America*, I look at how Wallace blends the general notion of the destructiveness of war with the contemporary imperial intentions of America’s wars, focusing on her dramatization of how these wars ideologically and physically reflect on the female body.

Wallace focuses on two specific American wars that were initiated through idealized political validations but were imbedded with imperial intentions

toward the other side. Wallace implies throughout her play how America's claim of fighting against communism, tyrannical regimes, and for the good of the people is all a rationalization used to cover the real imperial intentions of America as a dominant power. The play introduces, in surrealist sketches, both the Vietnamese war and the Gulf war, blending their occurrences and confusing their morals in a demonstration of the parallel imperial approaches of the two. Demonstrating how war produces "disfigured bodies which physicalize the metaphor of imperial violation" (Gilbert and Tompkins 224), the play personifies war violence through the damaged bodies of its characters, especially the female characters as ideological texts of their invaded nations.

Revolving around Fairouz, an American-Palestinian woman, and her search for the facts of her brother Remzi's death during the Gulf War, the play illustrates the destructiveness of the American imperial hegemony, exemplified in the Vietnamese and Gulf wars, on the bodies and mentalities of its participants, especially those of the females, each introduced with a body defect in the play. Fairouz's exploration of the Gulf war circumstances uncovers a love story between her brother and another soldier, Craver, who met in the Saudi desert. She also encounters the wandering ghost of Lue Ming: a Vietnamese woman killed at the My Lai massacre. In addition, the play introduces the character of Boxler, a lieutenant in the American army, who appears sometimes as a real flesh-and-blood character, and other times as a wandering spirit of war that visits soldiers everywhere. The play, as Lyn Gardner states in her article "The Mythic and the Marxist," is "both realistic and surreal" (4) in its overlapping incidents, collage-like scenes, and fantastic characters. Moreover, *In the Heart of America* employs a feminist approach in analyzing the issue of violence in war, especially physical violence that mostly manifests itself on the female characters' bodies. This physical violence of war is introduced in the play to gender any inflicted body or object as female, making the purpose of the play to "redefine political drama in terms of a feminist surrealism" (Gardner 4).

Walter Bilderback writes in his article "The City That Embraced Naomi Wallace" that the playwright "speaks to, and for, the body" (59). Wallace's dramatic centrality of the body is clearly emphasized in the play *In the Heart of America* as the characters' bodies are made to interact within the different contexts of war, homophobia, love, lust, guilt, and other social and political backgrounds, building the drama on the results of those bodies' interactions. In an interview with John Istel, Wallace talks about the main guiding concepts to the writing of her play, stating that

One of my leads into the play was thinking about the body in love and in war. While war is intent on destroying the body, love supposedly has a capacity to reconstruct or rediscover the body's sensuality. The body is central--and vulnerable--in both love and war. The question is: how does the body's sensuality

or sexuality survive in the face of systems designed to destroy it-either war or late capitalism. (25)

Throughout the play, the characters try to make sense of the fatality of the war “system” and find a moral in its imperial justifications. Wallace uses the “vulnerability” she describes above, of the characters’ bodies, to materialize the violations of both wars and illustrate their outcome as engraved on those bodies. She asserts at the same time that all the characters’ attempts for understanding and rationalizing war are doomed to failure as they encounter further evidence of its destruction.

Dahl states that trying to justify violence as an agency of winning human freedom only “intensifies the sense of violation” (2), which is clearly presented on the bodies of Wallace’s characters, which are handicapped one way or another: either physically as a result of being subjected to violence or mentally as a result of having to face it, practice it and justify it. However, the play stresses the physical manifestation of violence, displayed in the deformities of the characters, especially the females. Fairouz, for example, has a destroyed foot that is sometimes taken care of by her brother Remzi, and often hated, despised and made fun of also by him. In one of the many reminiscing scenes in the play, Fairouz recalls a conversation she had with her brother, through which he tried to help her fix her deformity:

Remzi: You’ve got to do it or you’ll never walk right. Just once more.

Fairouz: Just once more. Only once more. Will it be better then?

Remzi: Soon. It will be better soon.

*(Remzi twists her foot, and she lets out a sound of pain that is part scream and part the low, deep sound of a horn.) (32)*

Remzi’s violent behavior toward his sister’s deformed body symbolizes the act of American imperial war, which is often advertised as an act of political correction intended to restore lost rights and rectify wrong situations, as Remzi himself is trying to do with his sister’s physical disability. However, his supposedly reforming violent act directed toward her deformity further offends her wound rather than heals it: a dramatic gesture that hints at the political hypocrisy of America’s imperial wars.

Although Fairouz’s deformity is not a result of war violence, it certainly is presented in the play as a symbol of the crippling power of imperial war. Fairouz often tries to practice her walk which Lue Ming tries to imitate, resulting in scenes of two limping women trying to stabilize their strides, signifying their whole nations’, the Palestinian and the Vietnamese’s, immobilization by war. In a conversation between Fairouz and Remzi, Wallace establishes a connection between Fairouz’s deformity and her social and political isolations:

Remzi: You're going to blame me that no one wants to marry a girl with a gimpy foot.

Fairouz: My foot is deformed, but my cunt works just fine!

Remzi: You have a mouth full of dirt, sister. What is it you want from me?

Fairouz: What I want? *(She speaks some angry lines to him in Arabic.)*

Remzi: Gibberish, Fairouz. Save it for the relatives.

*(Fairouz speaks another line of Arabic to him.)*

Remzi: I'm not a refugee. It's always somewhere else with you, always once removed. I am not scattered.

Fairouz: If I could go to war with you, I'd shoot my enemies first, then I'd shoot the ones who made them enemies. (16)

This conversation reflects how Fairouz's physical deformity cripples her both socially and politically in a symbolic parallelism to the political handicapping of Palestinians, resulting from years of violent battling, which destroys the nation's social life and its ability to physically defend itself.

Wallace establishes another connection between the female body and the land, in the conversations between Fairouz and Remzi, relating the honor and dignity of the female body to her land:

Fairouz: I'm an Arab woman.

Remzi: You've never been there.

Fairouz: Neither have you!

Remzi: If you walked into our village today, they'd tar and feather you.

Fairouz: Fuck you. I'd put on a veil.

Remzi: The veil's not the problem. You haven't been a virgin since you were thirteen.

Fairouz: How dare you!

Remzi: I'm sorry.

Fairouz: I was at least fourteen! *(They laugh.)*

Fairouz: Mother still says to me "The honor of a girl is like a piece of glass. If it's broken, you can never glue it together again."

Remzi: Why don't you tell her the truth?

Fairouz: It's my truth. Not hers. You hardly know her, and she lives five minutes away! (14-15)

Remzi insists that the land Fairouz is eager to associate with will "tar and feather" her to pieces because of what Fairouz's body represents to her Eastern nation: the loss of dignity. Fairouz's comment about her mother's point of view on a girl's honor, although sarcastic, also connects the female's violated body, represented in a broken piece of glass, to the land shattered by the violations of war. Fairouz's body offers her deformity and her lost virginity as symbols of the wounded and humiliated ideological body of the land.

Furthermore, the longing for and resentment of the past are displayed throughout the play as part of Wallace's eminent dramatic gestures. "Wherever there is a present moment," says Wallace, "the past is also present, although it's usually invisible. That's what draws me to theatre --the ability to put different times on stage and see how they collide or how they resonate with one another-- how the past tells a story within a present story" (25). This dramatic play with time is strongly displayed in *Heart Of America* as the drama "jumps around in time, presents simultaneous events, uses ghost characters" (Wallace 25). Wallace continues to go back in time, throughout her play, to "unlock the complexities of the present" (Gardner 4). Time retreating is done in whole scenes that take the play back years in time and also in the characters' stream of thought as they start bringing back incidents from the past to enhance the pictures of their present. Both Fairouz and Lue Ming bring their deformed mothers back into their present incidents, trying to view their own deformed bodies and crippled realities within those of their mothers. In a conversation between Fairouz and Remzi, the physical injury of their mother comes back from the past as an idiotic incident to Remzi but a heroic one to Fairouz:

Fairouz: There is always a parallel. Did mother ever tell you how she broke her hip before she came to America?

Remzi: She fell down when she was running away from the soldiers ...

Fairouz: No. She was running toward the soldiers.

Remzi: I've heard this so many times it's a sweet little lullaby that could rock me to sleep. So mother saved father and they broke her hip with a rifle butt. Crack, crack. Bone broke. Hobble, hobble for the rest of her life (14).

Wallace asserts here Fairouz's association with her mother and her ability to see the parallelism of their situation, sensing the depth of the mother's injury as a sign of heroic action engraved on the mother's body. The body/country symbiosis is further demonstrated in the mother's broken hip, a particular body part that symbolizes the physicality and the productivity of the female. Lue Ming also mentions the similarity of her mother's and Fairouz's injury as the former has only one foot because "she stepped on a mine on her way out for a piss" (14). Wallace here connects the body of Lue Ming's mother with that of Fairouz's, as they unite in a disability that in Fairouz's case foretells war and in the mother's displays its effect.

Bilderback points out Wallace's dramatic intention, in *Heart Of America*, to tie "American military involvements over the past half-century to male fear of otherness" (55). This notion of fear of the other, although implicated in the sites of physical violations of Fairouz as an 'other', is specifically apparent in Lue Ming's physical violations, another *other*, that have more than one representation in the play. In one instance, Lue Ming tells Fairouz the story of her long beautiful black braid that was cut off by an American soldier:

Lue Ming: [ ... ] Rush always gave me gum, Juicy fruit gum. He called me his little sis. Once he gave me a ribbon to put in my hair. I had very long hair, beautiful, thick hair that I wore in a braid down my back. *(Beat)* But one day Rush didn't bring any gum and he took out his knife and cut off my braid.

Fairouz: Was it a slow knife? Serrated are slow.

Lue Ming: Oh no, it was a quick knife, a Rush knife, and he strapped my hair to the back of his helmet. His friends laughed and laughed. Rush looked so very silly with his camouflage helmet on and this long, black braid hanging down his back.

Fairouz: It was only hair. (22)

The graphic implication in the scene does not only establish the same connection between the land and the female body as displayed throughout the play, but even more, it intensifies the sense of female violation in its insinuation of brutal sexual assaults. Lue Ming's slashed braid signifies the violated humanity in war in the form of physical and/or mental mutilation of the spirit and/or body, but more importantly, it refers to women's sexual violation, as hair is a strong symbol of a female's beauty. Lue Ming describes the soldier's knife as a rush knife, corresponding with the soldier's own name, which signifies the war's non-amendable destruction. Lue Ming's slashed braid is not "only hair," as Fairouz indicates; it is a physical sign that proclaims the victor and the vanquished.

The character of Lue Ming further connects the Vietnamese and Gulf wars in their violent content that is the substance of their imperial hegemony. Wallace, by choosing a female character to haunt the soldiers in the play, signifies the role of the female as the conscience of a nation and also as the most tormented victim of wars. Lue Ming asserts to Craver that her mistake of haunting the wrong person and site, landing in the Gulf instead of Vietnam, is not a crucial one, stating: "So I missed the house and the year. But not the profession" (8). She also tells Boxler that "what's done is often done again and done again" (34). Clearly, Wallace is trying to establish a comparison in the audience's consciousness between the imperial intentions of these two wars, their parallel circumstances and comparable results. She further tries to illustrate the function of these wars as "professions" that make money and establish power rather than as militant reforming acts that the imperial commands assert of their purpose.

The comparable violence and violation of the Gulf and Vietnamese wars, especially toward the female body, is emphasized by Wallace in one of the most graphic scenes in the play. In scene three of the second act, Boxler, a lieutenant in the American army during the Gulf war, sees the apparition of Lue Ming and lives her torturous incident all over again in front of the puzzled Remzi and Craver, confusing the wars and losing his sense of time and place:

Boxler: Shut your squawking, bitch. *(Calls)* Hey, you two troopers. Over

here on the double.  
 (Remzi and Craver enter.)  
 Boxler: Remzi, what's the best way to make a woman talk?  
 Craver: The dozers are cleaning the area, sir.  
 Boxler: Get on with it. What dozers?  
 Remzi: We're mopping up.  
 Boxler: I said make her talk!  
 Craver: Can you tell us where Saddam's minefields are?  
 Boxler: This is Vietnam, son.  
 Remzi: We're in Iraq, sir.  
 Boxler: This is Panama City!  
 Craver: We have the Dragon M-47 assault missile, sir. Couldn't we use that instead?  
 Boxler: Duty is face-to-face confession, son. Between two people. You and the prisoner. Well, go on. Take down your pants.  
 Craver: Sir?  
 Boxler: Take down your pants. (To Lue Ming) Suck him.  
 Lue Ming: (To Craver): Haven't we met before?  
 Boxler: Suck him, or I'll cut your head off.  
 (Craver unzips his pants. Lue Ming begins to sing a Vietnamese lullaby)  
 Boxler: Jesus. Can't you even give her something to suck?  
 Craver: It's the singing, sir.  
 Boxler: Remzi. Go get her kid. It's in the hut.  
 Remzi: What hut, sir? We're in the middle of a desert.  
 Boxler: Get her fucking kid and bring it here, or I'll cut his dick off.  
 Remzi: What kid, sir?  
 Boxler: What kid? There's always a kid.  
 Lue Ming: The child is right here. In my arms. They all look at Lue Ming [sic]. (36)

Boxler's puzzlement about his current battle reflects the similar violent circumstances of both wars he participated in, thus suggesting a unified American imperial hegemony that governs America's international relations. "There is always a kid," he asserts, pointing out how the two wars he is confusing produced the same casualties and created the same horrors under ever unchanged imperial claims of seeking peace and justice. Craver's failure to prove his patriarchal masculinity, a masculinity that is defeated by a Vietnamese lullaby, is avenged by the death of Lue Ming's child. The combined violation of the bodies of the female and the child is Wallace's dramatic insinuation of the destruction of a land's innocence and nurturing abilities. Lue Ming's and her child's death also suggest the vulnerability of their nations' future presented in the physical destruction of the female who produces that future and the child who is "a piece of the future," as Boxler states; that future/child "is alive, and then it isn't" (44).

In a later scene in the play, Lue Ming's ghost, as a victim of war, faces

Boxler's ghost, as the "soul" of war. Boxler describes himself saying:

Boxler: I go from war to war. It's the only place that feels like home. I didn't kill your daughter. Calley did. I was inside him, looking out, but I didn't do it. I didn't pull the trigger.

Lue Ming: You watched.

Boxler: What else can a soul do but watch? We're not magicians.(45)

Boxler, as the "soul" of war, makes of every soldier a haunted person, occupied by the phantom of the battle, thus becoming a machine that kills and destroys. The above conversation clarifies the previously quoted scene as we understand that Boxler is mixing Calley and Craver when he asks the latter to assault Lue Ming. Wallace, in all these dramatic instances of puzzlement and loss between wars and soldiers, emphasizes the similar type of victimization and violation that all participants suffer in this modern era of American imperial wars. Lue Ming asserts that female violence in war is often produced by men's frustrated sexuality resulting from the devastation they witness and often participate in creating. This frustrated masculine sexuality is asserted in Lue Ming's statement to Boxler that "You couldn't get it up. That's why you killed us both" (44).

Wallace here emphasizes that the fear for and the attempt to preserve masculinity is the main trigger for violence in war; it is a fear of "otherness," as Bilderback states, represented in the female's position as an 'other' whose biological difference is threatening to the male. This anxiety about the preservation of a hegemonic masculinity is emphasized by Wallace throughout her play in the many dramatic symbols she uses, such as Lue Ming's braid slashed probably because of the soldier's inability to rape her, thus trying to prove his manliness in another physical way. It is also apparent in Fairouz's crippled leg that intimidates men, preventing them from approaching her, including her brother who finds pleasure in her screams of pain and who even used to make money from showing her deformity to the kids at their school. Finally, this masculine fear of the female that promotes the violation of her body is made apparent in the many lines and actions of the male characters, some of which have been discussed above. These characters try to prove their masculinity by verbally and physically violating the female body, considering it as a battlefield on which they fight to maintain their masculinity, on a personal level, and to dominate the land, on a political one.

"What's it like to kill a woman?" (8) Lue Ming asks at the beginning of the play, giving special significance to the killing of a female in combat. "Racism and feminism," Gardner comments, "are [ ... ] high on [Wallace's] agenda" (5), which are notions specifically emphasized through the question asked by Lue Ming. Having a non-white female ask specifically about the emotional connotations of destroying a female's body in war establishes an immediate connection between the

race and the gender of the violated speaker. However, Wallace's drama, although built on racial differences as one of the play's main thematic approaches, emphasizes the body's suffering as its focal premise. The play is imbedded with many physical references that demonstrate how war discourse is fleshed out in the image of violated and destructive bodies. The female body, for Wallace, has an even greater significance in this context because of what it is in its physicality that impels this violation. The female body's significance as the producer of children who constitute the human power instigates the masculine fear and hostility toward that body. Wallace asserts that the masculine mentality often treats the female body as a weapon in itself that can be extremely destructive. In scene eleven of the first act, Wallace illustrates, in a conversation between Craver and Remzi, how the masculine mentality associates the female body with war weapons, both being very admired and desired as sexual entities, and also considered extremely lethal to handle. This connection of weapons to female sexuality metaphorizes the importance of the female body as a battle arena on which wars are fought and politics are inscribed:

Craver: I had a thing for the Sentry jet, but how long can love last, after the first kiss, after the second, still around after the third? I dumped the Sentry jet and went on to the Wild Weasel, F-4G. Like a loyal old firehorse, the Weasel was back in action.

Remzi: Have you ever touched the underbelly of a recon plane? Two General Electric 179-15 turbojets.

Craver: If you run your hand along its flank, just over the hip, to the rear end, it will go wet. Not damp but I mean wet. (30).

This connection between war weapons and female sexuality points at the exploitation of the female body in war as a means of establishing physical and political power and, later, imperial dominance. The importance of violating and subjugating women on the battlefield is further asserted in the play as we hear Boxler pointing out "lesson two" in war, which is "How to handle women in combat" (21). The "handling" of women in war is then represented in the play as a key act to maintain control over the defeated party, as women's bodies become political texts on which defeat and victory are inscribed.

*In the Heart of America* is a play that uses the sexual frustrations of all its characters to reflect the violent physical and mental pressures of imperial war and its resultant times. Interested in exploring "systems of oppression" (Istel 26), Wallace represents patriarchal violent behavior, illustrated in sexual aggression, mass killing, and obsession with weapons, as one of war's major destructive systems. Wallace tries to emphasize that women's bodies are measured as targets in war, as they constitute a threat to the patriarchal structure that brings into being the war system. Female physicality, as Wallace illustrates in her play, intimidates the male patriarch

and his violent system of power maintenance represented in war. Wallace tackles many more daring subjects in her play that are all rooted in the body and are best summed up by Bilderback, who states that Wallace “doesn’t shy away from genuine complexities, and the play raises questions that urge us to find connections everywhere-among such phenomena as homophobia, racism, militarism, gender attitudes, sex, the body [ ... ] and poetry.” He further emphasizes that Wallace’s plays in general “exhibit a surprising amount of humor and an unexpected sense of the craving for forgiveness, or rather the craving to forgive” (57), as apparent from the haunting images in the play and from Fairouz’s trip of discovery and forgiveness for her brother and for the victimized soldier in general. The surreal nature of the play and its episodic incidents that create multiple realities throughout prevent the drama from reaching any type of cathartic end. The play ends with a scene that is not much different from the opening one, as we see Fairouz and Craver have one of many casual conversations scattered throughout the play’s text. This open-ended, non-cathartic format deprives the audience of any sense of dramatic relief, sending them back to reality with unresolved political dilemmas and a burdensome guilt for their either active or passive sense of participation in the circle of violence.

Fairouz and Lue Ming are women whose bodies are caught in the war of politics. The bodies of these women are all victimized under a uniting violent system of patriarchy. Wallace represents the bodies of her female characters as ideological manifestations of their nations; each of these women tells a story about her people with her own body. Fairouz’s deformed foot documents the history of their nations and the political violations these nations suffered in the past and continue to do so today. However, Wallace’s dramatic efforts are not meant to renovate the world; more apparently, she desires her audience to take a closer look at the world in its past, present, and future conditions. Edward Said states that

appeals to the past are among the commonest of strategies in interpretations of the present. What animates such appeals is not only disagreement about what happened in the past and what the past was, but uncertainty about whether the past really is past, over and concluded, or whether it continues, albeit in different forms, perhaps. This problem animates all sorts of discussion-about influence, about blame and judgment, about present actualities and future priorities. (3)

The play, in its investigation of the past and analysis of the present, is actually repeating Said’s question of whether “the past is really past.” It seems to suggest the extended political violation of The Other: the other land, the other race, and the other gender, that continues to occupy different hegemonic forms as time develops and ideologies expand.

*In the Heart of America* does not try to remedy the flaws of history; rather, it tries to reinvestigate it. Lue Ming and Fairouz are resurrected from a somewhat

recent history, one that can still be imagined, in Lue Ming's case, and whose continuation can still be experienced, in Fairouz's. These women are all signifiers of their raped lands and violated nations, but even more, they are real women of flesh and blood whose bodies have paid the price of patriarchal political competitiveness as they sustain a nation's physical existence and symbolize its social and political honor.

The physical defects of all these women signal the hostile times they lived in, which are usually reflected on the female body as carrier and displayer of the ideologies and social constructions of the era, turning women's bodies into representatives of their nations' whole sociopolitical ideology. Fairouz and Lue Ming have their regions' ideology inscribed on their bodies as physical wounds, making these bodies battlefields on which colonizers and soldiers demonstrate their political muscles. Wallace demonstrates how the female body, through its sexual orientation, its color, its exposure, and its movements and gestures, can tell the whole story of violence and violation.

#### **WORKS CITED:**

BILDERBACK, Walter. "The City that Embraced Naomi Wallace." *American Theatre* 19 (2002) 54-58.

DAHL, Mary Karen. *Political Violence in Drama*. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1987.

GARDNER, Lyn. "The Mythic and the Marxist." *American Theatre* 13 (1996) 4-5.

GILBERT, Helen and Joanne Tompkins. *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics*. London: Routledge, 1996.

SAID, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.

WALLACE, Naomi. *In the Heart of America and Other Plays*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2001.

---. "Interview." *American Theatre* 12 (1995): 25-41.