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Testament of Survival: A Reading of Naomi Wallace’s Play “The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek”

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Abstract: Naomi Wallace is a contemporary American playwright, who uses her plays as vehicles for creating awareness of contemporary social evils, mainly those caused by the capitalist system. This paper has taken up for discussion her play “The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek” which has as its background the depression era. The feelings of futility, hopelessness, inertia and boredom are highlighted in the play. The dry river bed, on which much of the action of the play takes place, symbolizes the desperation of the characters’ situations. Deprivation of sensuality, ghastly reality, and the futility that stifles passions are other issues dealt with.

Naomi Wallace has established herself as one of the most important voices in the modern era. In many works she has raised her voice against global capitalism and the violence that is behind this movement. Wallace is a revolutionary playwright who vehemently speaks out her discontent with the capitalist policies of the US government, though, as she herself admits, she was born and raised in the belly of the beast. She says, “we live in a culture that is hostile to creativity and original thought that doesn’t serve capitalism, empire and the most virulent by products of those forces: racism, homophobia, classism and sexism” (“On Writing” 98). Born in a family of radicals, Wallace is very sensitive to the ills plaguing the contemporary society, particularly the lot of the labour class in a capitalist society. Her plays have been stamped as “strong, but political”, which foreground the ground realities of a class-conscious society. This paper seeks to analyse how Naomi Wallace sees capitalism in her play “The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek”.

The play has as its characters depression-era survivors of 1936 in an unnamed small town who have lost hope along with jobs. There’s talk of strike against the local glass factory, where the women workers have ended up with permanently blue hands from chemical contamination. Even the local creek has run dry. Meanwhile, bored and useless, two teenagers with no future beyond a suffocating present, meet up at a railroad trestle. Pace is a tomboy with a fascination with trains, which seem to have purpose and power. Pace has a feeling of hopelessness, which likely stems in large part from the death of her friend Brett. He died before the play’s start, running the train with Pace. They raced across the bridge, Brett out front until he tripped and fell looking over his shoulder to check on Pace. Pace, thinking Brett would get right back up, passed him and crossed safely. Brett, however, was injured in the fall, could no longer run, and just stood there while the oncoming train slammed into him.

Now she wants Dalton, a quiet and impressionable local lad, to join her in the kind of adventure that makes her feel alive by taking risks. “This dare is an attempt to escape the no-exit life of Pope Lick, where an older generation has been wrung dry by a capitalist infrastructure that has no more use for them” (Abbitt 147). Driven by a desire to redeem herself for failing Brett and causing his death, Pace presses Dalton to practice the run with her day after day for weeks on end. This is a game of chicken in which they plan, when the

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train’s whistle can be heard in the distance, to race across the hundred-foot-high bridge, running toward the oncoming train, in hopes of reaching the safety of the far side before the train arrives. Because the bridge towers over a dry creek-bed and is wide enough only for the train, being on the bridge when the train arrives means certain death.

Yeah, well. You (Dalton) and her (train) are coming from opposite sides, right. You’ve got to time it exact ‘cause you need to make it across before she hits the trestle. It’s like playin’ chicken with a car, only she is bigger and you’re not a car. The kick is once you get halfway across, don’t turn back and try to run her. You lose time like that. Just face her and go. (286)

Dalton refuses to run. She begins to run it without him while he watches from the creek bed below. She stops in the middle of the bridge and pleads for him to watch, but to no avail. He will not watch. Without his eyes on her to record her feat, she will not run. With time lost, she cannot outrun the train; doomed, she dives from the trestle to the rocks below as Dalton looks on. In his grief, Dalton scoops her up in his arms, and kisses her bloody, lifeless body. Dalton is arrested for murder. Stunned, Dalton says nothing in his own defence, though his jailor, Chas (father to the train-killed Brett), tries fruitlessly to coax, cajole and bully him into saying something that might save him from the hangman.

Dalton’s father, Dray, meanwhile, has been paralyzed by despair after losing his job at the local foundry. With nothing to do with his hands, he stays home and makes shadows on the wall, afraid to leave the house because of a fear of invisibility that comes of having nothing to contribute to society or family. Gin (Dalton’s mother) has not yet been fired from her job at a chemical plant, but that ever-present threat and the danger inherent in her job loom. Unsatisfied with her job and also with Dray’s despairing listlessness, she presses him to get out, even to join her and some others in their plans to reopen a glass factory that’s been closed down. The first evidence that she’s breaking through Dray’s despairing paralysis comes in his visit, finally, to Dalton in jail. After that show of love and caring, Dalton’s hopelessness sees its first major cracks. At last, Dalton tells the story of Pace’s death and is therefore released from jail.

Much of the action takes place in a dry river bed, which symbolizes the desperation of the characters’ situations. The lack of vegetation signals the absence of opportunity for growth for the inhabitants of the nearby town. The train trestle, which is “[a]llmost a hundred feet up,” symbolizes the characters’ unattainable aspirations and hopes. For characters like Brett Weaver, Dalton Chance, and Pace Creagan, the only way to escape the futility of their lives is to take the risk of running the trestle, a symbolic gesture of defiance that results in the deaths of Brett and Pace, and in Dalton’s imprisonment for suspicion of murdering Pace.

The future for each of the youths Dalton and Pace, does not look bright. Pace says: “You and me and the rest of us kids out here, we’re just like. Okay. Like potatoes left in a box... The potato thinks the dark is the dirt and it starts to grow roots so it can survive, but the dark isn’t the dirt and all it ends up sucking on is a fistful of air. And then it dies” (294).

While Dalton harbors some faint hope of going to college, or at least of leaving town, Pace tells him it’s not going to happen. We see how hard times have ground down Dalton’s ineffectual parents. We meet the dead boy’s father, a jail guard who describes how the prisoners have morphed into animals to deal with captivity. Wallace has a gift for turning sympathy for life’s underdogs into testaments of survival.
"Capitalism plunders the sensuality of the body", wrote Terry Eagleton (qtd. in Saunders para 4). The working class, under the oppressive conditions of their workplace, and due to the poverty imposed on them, miss the sensual pleasures natural to them. "The sensory deprivation of the proletariat... [is] to be expected, given the gruelling conditions of factory work" [Howes 206]. Naomi Wallace has spoken about this in an interview:

People I went to school with have become farmers and factory workers and electricians. They pump gas and drive trucks and dig wells, and they are old in their mid-30's. One of my schoolmates, a man of 35, has been laying carpet for 20 years. The last time I was home he told me that his back and his knee hurt so much now that he can't get on top of his wife when they're making love. But he told me in a kind of wild, funny, self-mocking tale full of Kentucky humor and smarts, and I could see, not in what he said but in how he said it, that he was trying to make sense of things. (qtd. in Gornick 60)

In "The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek", this deprivation of sensuality is brought to the fore. The affair between Dalton and Pace seems to be devoid of any sensuality. Dalton carries his own curses—parents who, hardly able to fend for themselves, make him feel like a burden, and a protective shyness that turns his feelings for Pace into a kind of self-mutilation. These are Romeo and Juliet without the romance, just the rebellion. In a similar vein, the courtship of Dalton's parents, as recollected by them, is based on material needs, not romantic ones. Gin reminds him: "You didn't bring me flowers like other girls got. You brought me tomatoes." Dalton retorts, "You can't eat flowers" (306).

Pace offers Gin a model beam engine, which is broken. Confused by such an awkward and nontraditional gift, Gin merely offers silence. Having no real possessions to speak of, Pace explains that this engine is the only thing that she can call her own and offer Gin as a gift.

The broken beam engine, and not the actual train, comes to symbolize Pace's life. The broken engine symbolizes all of Pace's comments on the futility of life and her inability to escape the same fate as Dalton. Her knowledge of trains and her model engine symbolize her life and longing. But the model engine is broken. No matter how much she attempts to know about trains and regardless of how much control she tries to gain through this obsessive knowledge, the futility and impotence of her life cannot be negated. This model engine, like the train that eventually takes Pace's life, embodies the futility that stifles her; her passions, like her knowledge of trains and engines, cannot elevate her above the emptiness and oppression. (Hale 158)

Survival for the underdogs under capitalism is only ghostly. The play starts in a cell with the protagonist, fifteen year old Dalton doing the hand shadow in the wall. He is alone in the cell. The cell is considered to be a place for prisoners. The prisoners are not able to do the things as they wish. They can only imagine but can't realise the things in their life. It is like a shadow in the wall. We can produce different hand shadows in the wall, but it is all lifeless. It's just an image.

The readers can see the train as the symbol of capitalism. Pace, a girl of seventeen years old gives a small advice to Dalton how he should cross the trestle when the train comes. She advises him not to turn or he would lose his time and would be defeated. It is a race between life and death. If he fails he will die in the trestle. This train is compared to that
of the capitalist people. The labourers should protest against the capitalists, fight or try to overcome them. But if they fail they will be swallowed by the capitalist system. Dalton doesn’t want to cross the trestle because he is afraid that he will die, but Pace shouts at Dalton for his cowardly behaviour and says that he has got the heart of a dead rabbit. During a conversation with Dalton’s mother Gin, Pace says about playing in the trestle as “always taking someone away, Never bringing someone back” (293). This is typical of the capitalist movement which plunders and ruins the people.

Not only is running the trestle an attempt to overcome capitalist oppression, Pace’s running of the train trestle also represents Pace’s need to exist fully, if only briefly. Much of Pace’s life has been consumed by poverty, hopelessness, resentment, and emptiness. With most of her life diminished, she attempts to exist more fully by having Dalton witness her racing the train.

In short, Wallace’s play “The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek” may be read as a testament of survival of the proletarians in the capitalist system, and a witness of what the system has made of man.

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Self-Actualization through Relationship: A Reading of Naomi Wallace’s *And I and Silence*

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Self-actualization is a term used for various psychological studies, often in slightly different ways. This term was originally used by Kurt Goldstein for the motive to realize one’s full potential. Self-actualization for women is a concept stressed by feminists. Betty Friedan, in her 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*, offers a solution to the problems of women who are suppressed by their stereotyped gender roles: “Self-actualization is a challenge to the traditional feminine roles of housewife and mother” (qtd. in Lukkehaus 70). For the achievement of this self-actualization, a woman has to cross many barriers like being considered as a weaker sex by men, social restrictions which do not allow the women to develop, the notion that without men there is no life and security for women, and the inferiority complex developed by women themselves. This paper seeks to unravel how some women take their journey towards self-actualization through a bonding with other women, as seen in Naomi Wallace’s 2011 play *And I and Silence*.

Naomi Wallace (b.1960) is an American poet, playwright and screen writer. She has been widely acclaimed as a dedicated advocate for justice and human rights in the U.S. and abroad, and Palestinian rights in the Middle East. Her plays have been published by Faber and Faber Company in London. Among the contemporary writers, she is one who has earned many awards. Her work has received the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, the Joseph Kesselring Prize, the Fellowship of Southern Writers Drama Award and an Obie Award. She is also a recipient of the MacArthur Fellowship, and a National Endowment for the Arts Development Grant. Some of her well known plays are *In the Heart of America*, *One Flea Spare*, *The Inland Sea*, *Slaughter City*, *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*, *The Girl Who Fell through a Hole in Her Jumper*, *The War Boys*, *Things of Dry Hours*, *Birdy*, *The Fever Chart*, *A State of Innocence*, *The Retreating World*, *No Such Cold Thing*, and *And I and Silence*.

Set between a prison and aovel in the racially segregated America of the 1950s, the play *And I and Silence* is about the futile efforts of two young women, one black and one white, to rise above poverty, gender, racial inequality and class. But, it unfolds into a story of love and an inseparable bond between the women which enables them to rise above their circumstances. Wallace’s idea here is to run two parallel tracks of action and have the same characters played at two points in their lives by two pairs of actors. We follow teenaged Dee, who is white, and
Jamie, who is black, as they meet and become friends in prison; and, in interspersed scenes, we observe them as young women, after they are released and are trying to find their footing.

We slowly find out why the women are behind bars — Dee stabbed her wife-beating father, and Jamie was wrongly picked up as an accessory to a gun crime. What is heartbreaking is the extremely limited sphere of opportunity these women see available to them. Hope flies upward in prison, as the girls imagine building their future lives, but because they are poor, ex-cons and women — and because one of them is black — society on the outside slowly beats them down. All they end up having left — sexually, emotionally, materially — is each other.

Naomi Wallace is a white writer having an empathetic attitude towards the so-called racially inferior blacks. She is said to have stated: “Whiteness is not just biology, it is a ticket to power, and I am interested in how white people have been diminished by our unconscious practice of racism” (qtd. in Gardner). In this play she has brought out the beauty of the friendship between a black and a white. As Maria Cristina Mena has commented, “The piano keys are black and white but they sound like a million colors in your mind” (Goodreads).

As a white, Dee’s condescending attitude towards Jamie is inevitable. Perhaps the white Dee chooses the black Jamie as her friend thinking that she will be accommodative to all her demands. Dee notices Mr. Crackle, the prison guard knocking the bowl of hot chilli, Jamie’s favourite dish, off her hands, and the submissive Jamie not showing any protest:

YOUNG DEE : Few months ago, I saw Mr. Crackle the guard knock a bowl of hot chilli right out of your hands.

YOUNG JAMIE : I picked the bowl up.

YOUNG DEE : Yep. But Mr. Crackle, he knocked it out of your hands a second time.

YOUNG JAMIE : And I picked up that bowl again, though there wasn’t no chilli in it any more.

YOUNG DEE : Me. I would have let it lay. Eight times he knocked the bowl out of your hands. I counted. And you picked it up eight times till Mr. Chuckle gave in. That’s the kind of friend I want. (11)

At the same time, Jamie is wary of making friends with a white. Jamie’s reluctance to accept Dee’s friendship is also due to racial prejudice: “Blue eyes make me cold” (13). However, we find Jamie rising in Dee’s esteem, and the distinction due to colour slowly evaporates, as Jamie also comes to accept Dee. Dee has a respect for Jamie as a person who has learnt much from life’s heavy hand, and she wants to learn her own lessons from Jamie. For Dee, all her education derives from her relationship with Jamie:
DEE : Ah, forgive a stupid gal, why don’t you?
JAMIE : You had nine years to learn. Shame on you. Why didn’t you learn?
DEE : ’Cause you’re the only one I can learn from.
JAMIE : If you’d learned to write you could have wrote me a letter.
DEE : Wrote you hundreds. They’re all up here.

She taps her forehead. (7)

One of the bases of their friendship is Jamie teaching Dee how to clean houses in the properly polite and subservient manner. Dee learns everything meekly: “I’ll practice everyday. Everything we learned” (50).

In the prison, the girls make plans about what they’ll do when they go out of prison. They know that their choices are limited as women:

YOUNG JAMIE : What will we be when we get out?
YOUNG DEE : (no hesitation) Sailors. They’ve got the best huts. And live on boats year round.
YOUNG JAMIE : We could sail to... Korea. I like the sound of it.
YOUNG DEE : Gonna be a war there.
YOUNG JAMIE : Too far away.
YOUNG DEE : Too far away sounds just the right distance for sailing.
YOUNG JAMIE : But sailors? We’re girls. They’ll laugh. (21)

Together they make plans for their future. They don’t hope for much: a job they can hold onto, a room they can share, the chance to walk through the city arm in arm and drink ice-cold soda. Dee says, “When we get out, we’ll meet up and walk into the city arm in arm in the hot summertime, down Oak Street and past the park, buy some doughnuts at Patsy’s Pies and two sodas so cold they’ll freeze our gums. Maybe I’ll buy me some blue suede shoes, and a bottle of perfume like a daffodil, for you. That’s a fact” (50). Their dreams are small but even these they cannot realize with the harsh realities of the segregated world outside their cell. They rehearse together for the roles they will need to play to get by: the good servant, dedicated, capable, graceful and uncomplaining. They practice polishing invisible silver, dusting invisible shelves. They remind each other there is a line that must never be crossed, there are things they must never succumb to and there are times when the only choice left to them will be to run, though even then they must always take care never to forget their bucket and brush. There is nothing but disillusionment as they face reality, and they know that only in dreams they can have the freedom and adventure of sailors.
Out of the prison the girls cannot walk together because social norms do not permit a white and a black to go together. So the girls have a nostalgic yearning for the times they spent together in the prison cell:

DEE : We were happy when we were inside. Sometimes.
JAMIE : When we were together. They kept us apart.
DEE : We found a way to meet. Here we can't go out together. We can't sit together. We can't walk together any more.

Dee and Jamie are both marginalized, one as a black and the other as belonging to the working class, though white. They cannot conceive of a life apart from each other and they are unable to survive in the world ridden with racial and class prejudices. The ending of the play where the two friends stab each other and end their lives, thereby putting an end to their miseries, may cause the audience or the reader to arrive at a conclusion that the girls have fallen victim to an unjust and cruel world. But on second reading, we come to see that the girls have opted out, so that they can be together in a place where there will be no more pain or hunger or humiliation. As Dee declares, “We won’t want to come back, Jamie. From a place where... there is no cold ’cause winter forgot what cold was. And no wind ’cause it’s laid down to sleep. Where there’s no being hungry and the dark is just something easy you can shake from your hair. That world is ours” (45).

In the final scene, the older Dee and Jamie as well as the younger Dee and Jamie come together as the past and present merge. When Jamie stabs Dee in the stomach, she doubles over in pain, but Young Dee lets out a wild celebratory call. This shows that for Dee and Jamie, putting an end to their lives together is a matter of celebration. In the end all is silence, as the characters repeat “Hush, hush” (57). If self-actualization is a motive for realizing one’s potential, Dee and Jamie find it through their relationship with each other which surmounts and silences all external circumstances.

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