"MAKE THE GHOSTS REAL": FEMALE MOURNING IN NAOMI WALLACE'S *IN THE HEART OF AMERICA* & *A STATE OF INNOCENCE*

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ABSTRACT

This paper will attempt to explore the female mourning in Naomi Wallace's *In the Heart of America* (1994) and *A State of Innocence* (2008). The first part will trace back to the traditional burial ritual and Greek tragedy and discuss the major themes of female mourning and its significance. The second part will consider *In the Heart of America*. In the play, the ghost of Lue Ming, a Vietnamese woman, appears in search of Lt. Calley, the leader of My Lai massacre. Lue Ming and her infant daughter were both killed in the massacre; her grief over her loss and search for Calley denounces America's imperial brutality of killing hundreds of old men, women and children in Vietnam. The third part will deal with *A State of Innocence*, based on a real event in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Um Hisham, a Palestinian woman, mourns for two deaths: that of her beloved girl accidentally killed by an Israeli army and that of Yuval, an Israeli soldier who helped her and later died in her arms. Her mourning condemns the de-humanization of war, but it also goes beyond condemnation to highlight the connection between the opposite sides and the re-humanization of one side to the other. The last part will bring up Judith Butler's *Precarious Life* (2004), in which she contends that conventions of mourning are normally shaped by the state; while particular lives are deemed valuable and mournable, certain deaths are disavowed as deaths. The women in Wallace's two plays mourn for the innocent victims of war, for the deaths that are not mourned or grieved by the nation; the female mourning not only protests against war but also proposes peace and life.

Keywords: Naomi Wallace, war, female mourning, ghost.

INTRODUCTION

Mourning is universal, and its rituals are different. In the ancient Greek funeral, after the proper sacrifice had been made at the tomb and offerings of food and drink presented to the dead, laments were sung as part of the elaborate ritual of mourning.

One of the most defining characteristics of the laments was their performance by women and their association with the expression of intense grief and sorrow. As the women lamented, at times their sobs, moans and sighs composed themselves into song, into a searing melody, or a mournful antiphony. They might shriek, tear their hair and clothing, scrathch at their faces and beat their chests. They screamed out questions without answers, repeated themselves, summoned witnesses, and called for vegence. They would not be consoled. This important characteristic of the burial ritual could also be seen in traditional cultures. According to Gail Holst-Warhaft in *Dangerous Voices*, laments for the dead in most traditional cultures are part of more elaborate rituals for the dead, and they are usually performed by women. In these cultures, women and men are perceived and expected to mourn in different ways. Men and women may both weep for their dead, but it is women who tend to weep longer, louder, and it is they who are thought to communicate directly with the dead through their wailing songs (1-2). Frequently, in these cultures, laments are led or sung by skilled or professional women who are regarded as being especially gifted at improvising and performing songs for the dead (2). It may also be natural to assume that women should lead the weeping over the dead, that this weeping should develop into a form of song that is associated with women. Since they are usually addressed directly to the dead, laments enable the members of the family or small community to tell the dead they are missed, and sometimes to berate them for abandoning the living (3).

In classical Greece, from the sixth century BC onwards, legislation was introduced in Athens and a number of the more advanced city-states aimed at the restriction of what was viewed as extravagant mourning of the dead. The new laws were particularly severe on women mourners, a fact which suggests that women must have played a leading part in the funeral ceremony. After the legislation, the passion of laments was channeled into two literary genres: *Epitaphios Logos* and tragedy.

The *Epitaphios Logos*, the funeral oration delivered at the tomb for those who die in the battle, makes a virtue of death, provided it is death in the service of the state. The state convinces the families that the glory of dying for the fatherland outweighs private grief, and compensates them for their loss.

The *Epitaphios Logos* is in direct opposition to the laments of the women who mourn their personal losses in terms of emotional, economic, and social deprivation, and look on death as an enemy.

Greek tragedy is an art preoccupied with death. The Greek tragedians draw on a tradition where women address the dead directly, rousing them to interact with the living. Take *Antigone* (441 BC) for example. It is a play about "a female character using lamentation to make a public and politically motivated display of injustice" (Foley 31). Antigone's two elder brothers, Eteokles, defending one of the seven gates of Thebes, and Polyneikes, leading the attack against him, have been at war and killed each other. Kreon, the new king of Thebes, announces that Eteokles is a hero and would be buried with proper rites. As for Polyneikes, a traitor, his corpse must lie unburied, eaten by birds and dogs. Thinking of the body of poor Polyneikes left unmourned and unburied, Antigone decides to bury him. For her, "it's noble to do / This thing, then die" (87-88); with love for her brother, she willI "commit a holy crime" (90). She sprinkles the corpse with thirsty dust, performs proper rites, and buries it. The rebellious action is discovered by a guard, who then is ordered by Kreon to find out who did the burial. Antigone goes once again; as she sees the bare corpse, she moans with wailing grief, like the way "a bird will give sharp cries when she finds / That her nest and bed are empty and her babies / Are gone" (469-471). Caught by the guard and confronted by Kreon, Antigone claims that the king's proclamation overrules the laws of the gods, so she would not obey. Haimon, Antigone's fiancé, protests to his father that what he has done is wrong to justice. The chorus of the Theban elders are also moved by Antigone's genuine grief. But Kreon insists in Antigone's transgression and punishes her to be sealed in some deserted tomb until she dies. In her final lament as she approaches her imprisonment and death, Antigone addresses to Polyneikes, describing how she has honored him by washing his body and pouring libations at his grave. Meanwhile, she expresses her anger and calls for justice: "but if those men do wrong, / May the evil that they suffer be no more / Than what they are unjustly doing to me!" (994-996).

Another archetype of female mourning is the Virgin Mary lamenting Christ at his crucification. The mother's cradling and weeping over her dead son expresses poignant female pain, sorrow, and mourning.

Lament is a gendered voice, mourning females' traumatic losses. It is the voice from the margin, expressing grief, suffering, anger, and rebuke of those responsible for the deaths mourned. Maternal mourning refuses the conversion of death into state glory, into heroic, manly virtue. It is instrumental in the constructions of the identity of the deceased and historical truths. Female mourning makes ordinary, innocent victims heard; they are heard, and heard sympathetically. Female morning is not just about grief or despair; it confronts death with courage, showing women's way of bearing the unbearable.

IN THE HEART OF AMERICA

In the Heart of America opened in London at the Bush Theatre in 1994, and then moved to Long Wharf Theatre in Connecticut, where it was directed by Tony Kushner. In 2001 the play was part of a Naomi Wallace theatre festival in Atlanta; in 2003 the Outward Spiral Theatre in Minnesota staged it to coincide with the beginning of the bombing of Iraq. The play begins with the Palestinian-American Fairouz's questioning of Craver, trying to find out about the disappearance of her brother Remzi, who is reported missing in the Gulf War in 1990; Craver, an American soldier, was stationed with Remzi in the Saudi desert. At the same time, the wandering ghost of Lue Ming, a Vietnamese woman, is looking for an American soldier named Calley, who was found responsible for My Lai Massacre. She later realizes that Calley's soul now lives in Boxler, who serves as Special Forces Lieutenant and trains Remzi and Craver.

Lue Ming mourns for her family who were hurt or killed during the Vietnam War. Her grandfather in the fields was shot dead by an American plane; her mother stepped on a mime on her way for a piss and lost one foot. Lue Ming's long, beautiful braid was abruptly cut off by Rush, an American soldier who had been friendly to her. He strapped it to the back of his helmet, and his fellows laughed and laughed. As Amany Mahmoud El-Sawy points out, 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 references women's sexual violation, as hair is a strong symbol of a female's beauty;" the incident "intensifies the sense of female violation in its insinuation of brutal sexual assaults" (51). One day Lue Ming was captured by Calley; he wanted to know the whereabouts of the others and forced her to suck him. Because he couldn't get it up, he shot Lue Ming first and then her girl, four times. Lue Ming woke up after Calley and his troops left, and found her dead child in her arms; "A dead child weighs so much more than a live one" (131), Lue Ming says. She went on living and always felt the heaviness of her dead daughter in her arms.

Lue Ming mourns for her personal losses and for the national tragedy as well. In a scene in which she and Calley/Boxler meet again, they spell out the atrocities committed in My Lai Massacre:

> LUE MING: March 16, 1968. Charlie Company…
> BOXLER: A unit of the American Division's 11th Light Infantry Brigade entered—
> LUE MING: Attacked.

BOXLER: Attacked an undefended village on the coast of Central Vietnam and took the lives—

LUE MING: Murdered.

BOXLER: And murdered approximately five hundred old men, women and children. The killing took place over four hours. Sexual violations…

LUE MING: Rape, sodomy.

BOXLER: Anatomical infractions.

LUE MING: Unimaginable mutilations. (125)

Bearing the great grief, Lue Ming's apparition has been looking for Calley/Boxler; she wants to ask him: "What's it like to kill a woman?" (86), "What's it like to kill a child?" and "Why wasn't one time enough?" (131). The mother's mourning presents a "counter-narrative" (Cleary 2) to the official discourses produced by the ideological apparatus of anti-communism and humanitarianism, exposing America as an imperial power. Calley/Boxler, after the Vietnam War, became famous and rich, with a hit song about his bravery; "I'm a hero, and you're a dead gook," he says proudly to Lue Ming (118). Calley/Boxler actually represents American militarism and imperialism. In the scene he teaches Remzi and Craver how to interrogate an Iraqi prisoner without breaking the Geneva Constrictions, he pushes them to tap deeply into personal pains and transform them into hostility; that is, he tries to provoke their anger—"A soldier without anger is a dead soldier," he says to them (99). He calls Remzi "a half-breed," "a sandnigger" (98), "a stinking Arab" (99); Craver's father is a "broken-down, coal-shitting, piss-poor excuse for an American dream" and Craver is "on the queer side," a "Faggot" (101). Anger from being a racial other and being a low-class and sexual outcast is manipulated to be a weapon of aggression, violence, and war. The brutality of Calley/Boxler is not only seen in what he did in Vietnam but also in the joke he made on an Iraqi prisoner: after eviscerating and pulling open the prisoner's rib cage, he stood inside the corpse and said to his men, "Hey, boys, now I'm really standing in Iraq" (129). The soul of Calley never dies; it continues to exist. As Boxler says to Lue Ming, "I go from war to war. It's the only place that feels like home" (132). Calley/Boxler personifies the white, imperial America that continues to hurt, kill, and destroy.

For Boxler, the Vietnam War is over, yet for Lue Ming, the past is never over, and what is done is done again and again. At the moment she "summons up the Gulf War: the deafening sounds of jets, bombs, guns" (117), she makes it clear that the ghost of Vietnam War has not disappeared, and the Gulf War is just another Vietnam War. This surreal scene deliberately rejects what President Bush declared in his radio address in 1991 that "the specter of Vietnam has been buried forever in the desert sands of the

Arabian Peninsula" (qtd. in Colleran 41). As Erith Jaffe-Berg notes, "war has no beginning or end, leaving people permenantly wounded as it does" (190-191). Where there is a war, there is a wounded mother like Lue Ming permenantly mourning for her child, her people, and her country.

A STATE OF INNOCENCE

A State of Innocence is one of the short plays in *The Fever Chart*, premiered at the Public Theatre in New York in 2008 under the direction of Jo Bonney. The play takes place at the Rafah Zoo in Gaza, demolished weeks ago by the Israeli army's tanks and bulldozers; the animals in it were cruelly run over and crushed. Yuval, an Israeli soldier, is the zookeeper now; he has noticed a strange thing happening to the animals: pieces of them disappear each night, only to grow back by afternoon. Rafah Zoo used to be the place Um Hisham, a Palestinian woman, and her daughter, Asma, visited; Asma liked turtles best. She was eleven years old and was always counting. One early morning Yuval and two soldiers broke into Um Hisham's house; they couldn't find any weapons, so the two soldiers beat her husband. Yuval stopped the beating. Um Hisham was so grateful that she made the tea for him. As he was drinking the tea, a Rafah sniper bullet was shot into his head and he went down. He said to Um Hisham, "Hold me" (23); he died after three minutes. To avenge Yuval's death, Israeli soldiers bulldozed Um Hisham's house; a bullet shot Asma's chest as she was tending her pigeons on the roof. Um Hisham couldn't hold Asma when she died, so she keeps thinking about how Asma felt at her final moment. Um Hisham mourns for the innocent death of her daughter; she "will never forgive even God" (21).

Um Hisham not only mourns for her own child but also for Yuval. For decades she has despised "the uniform, the power, the brutality, the inhumanity" (23) of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Yet she deeply understands how terrible it is to lose a child. She and Yuval's mother have something in common: "We had pieces of life in common. In our children. Our children were our pieces of life. Now we have piece of death. In common" (22). The great grief makes her find Yuval in the zoo. As she sees him, she watches him at work and then tells him that she has something that belongs to his mother.

What she means is the final three minutes of Yuval's life which she shared; "it is more precious to a mother than anything in the world" (18), she says to Yuval. Although Yuval has claimed "If it weren't for the state of Israel, I would not exist" (18), he finally

admits that he never wanted to be a soldier. After knowing how he died, he realizes that, with Um Hisham, he died “in love” rather than “in darkness” (24). In the end of the play, he asks Um Hisham to sing the song she sang when she held him in her arms; she refuses at first, but then she begins to sing it. As the stage direction states, hearing the song, Yuval “slowly turns his head as though the song is calling to him from some long distance. Then one of his knees gives way and he slowly sinks to the ground. He lies on his back, still. Um Hisham finishes her song. Then she turns her head and stares at the dead Yuval. In this fleeting gesture/moment, they connect“ (24).

“Why the zoo? The only place for children to go to touch animals and hear their sounds,” Um Hisham asks Yuval (17). Animals, children, and soldiers like Yuval perish as innocent victims of the conflict. Mothers mourn for their losses of children. They could only hope to cradle their children in the arms at the final moment—“We should hold our children when they die,” Um Hisham says to Yuval. Um Hisham’s mourning for the death of Yuval as well as for that of her beloved daughter deconstructs “the conflict’s dehumanizing separation and alienation of the ‘other’” and highlights “pieces of life”; the play offering “a connection that transcends death mediates the impulse to destroy the ‘other’” (Kritzer 625).

CONCLUSION

In her *Precarious Life* (2004) Judith Butler contends that conventions of mourning are normally shaped by the state; while particular lives are deemed valuable and mournable, certain deaths are disavowed as deaths. The women in Wallace’s two plays mourn for the innocent victims of war, for the deaths that are not mourned or grieved by the nation; the female mourning not only protests against war but also proposes peace and life.

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