

Violence in Sarah Ruhl's *In the Next Room*

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ABSTRACT

Sarah Ruhl's *In the Next Room* or *The Vibrator Play* investigates the causes of violence against women that constitutes any act of gender-based violence that results in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women. Ruhl uses historical facts to make a connection between the events that occurred in the past and the present. This study aims to examine the problem of violence and its effects on women. The study tries to analyze the types of violence based on Johan Galtung's theory of Violence Triangle as a method of analysis. In his seminal article, *Violence, Peace, and Peace Research* (1969), Galtung presents his famous theory of the Violence Triangle, which is the best framework for comprehending the concept of violence. He made a distinction between three categories of violence: direct, structural, and cultural violence. This classification enables the examination of many types of violence. According to Galtung, "violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations" (Galtung 1969, p. 168). Galtung says that scholars should look at how violence is used to keep people from doing what they want in their daily lives, not just how it affects their bodies. The ultimate goal of this study is to show those causes of violence that result in various types of suffering for women and also to analyze the types of violence in the play under study.

KEY WORDS: *In the Next Room*, Johan Galtung, Sarah Ruhl, Triangle of Violence, Violence Against Woman.

1. INTRODUCTION:

1.1 An Introductory Glimpse

Sarah Ruhl's play, *In the Next Room*, or *The Vibrator Play*, is her most significant commercial success today, earning her more acclaim than her previous play, *The Clean House*. Productions of the play continue to get positive reviews throughout the country. Its first production and presentation were made by Berkeley Repertory Theatre in February 2009. Both performances were directed by Les Waters and opened in 2009 at the Lincoln Center Theatre (Welch 2012, p. 73).

In fact, Ruhl's idea of producing *In the Next Room* came from Rachel P. Maines's book *The Technology of the*

Orgasm, which deals with the vibrator's historical background. The action takes place in a well-to-do spa town beyond New York City, likely Saratoga. During the 1880s, the electric era began, and just after the American Civil War. It also shows how the vibrator was used in medicine to treat hysteria in women (Ruhl 2009, pp. 5-6).

There is a brilliant blend of polished humor, a harsh critique of a fast-developing technology era, and a bitter knowledge of the tight restrictions on women's sexuality in this work. Playwright Ruhl says the main goal of making the play is to retell history by combining historical materials with her own creative abilities, to understand the events that took place before, and to show parts of history that had been hidden behind a curtain, especially on the stage (Maines 1999).

The play goes further than just recounting facts of history to connect with the audience in a creative dialogue about the events of the past. It examines the characters' connection to their actual surroundings, enabling them to engage with the past by living it (Bechtel 2007).

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Ruhl employs an expressive approach to beauty to depict the finer aspects of late Victorian society in her dramatic representation of history, as well as immerse her modern viewers in a staged encounter responsive to stimuli. Ruhl's audience members are unintentional invaders into very intimate times of the protagonists' lives, the depths of their inner universe, and all in between. Ruhl successfully captures the play's emotional depth via the given instruction at the start of the play, that is, to reproduce a certain historical era and, significantly, to record the characters' bodily and inner replies towards the intricacies of their daily lives and connections with friends (Rowen 2018, pp. 307-26). Thus, the historical divide between the play's nineteenth-century set and subject as well as the viewers' twenty-first century perspectives and encounters are closed as performance places, and the viewers exchange clearly identifiable information about their feelings with each other. At several points in the play, Ruhl stops the conversation to give stage directions that try to make the physical manifestations of unspoken thoughts and emotions look better. (Ibid.)

The play, based on a representation of reality, having techniques that harken back to classic comedic standards and also addressing issues like social background and the degrading intrusion of technology, accomplishes the difficult task of expressing both the attitude and the atmosphere of a historical portrayal at the same time, effectively evoking a reaction in a culturally and mentally separate situation. It is important for the audience to pay attention to Ruhl's stage intrusions, which could be as simple as one line or as complex as detailed instructions, because they help them understand and be creative.

The play has two acts with two scenes in each. It portrays Victorian women's everyday struggles in the late nineteenth century, which have been shockingly important nowadays. The majority of the events occur in the home of Dr. Givings, particularly in the operating theater and the living room. He operates an affluent, personal clinic of medicine at his own house, which is located in Upstate New York, and lives with his wife, Catherine Givings, a pretty young lady who later gave birth to their only child. It is the start of the electrical era, providing more than just light replacement throughout the house, but rather changing the manner in which Dr. Givings treats "hysteria" through the use of his modern treatment device, the electrical vibrator. Dr. Givings can now avoid working with his hands, which required long hours and was not that effective throughout the process (Simmons 2016, p. 3). Mrs. Givings and Mrs. Daldry (Sabrina Daldry), Dr. Givings' patient with hysteria and Mr. Daldry's wife, are compelled by technological innovation to discover the source of their sexual dissatisfaction. As well as the boringness of their

unsatisfactory relationships when they have operated the device on each other and had the pleasure. During Elizabeth's stay to nurse the baby, Givings, she informs us that their "relations with their husbands" (NR, p. 115), provide them with the sexual pleasure they want. The ladies are encouraged and empowered by this personal discovery to do things with their own efforts. Sarah Ruhl has produced a witty and touching drama about women in reality who have serious issues and are in deep trouble (Simmons 2016, p. 3).

2. VIOLENCE IN RUHL'S *IN THE NEXT ROOM*

Throughout the play, violence occurs when certain factors, either social or cultural, impose on an individual and oblige him to commit the violence, intentionally or unintentionally. In fact, technology is one of the causes that results in violence in that it controls the lives of those characters who use it. In other words, users of technology dedicate too much of their time to technology while they forget their own responsibilities, resulting in violence directly or indirectly. The play starts with Mrs. Givings, who puts on her electric light and introduces it to her newborn, "Look baby, it's light! No candle, no rusty tool to snuff it out, but light, pure light, straight from man's imagination into our living room. On, off, on, on, on-" (NR, p. 7). Ruhl's use of electricity at the start of the play is to present the dominance of technology in the modern age. Ruhl uses the vibrator as a springboard through which she directly dates the age of electrical technology to its roots (the 1880s), which enables Ruhl to show the impact of technology on human lives successively as well as offer a method on how to avoid this oppressive dominance. It is true that technology, the vibrator, is used in the play to treat people with hysteria problems, but at the same time, it creates many problems in the lives of female characters, particularly Catherine Givings. It affects her marital life. As a result, she suffers emotionally and sexually (NR, p. 7).

In the play, Dr. Givings is the one whose life is under the control of technology. As a result, he neglects his wife emotionally and sexually. The effect of technology also results in his anger. He becomes angry when Mrs. Givings insists on experimenting with the therapy on her and replies, "Are you going to force me to lock my laboratory" (NR, p. 56). According to Galtung's definition of violence, which is when a person exercises a violent action towards another person, whether it is physical like bodily harm or psychological like insult or humiliating, this is direct violence because it affects his wife psychologically, resulting in her feeling of detachment and neglect. Being his own wife, she is not allowed to know his secrets.

In fact, Ruhl has a pessimistic view of technology; she portrays contemporary electric technology as a destroyer of the environment and mankind. New technology gives humans a decision to make: they may either dedicate themselves to, as Martin Heidegger states in his essay, *The Question Concerning Technology*, given as a lecture in Bremen in December 1949, "pursuing and promulgating nothing but what is revealed in order" (Heidegger 1949, p. 331). This means they might become oblivious to possibilities that go above and beyond what current science can provide. Alternately, they might go for the real, true knowledge, which is not hidden at all. The danger is that, in an electric-powered society, we will be reduced to being nothing more than a backup, at the same time that technological advancements pose the danger of reducing the universe to a mere holding reserve. We start by trying to manage it, but soon find that it manages us:

The human being is delivered helpless, in respect to life's most important and most trivial affairs, to a power which is in no sense under his control. For there can be no question today of man's controlling the milk he drinks or the bread he eats, any more than of his controlling his government. The same holds for the development of great industrial plants, transport systems, motion pictures, and so on (Ellul 1964, p. 107).

Therefore, technology has to be examined and challenged. If we allow it to run out of control in society, we are handing over control of human existence to nefarious powers.

Another cause of violence is social standards and cultural beliefs. Under the influence of those standards and norms of Victorian society to which they have adhered, the male characters are controlling their wives. It is because their husbands have made small homes for them that makes them live under their husbands' control. Early in the play, Ruhl makes it clear that both Catherine and Sabrina are controlled by their husbands. In many ways, Dr. Givings is a guy deeply shaped by and dedicated to the medical profession. For him, science is the only remedy to all difficulties, and he applies this philosophy to both his daily life and career life. The next room, which divides his work life (and, as Ruhl implies, masculine) and personal life, serves as a physical indicator of his dominance. Additionally, Dr. Givings often exercises dominance over the household by directing Catherine to various places throughout the home. Nevertheless, Ruhl set up Catherine's discontent with her confinement in the traditional position of wife and mother. As shown in Act One, Scene One, she tells Lotty (her baby) that she is looking for a nursing mother who has enough nutritious milk to give her because she does not have enough milk to give her. My milk is not filling you up, is it? Are you less fat today, darling? Are your cheeks less fat? " (NR, p. 8). In fact, her marital

problems make her so depressed that she does not have enough milk to feed her own child.

In Galtung's view, this is called "cultural violence": "those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science and formal science (logic, mathematics) that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence" (Galtung 1990, p. 291). According to him, culture might be considered a form of violence in some situations. Considering the issue of cultural violence, issues such as patriarchy and degrading stereotypes are utilized to create institutionalized standards of conduct, and they are utilized to legitimize both direct and institutional violence. Hence, the three forms of violence are intertwined and can contribute to one another or combine in a harmful way (Atack 2005, p. 5).

According to the norms of Victorian society, a patriarchal society, a man has control over his wife. In this regard, women are not given the freedom to have their own opinions and beliefs. These beliefs are built into the structures of society and they are legitimated by the culture. Therefore, it is cultural violence. As shown in Act One, Scene One, she tells Lotty (her baby) that she is looking for a nursing mother who has enough nutritious milk to give her because she does not have enough milk to give her. My milk is not filling you up, is it? Are you less fat today, darling? Are your cheeks less fat? " (NR, p. 8). Thus, as a married woman, she is so depressed that depression has affected her psychology, causing insufficiency in breast feeding.

In this concern, Mrs. Givings has a generous spirit in this regard. When it comes to caring for the people around her, she is most concerned about feeding her kids, supporting her husband's career, and creating a friendly atmosphere for new visitors. This reveals a frustrated excessive repayment for her apparent failure to give, which is likely exacerbated by her actual breastfeeding inadequacy. Her inquisitiveness, on the other hand, implies that she also wants to be exchanged with others in order to receive something in return. She sees herself as insufficient in both roles, and she becomes tenderly restless and unhappy because her husband, the doctor, is blissfully unaware of her feelings. And yet, what were your expectations of a man? Mrs. Givings, on the other hand, is in desperate need of a strainer. Or she+ has to be taught about "romantic" and "bloody foolish," whatever option is more widely accessible to a woman wearing clothes that feature an excessive number of fasteners. She is not above admitting when she is wrong, is anxious to reignite the passion in her relationship, and ends up creating snow angels while naked. It is amazing how even the most reserved individuals can open up in front of her, she thinks, not

realizing that they are just waiting for her to add something else (Essinec 2013, p. 1).

Throughout the play, Mrs. Givings and Mrs. Daldry experience inner conflicts of discontent in various parts of their lives as a result of cultural beliefs. This makes it much harder for them to unquestioningly follow their conventional roles' demands. The decline in enthusiasm and excitement that comes with growing up, from becoming an unmarried lady to becoming a wife, was painful for both of them (Zeigler 2019, pp. 63-96). When Mrs. Daldry was a little girl, growing up in her mother's house, there was an exciting feeling of independence for her. She recollects:

The house where I grew up, my mother would wash the curtains every week. She beat them with a stick, and there were ghosts in them. There was a beautiful view of a grape arbor, and when the curtains were cleaned you could see right through to the grapes, you could almost watch them growing, they got so plump in the summer. My mother would make loads of jam-my mother was not a nervous or excitable woman. It was jam, it was laughing, and long walks out of doors. We haven't a grape arbor here- (NR, pp. 11-12).

As a stark contradiction to Mrs. Daldry's current oppressive urban home atmosphere of restriction and deprivation, this happy picture, which she had before, depicts a naturalistic setting of pleasure, freedom, and an overpowering sensation of caring. Mrs. Daldry's vivacious nature and upbeat temperament appear to be suffering as a result of her marriage. When Mr. Daldry first came into contact with her at the age of seventeen, she seemed like a very unique individual. She was good at the piano:

Daldry. We ate grape jam in the arbor and there I told her I wanted to take care of her and protect her forever, didn't I?

Mrs. Daldry. Yes.

Mr. Daldry. Now I am afraid there is very little sympathy between us.

Mrs. Daldry. I am breaking his heart. He likes me to be in a certain way. Perhaps if I could play the piano again but my fingers will not work (NR, p.12).

Due to her inner inadequacy, Mrs. Daldry was unready for marriage and was ignorant of the significant psychological expenses involved with her new position in society. Mrs. Daldry is compelled to give up her sense of self-identity and autonomy just to conform to the expectations of marriage. Because of her inner and physical barrenness, she feels unfulfilled in her marital life. She yearns for care and devotion, as well as genuine human interaction. When she and her spouse are having sex, perhaps the most personal moments are turned into a physical performance with no emotion or even gaze at her: "When he comes to my room at night, I am asleep-and he tells me to keep my eyes shut, and I do-so I feel

only the darkness-and then the pain-I lie very still-I do not see his face-" (NR, p.70).

Mrs. Daldry's personal relationships with her husband adhere to the guidelines and requirements established by the nineteenth-century concept of "woman's love coldness," which rejects the validity and presence of women's sexual impulses (Cott 1978, p. 236). The belief that women are thought to be passionless causes them to be unaware of their own sexuality and how it works. Throughout their lives, women have been subjected to societal expectations that demand they uphold high moral standards and find inner comfort in parenting. Because she has not met her genetic or social expectations, Mrs. Daldry is depressed and not happy with herself.

Similarly, Mrs. Givings becomes unhappy in her marital life because she becomes unsatisfied with her sex and her feelings. Her husband's quiet demeanor, preoccupation with technology, and inability to look beyond his sex stereotype have contributed to her growing feeling of isolation. She had to put up with her husband's unpleasant physical and passionate carelessness. Living a restricted lifestyle, she starts to resent the societal restrictions placed on her because of her marital status. She gives a detailed account of her relationship with her husband before and after they got married, which shows that men need to be in charge of women and keep them in a state of constant reliance.

I walk walk walk no one can keep up with me not even Dr. Givings-that is how he fell in love with me, he said he was determined to keep up with me-he only saw the back of my head before we married because I was always a step ahead. He said he had to marry me to see my face (NR, p. 20).

After becoming a nursing mother, Mrs. Givings suffers from an overwhelming impression of insufficiency due to the belief that she has no ability to complete her biological responsibility of breastfeeding her own baby. She accuses herself of being incompetent because of her inability to fulfill the responsibilities of motherhood and of not living up to the absurdity that is still widely reasonable and accepted according to a culture that declares: "a good mother has a fat child. And everyone knows it" (NR, p. 32).

Actually, the lyrics that Mrs. Givings writes for Mrs. Daldry's piano tune reinforce the idea that she is deeply suffering. When people are sad and emotionally suffering, they express their inner sadness through a sad tune or song, either to endure the sadness or to get rid of it. Therefore, both the song and the melody reflect their inner suffering. The desire of Catherine Givings to live in the natural environment without the use of artificial lights reveals her disdain for technological advancements. In other words, it implies that within

Mrs. Givings, possibly constrained by societal and cultural expectations, a woman with a high socio-economic status living in the 19th century has to behave, while an aspiring poet sits patiently, awaiting the moment to get her words out. It is not surprising that she composes her rhymes so swiftly. The melancholy song that Mrs. Daldry sings to Annie, in contrast, expresses her tremendous anguish as a result of living in a society where men dominate. She is, however, unconcerned about her social limitations (NR, p. 36).

However, it is also important to mention another female character who becomes a victim of cultural violence. Elizabeth, the Daldrys' housekeeper and a nursing mother of Givings, despite the fact that she has just lost her own child, has come to help Catherine and her husband, Dr. Givings, with their newborn, Lotty. When Mrs. Givings inquires about her feelings for the kid when the milk comes in, she replies, "I try not to think of love. I try not to think of Henry Douglas" (NR, p. 47). In spite of her spiritual deep suffering for her lost baby, she also suffers from male-dominant oppression. While her husband sees her home with Leo, he decides not to let her work in Mrs. Givings' house as a wet nurse. This is direct violence because her husband deprives her of her job and freedom. One of the "basic needs" of human beings is liberation, and the denial of this need is exploitation and suppression. In this regard, her husband suppresses her by not allowing her to do her job any more. In other words, he restricts her own freedom. In addition, when Leo tells her that he wants her to be in a painting with her breast out while nursing the baby, she agrees with the condition, "But do not tell my husband and please disguise my features." and so that nothing would seem improper (NR, p. 87). Therefore, Elizabeth is another example of a woman who is not allowed to do what she likes. They are not given their own liberty and are always controlled by the social standards of the Victorian period. So, the direct violence of male characters towards their wives is justified by the culture of their society; this is called "cultural violence." Thus, cultural violence is present everywhere in this play.

It is true that the play reflects various types of violence that were done to women during a specific time period, yet such violence is still evident in women's lives today. Nowadays, there are women who are living under the effects of cultural violence, completely under the control of their husbands, and are not allowed to express their true feelings and opinions about anything around them. Therefore, such women suffer from depression, anxiety, and a longing for spiritual intimacy. As a result, cultural violence could affect their personal and marital lives, causing them so many diseases and psychological problems.

As a matter of fact, Dr. Givings was able to finally break free from the influence of cultural norms and beliefs, which is what cultural violence is. This is because these beliefs are not true. He begins to care for his wife. At first, the Givings' union appears to be in trouble at first. However, an amazing event occurs immediately afterwards: Catherine becomes persistent about being loved by her husband, and he also realizes that all he needed from the beginning was passion. Under the face of his cool scientific detachment, there is passion and commitment, which eventually "love-sweaty, earthy, and exhausting love-triumphs over the cold biology of rationalism" (Royce 2017). He becomes envious of her feelings for Leo, yet Leo serves merely as an inspiration for the realization of her sex without being the end goal. Her primary focus is on her husband. "I have heard," she tells him, "That some women do not need the vibrating instrument to give them paroxysms, that relations with their husbands have much the same effect. Love me for your job" (NR, p. 140). This proposal affects Dr. Givings deeply. Finally, Dr. Givings confesses his feelings for his wife just in time for the most critical point. To wrap things up, he gives a Latin benediction to all of her organs and connective tissues while kissing her on the cheek, "I bless thee, Catherine" (cited in *Ibid.*, p. 141), in contrast to the vague notions of wife and husband put out by Dr. Givings up to this point.

Furthermore, in the Givings, the physicist and the writer have kept in touch in the middle of their particular fields, and the encounter is seismic in nature. As for the scene, it starts to transform: "Although the domestic space seemed terribly permanent—a settee, a statuette—suddenly it disappears and we are in a sweet small winter garden" (NR, p. 142). The household sphere begins to crumble at this exact time. Catherine begs her husband to "Open me... away from the machine. In the garden... Do not close your eyes, look at me..." (NR, pp. 141–142). With the recognition of his own fragility, he grows into a more manly person (probably due to his conventional ideas about males and how they cope with their emotions).

In the conclusion of the play, as he takes his clothes off for Catherine, he confesses his shame because they have not at all met one another undressed, in spite of the fact that they had a kid together. As soon as he accepts having sex with his wife outdoors, openly, it is an indication of a shift in his sexuality restrictions (Essinec 2013). Dr. Givings' opposition to the natural environment has been overcome by their passion, which has taken them out of the operating theatre and far from modern technology. Nothing is left except their affection to realign the rest of the universe around them. Because of the event, Dr. Givings is forced to shed his Victorian and scientific persona. His act of undressing is an

indication of his revelation of the confirmation of reality. Catherine's groans, on the other hand, convey her encounter with the god that has been obliterated by modern society. (NR, p. 144).

3. CONCLUSIONS

Overall, with intellect and comedy, and yet also with charming truthfulness and elevated sensitivity, Ruhl's play depicts types of violence exercised against women and their effects on their daily lives. Thus, the play is not a portrayal of the female characters in the play, but it is about all women who have experienced such violence. In fact, the impact of violence is emotional and psychological suffering. In the play, all the female characters are controlled by the male characters. Throughout the play, Ruhl attempts to present how violence has affected women's lives on stage. In fact, violence has been continually present in the history of humanity.

In the play, *In the Next Room*, the presence of violence can be clearly seen in the characters' ways of life, health, and thinking. Of course, most of the violence can be attributed to cultural norms and standards, as Galtung has already stated that culture in many ways has caused cultural violence, which leads to other types of violence. Throughout the play, women experience emotional and psychological suffering and pain as a result of cultural violence, which sometimes results in direct violence. For example, Mrs. Givings is the one who becomes the victim of cultural violence due to her husband's adherence to cultural norms and beliefs. Her husband believes that women are just to follow men's instructions without caring about aspects of emotion, passion, and sexual desire. So, the women, mainly Mrs. Givings and Mrs. Daldry, struggle to have a life with these aspects and live away from the influences of cultural norms. Therefore, they always struggle with these challenges and, in return, they experience psychological pain such as insufficiency in breastfeeding, being unable to have children, sensitivity to light and cold, and also uncomfortableness with their current lives. So, Ruhl tries to show these important ideas on stage as awareness for women, but she doesn't offer any help for them.

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