

Economic Violence and the Financial Subjecthood in Lynn Nottage's *Fabulation, or the Re-Education of Undine*

Mr. Madhav S Dudhate¹, Prof. Dr. Ajay R Tengse²

¹Research Scholar, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Yeshwant Mahavidyalaya, Nanded

²Research Supervisor, Department of English, Yeshwant Mahavidyalaya, Nanded

ABSTRACT

The present study examines Lynn Nottage's *Fabulation, or the Re-Education of Undine* through the critical lens of economic violence and financial subjecthood. It argues that the protagonist Undine's downfall is not simply a personal or moral failure, but rather a dramaturgical exposition of the larger neoliberal mechanisms that define, exploit, and discipline marginalized financial subjects. The play dramatizes how financial capital, debt, bankruptcy, and entrepreneurial performance intersect with race, gender, and class to construct a precarious economic identity. Drawing upon theoretical frameworks from Maurizio Lazzarato's concept of the "indebted man," David Graeber's anthropology of debt, and Black feminist critiques of capitalist patriarchy, this study analyzes *Fabulation* as a satire of the postmodern success myth. Through close textual reading, the paper reveals how Nottage exposes economic precarity as a systemic condition rather than a character flaw and suggests that Undine's journey constitutes a rupture in capitalist morality. The paper concludes by arguing that *Fabulation* disrupts the conventional redemption arc by revealing the moral violence embedded in financial structures, offering an alternative dramaturgy of survival and redefinition.

Keywords: *Fabulation*, Economic Violence, Financial Subjecthood, Neoliberalism, Debt.

1. Introduction

In the early 2000s, the figure of the self-made entrepreneur became an emblem of postmodern American success, increasingly shaped by neoliberal ideologies that celebrated individual agency while masking systemic inequities. Lynn Nottage's *Fabulation, or the Re-Education of Undine* (2004) stages a biting critique of this myth through its satirical portrayal of Undine Barnes Calles—a high-powered publicist whose glamorous corporate life collapses under the weight of financial and social bankruptcy. Although the play is often read as a comedic redemption narrative, this paper argues that *Fabulation* is, at its core, an indictment of economic violence and the structural forces that produce and regulate the "financial subject," particularly within the context of race, gender, and capitalist patriarchy.

Undine's journey from wealth to poverty and back is not merely a narrative arc of fall and redemption but a performative exposure of how neoliberal systems manufacture precarity, internalize guilt, and commodify survival. Her downfall, triggered by the betrayal of a husband who absconds with her wealth and leaves her bankrupt, is not portrayed as the result of personal hubris but as a consequence of deeper

economic entrapments. As scholars like Maurizio Lazzarato and David Graeber have shown, the financial subject under neoliberalism is defined by debt, discipline, and a constant demand for self-reinvention (Lazzarato 31; Graeber 3–5). *Fabulation* dramatizes this condition with sharp satire and theatrical irony, revealing the psychological and moral consequences of financialization on marginalized Black women. This study aims to explore how *Fabulation* constructs economic violence not as background texture but as the dramatic engine of the plot. Using close textual analysis alongside theoretical frameworks from political economy and Black feminist thought, the paper interrogates how Undine is rendered legible only through her financial status, and how her collapse prompts a renegotiation of her place in the socio-economic order. Through this lens, *Fabulation* emerges not simply as a morality tale, but as a radical narrative of disruption that critiques the capitalist logic of debt, rebranding, and resilience.

2. Literature Review

Lynn Nottage's *Fabulation, or the Re-Education of Undine* has been widely studied for its satire and commentary on race, gender, and social mobility. Scholars such as Jennifer Larson interpret the play's comedic structure as a site for negotiating Black womanhood, where vulnerability and defiance coexist (Larson 172). Jennifer Devere Brody similarly views Nottage's satire as a strategic critique of racial respectability and post-racial narratives (Brody 94).

However, few studies have examined *Fabulation* through the lens of economic violence or financial subjecthood. While Undine's bankruptcy is central to the plot, it is often analyzed symbolically rather than as a commentary on systemic neoliberal forces. The ways in which debt, institutional dependency, and economic shame operate to discipline Undine remain critically underexplored.

Maurizio Lazzarato's notion of the "indebted man" frames debt as a tool of governance, embedding guilt and self-monitoring into the subject (Lazzarato 31). David Graeber extends this by arguing that debt historically functions as a mechanism of moral and social control (Graeber 3–5). From a Black feminist standpoint, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor's idea of "predatory inclusion" and Brittney Cooper's critique of neoliberal meritocracy offer essential insights into how economic narratives affect Black women (Taylor 220; Cooper 151–52).

This paper draws on these frameworks to offer a new reading of *Fabulation*—one that situates Undine's financial collapse as a dramatization of broader capitalist logics, where debt and rebranding define not only survival but subjectivity itself.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis, interpreting *Fabulation, or the Re-Education of Undine* as a cultural critique of neoliberal political economy. Rather than focusing solely on character psychology or classical dramaturgy, the analysis explores how debt, bankruptcy, and economic discipline are dramatized through Undine's trajectory and the play's episodic structure.

The approach draws from Maurizio Lazzarato's theory of the "indebted man," which views debt as a moral technology enforcing guilt and self-correction (Lazzarato 31). David Graeber's anthropological lens further situates institutions like the bankruptcy court and welfare office as sites of economic ritual and social control (Graeber 13–21).

To contextualize Undine's experience within broader structural frameworks, the analysis also applies Black feminist critiques by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor and Brittney Cooper. Their scholarship highlights

how race and gender intersect with capitalist systems that offer inclusion only through surveillance and conditional legitimacy (Taylor 209–22; Cooper 150–53).

Selected scenes—particularly those involving state institutions and financial breakdown—are examined for their satirical framing, theatrical irony, and ideological depth. This methodology treats financial subjectivity not as subtext, but as the structural and thematic core of Nottage’s dramatic critique.

4. Analysis and Findings

Performing Bankruptcy: Debt as Theatrical Device

In *Fabulation*, Undine’s fall from Manhattan elite to Brooklyn obscurity begins not with emotional upheaval but with the impersonal declaration of financial bankruptcy. Her firm collapses, her husband disappears with her assets, and she is left in debt—a social and legal state that initiates her re-entry into a world of state institutions, forgotten kin, and buried pasts. Lynn Nottage uses bankruptcy as a theatrical device, not merely to generate narrative conflict, but to expose how neoliberal economies enforce moralized structures around wealth and worth.

Undine’s initial response—“I don’t have time to be bankrupt”—satirizes the corporate culture that conflates financial solvency with virtue, responsibility, and adulthood (Nottage 5). Her emotional detachment signals a deeper theme: the abstraction of economic violence under capitalism, which punishes individuals while obscuring systemic roots. As Lazzarato notes, debt “acts on the subjectivity of individuals” through “guilt, responsibility, and moral failing” rather than structural critique (31). Nottage externalizes this by dramatizing Undine’s collapse in public, legal, and bureaucratic arenas, thereby enacting how personal debt becomes socially performative.

The scene at the bankruptcy court is especially telling. Undine must justify her failed enterprise in front of a system that does not see her race or gender but sees her only as a defaulting subject. The staging strips her of her fashionable armor—her Prada bag, her wedding ring, her Rolodex of celebrity clients—and presents her as nakedly dependent, not just on law but on mercy. This tension mirrors what David Graeber identifies as debt’s “double character”—both quantifiable obligation and moral judgment (Graeber 3). For Undine, this is less about money lost than a reputation tarnished, a social rebranding from success story to fallen subject.

Institutions of Shame: Bureaucracy and Black Womanhood

Following her bankruptcy, Undine is routed through a series of institutional encounters—social welfare, drug rehabilitation, probation, family court—that Nottage renders in stylized, often absurd tones. Each space acts as a site of containment, reinforcing her fall from entrepreneurial glamor to racialized vulnerability. Yet, the satire does not undercut the violence implicit in these spaces—it enhances it.

For example, the welfare office scene places Undine in the hands of a patronizing caseworker who demands humility and docility. The “fabulated” version of her identity—self-made, polished, upper-class—is instantly invalidated. Instead, she must now re-perform working-class Black womanhood, evoking what Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor terms “predatory inclusion”: the demand to participate in state systems that were never built to uplift but to surveil and manage (Taylor 214). Undine’s resentment—her refusal to perform gratitude—defies the moral script these institutions enforce.

Nottage does not offer these interactions as plot filler. They are ritualized scenes of humiliation, showing how economic failure is converted into institutional discipline. This is especially clear in the rehabilitation clinic, where Undine, a non-addict, is lumped in with women battling addiction. The conflation of economic collapse and personal pathology illustrates how neoliberalism pathologizes poverty, framing

misfortune as character flaw. As Cooper notes, “Black women are expected to be grateful for inclusion even in systems that dehumanize them” (Cooper 151).

These scenes deepen the play’s critique of capitalist society, not by lamenting the collapse of Undine’s success, but by exposing how re-entry into the social safety net is framed as punishment rather than support. Through heightened dialogue, swift scene changes, and satirical exaggeration, Nottage turns these bureaucratic structures into performances of economic regulation.

Capital, Rebranding, and the Illusion of Redemption

Undine’s attempt to regain control over her life ultimately hinges not on community healing or inner transformation, but on a re-branding of her financial self. By the play’s end, she resumes her career in public relations, albeit with a “new” identity that incorporates her child and reconciles (at least partially) with her past. Yet the audience is left to wonder: has she truly been “re-educated,” or merely re-circulated within the same capitalist loop?

Fabulation does not present Undine’s redemption as stable or satisfying. The birth of her child, a trope often used in literature to symbolize renewal, is ironically paired with her return to work. Her closing lines—sharpened, professional, and image-conscious—suggest that her past vulnerabilities have been converted into marketable narratives. Here, Nottage critiques the commodification of trauma. As Lazzarato writes, the neoliberal subject is “constantly encouraged to transform any crisis into an opportunity” (Lazzarato 39). Undine does just that—she packages her struggle as part of a comeback brand.

This closing gesture parallels what Sara Ahmed calls the “promise of happiness” narrative: the belief that reintegration into capitalist norms guarantees fulfillment (Ahmed 12). Undine’s arc challenges this—her “re-education” teaches her that survival under capitalism means learning to fabricate, not to heal. She does not emerge from trauma freed; she emerges reformatted.

In this way, *Fabulation* subverts the redemption arc. While traditional comedies resolve in harmony and restoration, Nottage offers a fractured resolution, saturated with irony. The financial subject, as constructed in the neoliberal present, is not reborn but repurposed. Undine may recover her status, but her subjectivity remains tied to the very system that orchestrated her fall.

Discussion

The preceding analysis reveals that *Fabulation, or the Re-Education of Undine* is far more than a satirical comedy about a fallen socialite; it is a sharp and structurally embedded critique of the economic regimes that define, produce, and punish financial subjects, particularly those who exist at the intersection of race, gender, and class. Undine’s collapse, as well as her forced reentry into spaces of bureaucratic and economic containment, articulates a dramatic theory of economic violence—one that positions financial failure not as a deviation from normalcy, but as a central component of neoliberal capitalism’s moral apparatus.

The discussion of bankruptcy in *Fabulation* complicates neoliberal narratives that frame personal debt as an ethical failure. Instead, the play reveals how capitalist systems cast indebtedness as a moral burden, a disciplinary condition that enforces conformity, self-blame, and performative humility. Undine’s bankruptcy is not simply the loss of capital but the initiation into a state of economic abjection, governed by institutions designed to surveil, correct, and re-integrate her into the neoliberal machine. As Lazzarato explains, “Debt is a means of making individuals accountable, of drawing them into networks of

responsibility and guilt” (Lazzarato 31). Nottage stages this accountability as spectacle, turning Undine’s debt into a public performance of failure.

Moreover, the paper’s findings demonstrate that *Fabulation* challenges the very structure of the redemption arc by refusing to deliver catharsis or moral clarity. While Undine reclaims aspects of her former life, her “re-education” results not in authentic transformation but in a marketable reconstruction of self—an updated personal brand tailored for a culture that fetishizes resilience. This aligns with David Harvey’s notion of “accumulation by dispossession,” where crisis and collapse are not capitalist failures but essential mechanisms for reconstituting profit and hierarchy (Harvey 145). Undine is “disposed” of and then re-entered into circulation, rebranded but not liberated.

The play also operates within a Black feminist dramaturgical tradition that resists teleological narratives of progress. Brittney Cooper warns against what she calls “solutionism,” the desire to frame Black women’s stories as journeys from suffering to triumph in ways that erase systemic oppression (Cooper 161). *Fabulation* resists this impulse. It neither punishes Undine as a cautionary figure nor absolves her through individual reform. Instead, it places her in a circular economy of failure and reinvention, dramatizing the futility of escape within a society that defines value through productivity, solvency, and visibility.

By presenting failure as both a personal ordeal and a structural inevitability, Nottage joins a growing body of contemporary playwrights who engage with economic dramaturgy—the staging of economic relations not as background context, but as the very fabric of character formation and plot development. *Fabulation* stands out in this landscape by centering a Black female protagonist whose financial subjecthood is neither romanticized nor condemned but interrogated and re-theatricalized.

In broader terms, this paper contributes to scholarship at the intersection of theatre studies, political economy, and Black feminist theory, advancing the argument that economic violence must be read not only as a material reality but as a narrative structure. The capitalist imperative to succeed, fail, and reinvent—as seen through Undine’s journey—constitutes a dramaturgy of its own, one that governs how we write, stage, and interpret survival.

Conclusion

Lynn Nottage’s *Fabulation, or the Re-Education of Undine* offers a nuanced and trenchant critique of neoliberal capitalism, presenting economic violence not merely as context but as the dramaturgical core of its narrative. Through the character of Undine, Nottage stages the making—and unmaking—of the modern financial subject, exposing how capitalist systems construct identity through credit, debt, performance, and shame. Far from presenting a traditional comedic arc of downfall and redemption, *Fabulation* interrogates the moral and emotional weight of financial collapse, revealing the ideological machinery that punishes failure and commodifies recovery.

Undine’s journey across institutions—courtrooms, clinics, welfare offices—reveals the structural rigidity of a society that equates solvency with worth. By dramatizing her movement through these spaces, Nottage critiques the racialized and gendered assumptions embedded within economic systems. Debt, in this context, is not only a legal or financial status but a social condition that disciplines the body and regulates public behavior, as Lazzarato and Graeber assert. What emerges is a portrayal of economic life as theatrical, ritualized, and ultimately violent—a performance of compliance in exchange for limited reacceptance into capitalist structures.

Rather than concluding with personal salvation or systemic resolution, *Fabulation* closes on a moment of ambivalence. Undine survives not by dismantling the system, but by refashioning herself within its logic. Her “re-education” becomes less an awakening than a recalibration—a strategic adaptation to economic forces that continue to shape Black women’s subjectivity. In this way, Nottage resists the narrative closure typically afforded to comedic heroines, replacing it with a complex, ironic awareness of capitalism’s enduring grip.

This paper has sought to foreground how Nottage’s play critiques neoliberal morality by staging the financial subject as a site of conflict, regulation, and reinvention. Future scholarship might extend this analysis by exploring how *Fabulation* fits within a broader tradition of Black economic satire, or how it dialogues with other contemporary plays that treat money and value as central narrative engines. Ultimately, *Fabulation* demands that we rethink not only how we depict financial failure on stage but how deeply economic logic informs the very stories we tell.

Conclusion

Lynn Nottage’s *Fabulation, or the Re-Education of Undine* offers a sharp critique of neoliberal capitalism by presenting economic violence as a central dramatic force rather than background context. Through Undine’s collapse and attempted reinvention, the play exposes how credit, debt, and shame are used to construct and discipline financial subjects, particularly Black women.

As Undine navigates institutions like welfare offices and bankruptcy court, her story reveals how solvency becomes a measure of worth. Debt operates not only as a financial state but as a tool of regulation, reinforcing racial and gender hierarchies. These institutional encounters highlight the performative and punitive nature of economic life, echoing critiques by Lazzarato and Graeber.

The ending resists easy redemption. Undine does not escape the system; she adapts to it, reformulating her image within capitalist expectations. Her “re-education” reflects not liberation but strategic survival. In doing so, Nottage disrupts traditional comedic closure and underscores the ongoing power of economic ideology.

This paper has argued that *Fabulation* dramatizes financial subjectivity as both narrative structure and political critique. Future studies may further explore its place in Black economic satire or its relation to contemporary dramas that foreground value, debt, and systemic control.

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