

## Pain And Suffering In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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### Abstract:

*The concept of pain and suffering is complicated one. Every single human being experiences pain in a myriad ways; mentally, physically, and spiritually. It is the one unwavering constant that defines all human life. Moreover, it can be said that pain and suffering can be distinguished in that even if there is pain, our mental resistance to it, the aversion or running away from it, is the actual cause of the suffering. In Buddhism, suffering is considered in its first Noble Truth- that there is suffering. In Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* pain and suffering are inextricably meshed. More importantly, it is the very idea of pain and its implications on the individual mind/psyche, that drives the narrative. It fuels the primary plot conflict, and it also acts as the energy force behind every action and thought of its characters. It is a motivator and a drain, a dichotomically fused concept that is paradoxical yet relevant. This paper shall examine the nature of the pain and suffering expressed in *Beloved* in an attempt to gauge the impact it has on its characters; characters that can symbolize a larger, more collective swathe of humanity. We can theorize about the universality of what pain means, the profundity of its place in literature only when seen through the lens of human suffering.*

**Key Words:** Morrison, slavery, pain, suffering, redemption, trauma, psychology

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In Linden Peach's critique of Morrison's most gripping novel, mostly set in post-Civil War America, he asserts that a certain fracturing, "...a sense of fracture..." has occurred; one that defies yet signifies and transforms the beingness of the human mind/psyche, and thus the human soul. Peach continues with a poignant, possible, overarching interpretation of what the character *Beloved* might mean within the context of this abhorrence, this pain and suffering inflicted upon an entire continent and its inhabitants. "Eventually she appears to represent not a single child but the pain and anguish of the 60 million blacks who have been enslaved, tortured, and killed." Kristen Boudreau views center on the pain and the shattering of the self and argues that *Beloved* "announces the prominent place of pain in the lives of these ex-slaves." Furthermore, not only is the novel more than just a retelling, or a testament to the pain endured for so long by so many, Boudreau argues that it (the novel) "chastises" itself in any attempt at romanticizing or even transcending the pain. Boudreau is very clear with this point as she states:

The novel, in fact, quickly chastises its own impulses to beautify pain. Even momentary attempts to recuperate a violent past for the sake of transcendence are met with the implied accusation that such interpretive

gestures occlude the horrific moments of slavery (Boudreau, p. 454).

In her novel *Beloved*, Toni Morrison creates a fictional world that so hauntingly vivid, so mesmerizingly cruel and violent, it forces the reader to reconsider and reflect upon so called American "history." Deborah Horvitz asserts, *Beloved* explores the insidious degradation imposed upon all slaves..." (Horvitz, p. 481). As a history major in college, facts were often stale, impersonal, and honestly, uninteresting. The history of slavery was condensed into a few paragraphs, and we learned that with Lincoln and the end of the Civil War black slaves were freed, emancipated. Terms such as abolition, emancipation, civil rights, slave trade, and slavery often meant very little beyond the context of general history. *Beloved* paints in bright, loud colors what these historical terms have shown us in black and white. *Beloved* is a story that has contextual significance as part of American history, but it is more concerned with the lives of individuals. It is in the details of their lives that we as students of history become more aware, more knowledgeable. We never really think of what the life of a slave was like beyond the superficial. We figure that they were forced to work for the white man and probably suffered untold hardships. We assume that with emancipation came freedom and dignity. It was never that simple.

Linden Peace writes, "...the way in which emancipation brought not freedom but the widespread slaughter of former slaves. If death did not catch them, there was little in the way of opportunity for the ex-slaves." *Beloved* is the un-telling of the untold. In the details only a work of fiction can provide, we are faced with the horror, shame, and hopelessness individuals faced under an institutionalized system of human torture, subjugation, bondage, possession, and control; namely, slavery. *Beloved* is a re-education in American history, from the point-of-view of the slaves themselves. Critical approaches regarding this novel are diverse as well as prolific. Rather than to continue onto, the previously mentioned, more general and historical aspects of slavery and its effects on the multitude of slaves it gripped, this paper intends to come to terms with some of the more psychological aspects. In other words, we shall examine the topics of pain and suffering (physical and psychological) in this novel. *Beloved* is, at its fundamental core, an illuminatingly precise record of the viciousness and inhumanity of the pain perpetrated on African American slaves- on individual human bodies and souls. To be clearer, it is this pain that stands central among all its themes, specifically because it is through and beyond this pain that one can begin to see any form of healing or reconciliation; a distinct kind of self-awareness that allows for the things unspoken or unheard, ineffable, yet yearning to be understood. We will examine how, within this totality or *matrix* of pain and suffering, can there be any form of acknowledgment or recourse for any future interpretations.

Christina Bieber Lake delves into concepts of the demonic/grotesque and their link to human suffering and how it is used in Morrison's novel.

The grotesque reveals by the contradiction and it difficult to think of something more shocking and incongruous to us than a spiteful ghost of a murdered baby haunting its mother with such intensity (Lake, p.51).

With a clear intent on illuminating some of the undercurrents of the Christian idea of hell and suffering, Lake is explicit in her stance that this is a key theme we should explore further.

Christian theology teaches that God, an eternal being, had to cross incongruously (and grotesquely) into time in order to redeem humanity. Jesus' literal suffering, death, and resurrection are essential to the

insistence that salvation for the Christian is never symbolic (Lake, p. 60).

The Christian assertion that somehow, pain can used, and was used by God himself, as an instrument for transmutation, redemption and deliverance is a tricky one but of literary punch and impact, it works on many levels. Lake writes, "Morrison turns to the grotesque because she wants her readers to enter the pain of Sethe's past experiences as much as she wants Sethe to do so. Lake's approach lends itself to a certain coalescence of the characters and makes their struggles more collective and thus, communicable. It even offers a chance at healing. Lake writes, "Sethe figuratively returns to the murder of Beloved and erases from her life some of the overwhelming impact of that action, giving herself a chance to reintegrate her profoundly fractured psyche. Sethe's pain and torment has caused a psychologically fractured self, and this fracture appears as a literal manifestation of her child, returned to her in corporeal form.

Sethe, in most estimations, is our protagonist and it is within her pain that we can begin. Sethe has had many vicious things done to her and the text is essentially a record of those things. She has had her back whipped open, raped, and her "milk" taken. When she first tells Paul D. of what the Schoolteacher has done to her to make her run away from Sweet Home, she says, "Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still...And they took my milk." In telling her story to her baby Beloved, Sethe says, "Felt like I was split in two... Bit a piece of my tongue off when they opened up my back." The imagery here is disturbingly gruesome yet real, a shadow or whisper of that actual pain she was forced to endure as the slave owner and his nephews whipped her. Lynda Koolish's research is involved with how certain psychological models can be used in any analysis of suffering and pain. The climax that is not the climax; Sethe's murder of her own child, is seen through the lens of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) and MPD (multiple personality disorder), the fracturing of the self due to the trauma she is forced to endure. Koolish states, "The first time Schoolteacher, a white man, comes into her yard, Sethe commits self-murder, she kills part of herself by killing her child." From Paul D's point of view after his first coupling with Sethe, we see the vividness and intensity of her pain:

Raising his fingers to the hooks of her dress, he knew without seeing them or any hearing any sigh that the tears were coming fast. And when the top of her dress was around her hips and he saw the sculpture her back had become, like the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display. (77)

Sethe is forced into killing her baby before Schoolteacher and his "pupils" can inflict pain upon it. We wonder why Sethe commits the evil of infanticide and later in the text we are made to understand the why. "My plan was to take us all to the other side where my own ma'am (mom) is." It this unimaginable moment where a loving mother kills her own infant daughter, that there is a sense of terrible epiphany, of a state of (un) rapture that says this: the pain of slavery is somehow more unbearable and painful than the taking of this most (be)loved life. This event sets forth in motion, the dominant plot of this story, where the ghost baby Beloved haunts the house and then subsequently appears, manifested as a grown human woman, twenty or so years later. The pain inflicted on Sethe, to all slaves, is the catalyst for the tragedy, and the catalyst for this novel. Boudreau chimes in here about the nature of the pain Sethe has faced- about the tragic inutterability of such things. She writes, "Not only is pain ineffable, but, as Sethe should know, the experience of vivid pain results in the impossibility of any intelligible utterance." Here it is of some import to point out that the act of trying to convey

someone's pain through words, is not possible. Words are merely symbols of the actual thing and language here fails to offer true understanding. Boudreau continues on with the paradox this creates: "One might argue that Sethe stutters still- indeed, that the novel itself stutters in its Lavinian struggle to render pain linguistically," If what Boudreau claim is convincing, that the paradox absolute/subjective nature of pain itself is indescribable, what other purpose of function can it serve in such a context? What do we become when confronted with such torment? What is the meaning, if any, to this wretched pain?

Beloved challenges the romantic notion of beautiful, communicable, and humanizing pain by calling attention to the role of pain in unmaking language—not just the language of pain, but any language whatsoever. But if pain cannot be clearly conveyed, can it at least be examined privately, in order to validate the self to itself? If not publicly utterable, can suffering be communicated and contemplated? (Boudreau, p. 456)

Herein lies the crux of the issue- pain is not truly able to live outside the singular human experience of the self in witnessing the self, but as a conceptual meandering of what it could actually *mean*, not for the character of Sethe or any other in the book, but for the reader. This shifts the dynamic in terms not what or how, but of where, this pain rests.

Boudreau quotes Ralph Emerson, refuting his claim about how suffering can offer itself as a road to more meaning and clarity. She writes, "...as Emerson says, to "'court suffering, in the hope that here at least we shall find reality, sharp peaks and edged of truth'" (Boudreau 464). Emerson sees a link with the depictions of pain and how that could possibly lead to a better understanding of the truth- of what the fundamental meaning of this human suffering could be set within the universal whole of the human experience. Boudreau is clearly at odds with this Emersonian claim. Applied to *Beloved* "The most pain can do, as the novel suggests, is call attention to the violent and necessary process whereby self is constructed by other." In other words, pain is the tool used to shape the self, the slave, by the other, the slave owner.

Paul D's story shows again the detailed cruelty and inhumanity perpetrated by whites on black. Though the war is over, and slavery abolished, it is not the black parade and celebration we assume with such a moment in history. Paul D articulates the real dangers for blacks even in the supposedly freer and safer north of Ohio. Paul D doesn't like Beloved but believes she would be in too much danger if they were to throw her out without a home.

It was one thing to beat up a ghost, quite another to throw a helpless colored girl out in territory infected by the Klan. Desperately thirsty for black blood, without which it could not live, the dragon swam the Ohio at will. (79).

Paul D's struggles are reflected in his philosophy on life. He believes in "loving small." He feels the beauty of the land but cannot afford to love the big things. He is content to love the small things that are not claimed by white folk. To love anything, you pleased was to Paul, the true meaning of freedom. "He knew exactly what she meant: to get to place where you could love anything you chose-not to need permission for desire- well now, *that* was freedom." The horrors Paul D has had to endure are reflected in his incapacity to love even things which have no ownership, no white folk's claim. "He could not help being astonished by the beauty of this land that was not his...Anything could stir him and he tried hard not to love it." As Sethe confides in Paul her largeness in being able to maintain her children in free Ohio as opposed to slave-Kentucky, she says,

“Or maybe I couldn’t love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn’t mine to love. To this Paul D empathizes in his mind as follows:

Listening to the doves in Alfred, Georgia, and having neither the right not the permission to enjoy it because in that place, mist, doves, sunlight, copper dirt, moon-everything belonged to the men who had guns... So you protected yourself and loved small. Picked the tiniest stars out of the sky to own. (191)

Paul D’s heart is a “tin can” locked and never let open until he meets Sethe and Beloved. Paul D is made to bite down on an iron bit, usually meant for horses and livestock. This seems to be Paul D’s most traumatic experience at the hands of white folk because it has left him emasculated. His recollections of that day lie vivid in his “tobacco tin.” It is Sethe who tries to imagine what it was like.

He wants me to ask him about what it was like for him-how offended the tongue is, held down by iron, how the need to spit is so deep you cry for it. She already knew about it,

had seen it time after time ...Men, boys, little girls, women. The wildness that shot into the eye the moment the lips were yanked back (84).

Paul D is changed by the schoolteacher the same way Sethe is. They carry mental scars as well as physical ones from schoolteacher. The dangers black people faced were lethal and fueled by a fierce and illogical hatred. Paul D and Sethe are a small sampling of the victims of this hatred. The details in the recording of history are often not included for practical reasons. However, in *Beloved*, we find the details of the narrative the most intriguing and the most appalling. Stamp Paid finally understands Baby Suggs. He understands how the “whitefolk had tired her out at last.” In a last excerpt from the novel, we can see the truth and the cruelty in the details:

Eighteen seventy-four and whitefolks were still on the loose. Whole towns wiped clean of Negroes; eighty-seven lynchings in one year alone in Kentucky; four colored schools burned to the ground; grown men whipped like children; children whipped like adults; black women raped by the crew; property taken; necks broken. (212)

Pamela E. Barnett claims that Paul D’s pain is multifold- it asserts that his ordeal as a member of a Georgian chain gang was his most grueling and shocking experience of personal suffering. She writes, “Paul D and his fellow prisoners must choose between saying ‘yes sir’ and death, but they articulate the choice between manhood and impotence. The implications of Paul’s experience can be seen through the eyes of this impotence, this helplessly inhumane struggle of not only pain, but of emasculation; of being dehumanized and stripped of all dignity. This type of mental torture can surely overwhelm and transcend the nominal limitations of physical pain, or can it? Paul D is assaulted, raped, and made to sleep in a muddy trench, shackled and unable to even squirm within its torturous confines.

Both Paul D and Sethe have gone through unspeakable horrors, the breadth and depth of which is arguably, at best, difficult to communicate using language. However, if there were any justification as should why we should soldier on in these attempts, is exactly this: the process of remembering such past instances of humanity can be a means unto itself. In other words, though true pain and suffering are absolutely subjective and ineffable we can see their effects on the person. Because we can see the effects, with more truth and clarity in this process we hopefully create a more robust moral stance, in turn, creating less suffering and more growth.

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