

## MOMENTS OF BEAUTY AMIDST SUFFERING IN TONI MORRISON'S BELOVED: A REFLECTION OF EDMUND BURKE'S SUBLIME

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**Abstract:** Through the story of the ghost called *Beloved*, Tony Morrison presents the story of the black mother who committed infanticide with the hope of preventing the enslavement of her daughter. Though *Beloved* is the harrowing story of one single black African family, yet, it represents all the black Africans who suffered and died on their way in the Pacific to America to find food and shelter there. The date of the story in the beginning of the novel goes back to 1873, which marks the aftermath of slavery and the Civil War. It encompasses different phases of past from the slave ship called "Middle Passage" on the Pacific Ocean and the sufferings of the slaves on board the ship and afterwards as they reach the "hosting" country. It reveals the traumatic story of the black where Morrison depicts different means of suffering especially raping. She reveals how they were abused and were forbidden from any feeling of body pleasures like love, sex, and baby feeding. Although Morrison's novel treats different themes, the present paper is an attempt to study the moments of beauty amidst suffering in Morrison's *Beloved* orienting it to Edmund Burke's *Sublime* revealed in his treatise called *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* published in 1757, which as Landow puts it, "deals with deriving beauty from pleasure and sublimity from pain" (Landow, 1971, p. 23).

**Keywords:** misery, trauma, race, beauty, sublime, heal, community

### Introduction

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a miserable tragedy about traumas and brutal tortures experienced as an aftermath of slavery that reveals the resilience of human life. Reading the first few pages of *Beloved*, the reader can easily realize how Morrison

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reveals that the black race was treated “like an animal” during the time when the events of the story in her novel take place. She reveals raping, “*as a process by which white men keep some black women and even some black men in a state of fear*” (Barnett, 1997, p. 13). For Morrison, each act of writing a novel is not but “an act of discovering, deep within herself, some relationship to a collective memory” (Rushdy, 1992, p. 149). For her, “writing is an instrument that can be traced back to an African heritage” (ibid., p. 17). She has written her novel to reveal the brutality with which the white Americans had treated the black Africans, how they have “dirtied” them in body and soul, as Morrison puts it,

*Anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own*” (Morrison, 2004, p. 251).

She believes her story has long been forbidden to be told since “matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse” (Morrison, 1992, p. 9).

In his philosophical and aesthetic treatise, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Edmund Burke (1729-1797) explores the concepts of the sublime and the beautiful, analyzing their origins and effects on human emotions. He reveals a set of theoretical principles to demonstrate that the sublime and the beautiful are incompatible with each other just like pleasure and pain. Burke also makes another significant and controversial distinction between pleasure as; “the enjoyment of some positive stimulus of the senses and delight” (Burke, 2009, p. 36) and delight as “emerging from the diminution of pain or danger” (ibid., p. 37).

Making her characters stand up amidst horrible happenings in life, Morrison intertwines moments of awe and horror, aligning with Edmund Burke’s concept of the sublime, where beauty and terror coexist to evoke deeper emotional insight. She feels sorry that black lives didn’t matter to the whites, and accordingly they were taken for granted and not even counted in the numbers of human beings. Thus, she writes,

*Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don't*

*know her name? Although she has claim, she is not claimed* (Morrison, 2004, p. 274).

She adds, “This is not a story to pass on,” the sufferings of the black were so great that they were not supposed to pass on from one generation to the other. They are supposed to be forgotten “like a bad dream” (*ibid*).

## Methodology

Burke insists that our knowledge of the world is obtained exclusively from the evidence of the senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. In the story of *Beloved*, this knowledge is obtained through moments of awe and horror that Morisson had created.

Revealing the traumatic story of the black people, Morisson reflects the complexity of the trauma which will later be healed through different perspectives. The following research will study the healing process through the division of those perspectives in the points mentioned below:

- A- Beauty in the maternal love of Sethe,
- B- Nature as a sublime force,
- C- The haunting presence of Beloved, and
- D- The communal and redemption.

### A. Beauty in the maternal love of Sethe

The love Sethe feels for her children is transformative and devastating at the same time. Trying to commit filicide in an attempt to save her daughter from slavery personifies the end of maternal devotion. Accordingly, Morrison says, “Sethe reached up for the baby without letting the dead one go. I wouldn't draw breath without my children” (Morrison, 2004, p. 93), showcasing maternal devotion as both powerful and unsettling. Sethe’s fierce love, exemplified by her willingness to sacrifice her daughter, reflects the paradox of motherhood under slavery, where love is intertwined with unimaginable pain, thus revealing Burke’s idea of the sublime as a powerful emotion. According to Ayuk-Etang (2021), this act by Sethe highlights the duality of the concept of motherhood in the context of slavery, where love often manifests in unimaginable ways. Thus, being a mother in such a society is built on the duality of existence, which is the mixture of joy and pain (*ibid*). The tension between Sethe’s love and the suffering it causes underlines the complex intersections between beauty and terror.

The relationship between Sethe and Beloved, even in the form of a ghost, is heartwarming. Sethe exclaims, “I told Baby Suggs that, and she got down on her knees to beg God's pardon for me” (Morrison, 2004, p. 177). A reflection such as this shows just how powerful the instincts of a mother like Sethe is, but also how crippling the constant guilt can be. The presence of Beloved is painful to bear for Sethe, yet this very presence allows her to confront her past and thus start the healing process. This duality – a child's haunting as a pathway to redemption – parallels the sublime's combination of beauty and terror, which forces the characters and readers to come to terms with their emotions.

Further, the interaction between Sethe and Denver shows that maternal love can, even in despair, persevere. Sethe's daughter's, Denver's growth into an independent and protective figure represents the possibility of resilience within familial bonds, even amidst despair. Denver accordingly says, “I told Baby Suggs that, and she got down on her knees to beg God's pardon for me” (Morrison, 2004, p. 177). Her development into an independent, protective figure reassures the possibility of healing and resilience within family bonds after the overwhelming suffering they all passed through.

Thus, moments of beauty amidst suffering in *Beloved* can be considered as a reflection of Burke's sublime as he says,

*Without all doubt, the torments which we may be made to suffer, are much greater in their effect on the body and mind, than any pleasures which the most learned voluptuary could suggest, or than the liveliest imagination, and the most sound and exquisitely sensible body could enjoy* (Burke, 2009, p. 39).

The consideration of terror as the chief cause of the sublime is parallel to the beauty in Sethe's maternal love which is exposed by her preference for committing filicide instead of watching her daughter be tortured and rapped by the white people.

## **B. Nature as a sublime force**

In his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Edmund Burke explains “the opposition of beauty and sublimity by a physiological theory. He made the opposition of pleasure and pain the source of the two aesthetic categories, deriving beauty from pleasure and sublimity from pain.” (Landow, 1971, p. 23) Nature as revealed in Morrison's *Beloved* has a dual composition and reflects the duality of freedom and oppression. Morisson's novel

includes many dualities and oppositions. For example, the sycamores at Sweet Home looked so beautiful that they never looked able to testify to the horrors of slavery they witnessed there. According to both Sethe and Paul D, the trees have witnessed all the pain the slaves passed through, but they kept their aesthetic beauty perfectly well claiming the natural world's resilience. This paradox reveals Burke's sublime, a combination of beauty and terror that evokes a powerful emotional response.

Moreover, the process by which Baby Suggs provides balance and support to her family also shows how the sublime takes place in nature. She gets the community to pray, dance, and cry meanwhile commanding them to "Love your hands! Love them. Raise them and kiss them" (Morrison, 2004, p. 88). This sanctuary is a shelter for healing within the beauty of nature among the atrocities of slavery. Yigit (2020) comments that Morrison employs such a setting to highlight the healing potential of collective and personal ties with nature. This Sacred Space Clearing or the process of keeping the balance in the family, serves as a symbolic temporary relaxation from the torture the characters have had to bear and offers a glimmer of hope and bonding amidst the stark cruelty of their existence.

The sublime in its duality of nature continues in how Sethe remembers Sweet Home. She tells about fragments that cloaked the cruelty, such as the "lush green fields" and the "towering trees," in which the ugliness of human violence is veiled (Morrison, 2004). Sethe's memories of Sweet Home, highlight the tension between natural beauty of the land and the trauma that is tied to it. However, Burke considers that the ideas related to pain are much more powerful than those related to pleasure. Thus, as a reflection of the Sublime, he says:

*Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. I say the strongest emotion, because I am satisfied the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure* (Burke, 2009, p. 39).

The frozen instant of the tense juxtaposition, where natural beauty and outrage have coexisted, demands Sethe to balance, on one end, the yearning for freedom, while on the other, remembering the trauma coupled with those lands, even though the trauma of slavery is much more powerful than the natural beauty which Sethe could have ever seen in the nature in and out of Home 124.

### C. The Haunting Presence of Beloved

The ghostly presence of Beloved is terrifying and transformative. Also, it is inextricably linked with guilt and the unresolved trauma of Sethe the mother. Beloved seeks acknowledgement and longs for love. She embodies the past that Sethe has tried to suppress, compelling her to confront painful memories and unresolved guilt that she can no longer hide. As a matter of fact, Sethe noted; “That’s a pretty name, Beloved. Take off your hat, why don’t you, and I’ll make us something. We just got back from the carnival over near Cincinnati. Everything in there is something to see” (Morrison, 2004, p. 55). This emphasizes her yearning for redemption and connection. This ghostly appearance forces the character to confront certain deep-seated fears and memoirs.

A scholar called Eldiasty has claimed that Beloved’s existence falls within Burke’s sublime since her extraordinary and haunting existence simultaneously provokes awe and terror (Eldiasty, 2020, p. 27). Burke, in his *-A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* - refers to a different kind of beauty which is the kind of beauty that Sethe sees in the ghost of her slaughtered daughter, Beloved. Although beauty is known to elicit feelings of love, calmness, and attraction, for Burke the sublime is linked with awe, terror, and a sense of the vastness that surpasses all human understanding. While fear is central to the sublime, Burke clarifies that it’s not the kind of fear that paralyzes or harms us. Instead, it’s a fear that excites us, even though it’s deeply unsettling (Burke, 2009). For Sethe, she is the price of freedom and torn marks of choices that will blur between beauty and horror, a factor which can also be used to epitomize and exemplify the sublime.

*Sethe’s memory is being pried wide open by Beloved’s presence. She forces Sethe to listen to her voice and to remember her mother, her ma’am with the special mark on her body, along with her mother’s native language, songs and dances (ibid., p. 39).*

This is even better brought out in the relationship between Beloved and Denver. Denver begins catering to Beloved as a means of dependency; it grows into her source of strength: it is through Beloved that Denver finally manages to break herself free of her sheltered cocoon when she gains enough courage to fetch help from her society. This very attitude is what transforms Denver, helping her emerge into an independent, grown-up being at last.

Denver lives in the free state of Ohio and belongs to “the first unenslaved generation,” thus representing possibilities for the future (Carden, 2007, p. 2). At

the end of the story, the author makes Denver get back his senses through the help of the community and Sethe establishes a new bond with Paul D. The unity between Sethe and Paul D creates a happy family, thus carrying the potential for repair and rejuvenation, that produces normative families, communities, and cultures (Carden, 2007). Accordingly, due to this family bond, Denver and Sethe are both cured. The relationships of the characters with each other reveal how deep love and a sense of duty can persist even in the face of overwhelming pain and suffering. These forces push the characters to act out of both compassion and desperation, highlighting their resilience.

Further, the ambiguity of *Beloved* as a character serves to extend the novel's concern with the sublime. Morrison portrays *Beloved* as a figure of shimmering beauty. Accordingly, the name "Beloved" refers to Sethe's baby daughter and everyone else present at her funeral. It is essential to take into consideration the fact that the name of the girl who arrived from the water is also Beloved. This act of making Beloved come out of the water metaphorically represents the arrival of the black race from the ship called Middle Passage, which is either a birth or a rebirth for all those who were on board that ship. (Yigit, 2020). It is essential to mention the fact that Beloved's actions are dark and insidious as she disrupts the household. Also, for Burke, the effect of the sublime "most powerfully, is astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror" (Burke, 2009, p. 53). Such duality requires the readers to negotiate conflicted feelings of love, fear, and guilt that are all mingled together. Being at the chain of these contradictions, *Beloved* is the tool through which Morrison investigates the elaboration of memories for salvation; thus, making her presence seal and affect the fate of the story quite emphatically.

#### **D. Communal Healing and Redemption**

The role of the community in *Beloved* is that of the exorcist who reveals the sublime to transcend the bounds of the individual and accomplish a collective recovery. The climax is that the people of the community unite at 124, singing and praying to get rid of the ghost. Baby Suggs' lesson comes through the loud and clear voices of the women as they all yell together, "Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all" (Morrison, 2004, p. 194). Such solidarity not only frees this act of putting an end to Beloved's torment, but it also affirms the strength of the community and resilience characteristic of the Black people by exorcising Sethe from the torture that places people in the mercy of others. At 124, the collective suffering of the community transforms into a shared healing experience. The group's chants and prayers unite their individual pain into a powerful act of

solidarity, creating a sense of relief and renewal for everyone involved. Ayuk-Etang observes that this moment suggests that the community needs to support one another to break free from the trauma. The moment is personal, to remind one that some wounds are not healed alone but collectively. Moments of chanting by the women bridge the living and the dead, recognizing the connectedness of the black race both in history as well as in identity.

The resolution of the novel further reinforces the themes of salvation and resurgence. It is here that Sethe, though scarred, begins to find solace in the love and support of those around her. With the excuse of having the urge to get food for her starving mother Denver goes to the community where she learns that she is not alone, and that she's a child of the community. She learns how important it is "to belong to the community of other free Negroes, to love and be loved by them, feed and be fed" (Morrison, 2004, p. 209). As Wyatt states, it is the idea of belonging to the community of other Negroes that helps Denver "enter the nurturing reciprocity" (Wyatt, 1993, p. 64). As a reflection of Society and Solitude, Burke says,

*Good company, lively conversations, and the endearments of friendship, fill the mind with great pleasure; a temporary solitude on the other hand, is itself agreeable. This may perhaps prove, that we are creatures designed for contemplation as well as action; since solitude as well as society has its pleasures* (Burke, 2009, p. 39).

Accordingly, Burke's reflection on society and solitude is revealed in Paul D's reassurance, which signifies a turning point in Sethe's journey toward self-acceptance and healing. This is an acknowledgement of how **love** and **community** transform the traumas of the past. Sethe's rehabilitation and healing of her self-esteem in a gradual process, underlines the bonds she shares with others and the permanence of human connection in the light of unimaginable suffering. The aftermath of the exorcism still vibrates as a tribute to the stubbornness of a community determined not to be reduced to its pain but to fight back and reclaim its humanity and dignity.

## Conclusion

It is evident that, all around her novel, Morrison keeps insisting on the fact that the ghost of slavery haunts the black people of African origin throughout their lives. Morrison reveals that it is only through talking about the wound of slavery and

through showing care and love to one another that the trauma that is left on generations of black Africans can be healed.

Morrison has masterfully woven moments of the beautiful within or amidst suffering, reflecting Edmund Burke's concept of the sublime. Burke explores the concepts of the sublime and the beautiful, analyzing their origins and effects on human emotions, revealing a set of theoretical principles to demonstrate that the sublime and the beautiful are incompatible to each other just like pleasure and pain. Also, Burke insists that our knowledge of the world is obtained exclusively from the evidence of the senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. However, in the story of *Beloved*, this knowledge is obtained through moments of awe and horror that Morisson had created.

Through Sethe's maternal love, the paradoxical imagery of nature, the haunting presence of *Beloved*, and the community healing of the Black slaves in America, Morrison explores the levels of human resiliency. Throughout the novel, Morisson reveals the fact that the trauma of slavery will not only last a lifetime but will pass on from one generation to another. These moments refer to the key events in the novel, such as Sethe's maternal choices, the healing rituals, and the community's exorcism of Beloved. Each highlights the themes of trauma and redemption and offering a profound exploration of the human condition. Through such interplays between beauty and terror, *Beloved* acts as a testimony to the powers of love, memory, and healing of the collective imagination against the unimaginable suffering of the black Americans of African origin.

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**Վ. Չափարեան – Գեղեցկության և վսեմի արտահայտումը Թոնի Մորիսոնի «Սիրելի»-ում. –** Էղմունդ Բերլի վսեմության հայեցակարգի արտացոլումը Թոնի Մորիսոնի «Պիլովետ» (Սիրելի) ստեղծագործության մեջ ուրվականի պատմության միջոցով, ներկայացնում է մի սևամորթ մոր ողբերգական որոշումը՝ սպանել իր դստերը՝ վերջինիս ստրկությունից փրկելու նպատակով: Վեպը անդրադառնում է այդ ընտանիքի ձակաստագրին, սակայն այն ներկայացնում է բոլոր այն սևամորթներին, ովքեր տառապել և մահացել են Խաղաղ օվկիանոսը հատելիս՝ Ամերիկայում սնունդ և ապաստան գտնելու համար: Վեպի գործողությունները տեղի են ունենալ 1873թ.-ին՝ ստրկատիրության վերացման և Քաղաքացիական պատերազմի ավարտից հետո: Վեպը պատկերում է անցյալի տարբեր փուլեր՝ սկսած նավի վրա գտնվող ստրուկների տառապանքներից մինչև «հյուրընկալող» երկրում բննության դրսնորումները, մասնավորապես՝ սեռական բռնությունն ու այնպիսի հաճույքներից զրկելը, ինչպիսիք են՝ ինչպիսիք են սերը, սերսը և երեխային կրծքով կերակրելը: Չնայած վեպը շոշափում է բազմաթիվ թեմաներ, սույն աշխատությունը նպատակ ունի ներկայացնել, թե ինչպիս տառապանքի միջոցով հնարավոր է հասնել գեղեցկության: Վերլուծության հիմքում

ընկած է Էդմունդ Բուրկի վեհության տեսությունը՝ «Փիլիսոփայական ուսումնասիրություն մեր զաղափարների ծագումնաբանության և վսեմության մասին», իրատարակված 1757թ.ին: Ինչպես նշում է Լանդոուն՝ «գեղեցկությունը բխում է հաճույքից, իսկ վեհությունը՝ ցավից» (1971, էջ 23):

**Բանալի բառեր.** *թշվառություն, տրավմա, մրցավազք, գեղեցկություն, վեհ, ապարհինում, համայնք*

**В. Чапарян – Моменты красоты среди страданий в романе «Возлюбленная» Тони Моррисон: отражение концепции возвышенного Эдмунда Берка.** – Посредством образа призрака по имени Возлюбленная Тони Моррисон раскрывает трагическую историю чернокожей матери, совершившей детоубийство, стремясь спасти свою дочь от рабства. Сюжет сосредоточен на судьбе одной афроамериканской семьи, однако он символически представляет всех африканцев, погибших или пострадавших при пересечении Тихого океана по пути в Америку в поисках прибежища и еды. Действие романа начинается в 1873 году, в пострабовладельческую эпоху, вскоре после окончания Гражданской войны. Моррисон затрагивает разные темы, включая мучения рабов на борту судна, проходящего «Средний путь», а также страдания чернокожих после прибытия в «принимающую» страну. Особое внимание уделяется телесному и сексуальному насилию, лишению основных физических чувств, таких как любовь, секс и кормление ребёнка. Цель данной статьи – исследовать каким образом среди боли и страдания проявляются моменты красоты. В качестве теоретической основы используется понятие Возвышенного Эдмунда Берка, изложенное в трактате «Философское исследование происхождения наших представлений о возвышенном и прекрасном» (1757). Берк связывает прекрасное с удовольствием, а возвышенное – с болью и страхом. Как отмечает Г.П. Ландоу, «Красота проистекает из удовольствия, а возвышенное – из боли» (1971, с. 23).

**Ключевые слова:** *нечастье, травма, раса, красота, возвышенное, исцеление, сообщество*