

The Body in Pain: Spectacle and Witness in Marie Corelli's *Barabbas*: A Dream of the World's Tragedy

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ABSTRACT

Marie Corelli's *Barabbas: A Dream of the World's Tragedy* recounts the trial and death of Christ while also placing characters as audiences, witnessing the suffering of Christ and how they react to the violence inflicted upon him. Drawing from Susan Sontag's distinction of Spectacle and Spectator in her work *Regarding the Pain of Others* - this paper examines the body of Christ as a site of suffering and pain. While Sontag's spectacle covers the universal landscape of war, this study locates its spectacle in a smaller unit i.e. the body of Christ. The question of how the spectators in the text read and interpret first the suffering of Christ as an objective experience, and secondly how they experience pain within themselves allowing resonance with his body will be looked at through assessment of collective/ cultural notion of pain as well as Individual lived experiences. This will be achieved by referring to scholars such as David Morrison and Mark Zborowski and their remarkable work on pain studies.

Keywords: Marie Corelli; *Barabbas: A Dream of the World's Tragedy*; Body of Christ; Spectacle and Spectatorship; Pain Studies; Cultural Memory; Witnessing; Redemption and Punishment; Crucifixion; Power and Discipline.

1. INTRODUCTION

The body of Christ has been extensively discussed in literature, often focusing on his racial identity and representation. From the early Christiana period to the postcolonial times, race and racial representation has only escalated in degrees of how much his body can be stretched to fit into a certain mould of racial identity.

These imagined boundaries created by national markers of race, ethnicity and culture have often served the purpose of causing interpersonal unrest across national and international communities and furthered the generation of hyphenated identities in the postcolonial world. While the physical appearance of Christ matters to his believers, in terms of stabilizing their own identity in him through similarity in flesh, what is often overlooked is the possibility of finding solidarity in the person of Christ through his bodily experiences during his time on Earth.

James Cone, widely understood to be the father of Black Theology, in his work *A Black Theology of Liberation* attempts to position Christ as the "Oppressed One" as pictured in the New Testament, and further draws similarity on the basis of blackness being synonymous to being oppressed, thus Christ in present could only be imagined as Black in terms of his social and economic position in his time. J.S Siker, in his article *Historicizing a Racialized Jesus* critiques Cone's argument by efficiently pointing

out his narrow categorization of oppression solely in terms of blackness. However Cone's attempt of drawing familiarity with the person of Christ, though racialized later, begins with an alternative lens of oppression as the anchor for his argument. This paper aims to draw its argument on similar lines, though with the intent of choosing a lens that allows unity across nations when imagining the body of Christ.

Marie Corelli's *Barabbas: A Dream of the World's Tragedy* recounts the suffering of Christ on the cross while parallelly elaborating on the experiences of the disciples, the enemies and the character of Barabbas who posed as witnesses to the murder of Christ. In this paper, we will look at the body of Christ as a site of pain and suffering that allows a sense of solidarity to all communities, as pain, though varying in degrees, serves as a phenomenon that is inevitable in the case of all human bodies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

To understand the representation of pain in the work of Corelli, we must understand the meaning of Pain itself as discussed by various scholars. We must simultaneously focus on the role of literature in specific and other visual and performance art forms in general - when studying the representation, experiencing, witnessing and imposition of pain on given bodies in a text.

1. What is Pain?

David Morrison defines pain as "a performance that we interpret, both when it happens within ourselves and when we witness the pain of others."

Pain is culturally charged and equally a part of the human social structures as opposed to the idea of binarism of (Mind/Body) when discussing pain. Descartes in his *Principles of Philosophy* proposes the idea of pain originating in the body and travelling through neurological pathways alerting the mind, looking at pain as an individual experience that is limited to the dual spaces of mind and body, while disconnecting pain from its cultural and collective meaning. Jahre Das in her thesis *Bearing Witness: On Pain in Performance Arts* and David Morris in his work *The Culture of Pain* embark on the same mission of establishing pain as an experience triggered through collective memory and relevant in the cultural and social sphere alongside the individual experience of pain. Das in her work discusses pain as encoded in performance arts and how the ones bearing witness decode these cues allowing the witnessing body to experience the pain of the body that performs. Morris likewise claims that pain is "decisively shaped by individual human minds, and by specific cultures" bringing about a synthesis of individual and collective experience of pain. So the individual body poses as a microcosm to the larger visitation of pain throughout the globe.

2. Pain in Literature and Art forms

Morrison further elaborates on how art as a form informs the audience of cultural codes and triggers a collective response to stimuli. He writes:

- "Literature provides an especially rich field for examining the different meanings that humankind over the centuries has discovered within pain. Indeed, from Homer to Beckett, literary texts engage in a vastly neglected process of representing and elucidating our encounters with pain."

While documentation of death and even self-mutilation is not lacking when visiting history, this history of pain is explored explicitly in literature and other art forms. Art has always been the key to enter the social space which could otherwise not be accessed. Art forms serve as a dictionary of codes that allow the generation of a collective memory. In terms of Individuality, artists did not just replicate the pain that they saw around them but wrote of pain as they experienced it themselves in their individual spaces.

This allowed multiple notions of what pain is and its multiple manifestations in the life of separate individuals.

The importance of pain in the social sphere and the commonality of its presence allows us to solidify the idea of pain being a universal experience, thus, it should serve the purpose of linking the mass of believers with the body of Christ outside of the colour of his skin and other national markers. The body of Christ as represented in Corelli's work serves not only as a literary recounting of his suffering, but also as a body that documents suffering and pain, turning it into a symbol of pain itself.

3. Fear of Collective Desensitization towards Pain

Susan Sontag's famous essay *Regarding the Pain of Others* deals with war photography as a source of viewing pain from a safe distance. She discusses how different bodies are treated differently on the battlefield and how they're recorded for consumption by the audiences of mass media. There are some similarities, specifically in Sontag and Morris' idea of pain and its representation. Sontag considers the people consuming war photographs without any intent of directly getting involved in helping the suffering bodies as individuals deriving voyeuristic pleasure out of these images. The ability of humans to consume a large amount of gruesome contents like war crime and genocide that are recurrent and redundant news causes a desensitizing effect on the minds of individuals. The monotonous nature of this display of pain develops a new cultural code of either numbing the senses or embracing denial to escape the overwhelming solemnity of the content that is released for public consumption. Morris in his book speaks along the same lines while discussing the displacement of pain from symbols that primarily marked a painful event. The symbol of cross used as jewelries and adorned by men and women removes or eroticizes the idea of suffering, almost in a masochistic manner. The basic idea seems to be that if one cannot overpower pain - then one must deny its presence or strip it off its gravity.

3. THE BODY OF CHRIST AS AN ARCHIVE OF PAIN IN MARIE CORELLI'S BARABBAS: A DREAM OF THE WORLD'S TRAGEDY

Sontag in her work *Regarding the Pain of Others* separates the ones who have experienced war and the ones who watch it unfold into the categories of Spectacle and Spectators. Here the body of Christ will serve as the spectacle, documenting the pain inflicted upon it. The Spectators include the Romans, the Pharisees and their accomplice, the Disciples, the Women and Poor followers of Christ and lastly Barabbas himself.

Mark Zborowski in his work *People in Pain* conducted a case study to understand the attitudes of male veterans towards pain during the aftermath of World War II. He divided the men based on race i.e. Irish, Jewish, Italian and Old American so as to assess the reactions of these men towards pain. Our classes of spectators instead of depicting races understanding cultural codes differently focus on people understanding pain first on an individual level depending on their temperament and personal relation to the person of Christ, and later depending on their position in the social sphere.

Before discussing the Spectacle which in this case is the Body of Christ, we must first look at the spectators present at the site of torture and how they read pain as experienced by Christ in their presence- and how they experience it themselves when visiting memories of pain stored in their own bodies.

1. THE SPECTATORS

Returning to the framework of Zborowski in *People in Pain*- we will divide the spectators into three categories- **a)** The ones that demonize pain, believing the suffering body to be demonic **b)** The ones who

consider pain to be a form of punishment or redemption c) The ones who endure pain, resonating with the suffering body of Christ. These categories are dependent on the experiences of these individuals with Christ when he lives amongst them and how they interpret his presence amongst them.

a) The Demonic Body

In Zborowski's study the Jewish class of veterans had a different attitude towards pain and suffering as compared to the Irish. While the Irish seemed to have a notion of heroism attached to the tolerance for pain, as Morrison observes in his reference to Zborowski's work - Judaism often looked at pain and suffering as a punishment or test to redeem the men from their sins. Other sects within Judaism thought of pain as fully evil with no scope for any form of reconciliation or co-existence with it. In the biblical times, demon possession was widely understood to be caused by the evil nature of the body that was possessed and the suffering as part of a punitive measure that evil itself imposed on these bodies. Mary of Magdala, one of the followers of Christ is known for having been possessed by seven demons. The idea that Christ was a figure who was associated with such evil people by default made him an "evil man". The constant accusation of Christ having performed his miracles through the power of Beelzebub (one of the seven deadly demons) shows the preexisting suspicion on him.

In Corelli's work Judith is shown as the force that had driven Judas to betray Christ through manipulation. Judith looked at Christ as a false prophet who was derailing the Jews from the synagogue and posing a challenge to the existing power structure (The priesthood). The high priest Caiaphas convinces her of the evil nature of the man, and her desire for revenge leads her to believe that the pain vested on him is the wrath of God. The distortions in the weather were interpreted as the anger of God over the people for allowing Jesus to act as the messiah and blaspheming his name by calling himself the Son of God. Though repeated signs seemed to point towards the innocence of Christ, the mass were soothed through the conviction that this suffering body is evil and is being consumed by and through the evil in him. Pain here then is deserved and the audience is desensitized to its unjust nature, while they derive a sadistic pleasure from witnessing the suffering.

b) The Punished Body as Opposed to the Redeemed

The word pain is derived from the Latin word poena, meaning punishment. The idea that pain is a form of punishment according to certain Jewish traditions has already been mentioned earlier. These ideas through continuing Christian traditions in the 18th century instilled a similar belief in the general masses. Daniel Defoe in his work *Journal of the Plague Years* describes pain as an outbreak of divine visitations that allow temporary relief through godly deliverance. We see the same undertones of pain and punishment when reading the work of Corelli.

Pain on the other hand also serves as a test for people in order to redeem them from their natural state of sinfulness. In the Old Testament, Job is considered the icon of faith in the midst of tribulation. Interestingly enough, pain was visited on the body of Job through evil i.e. Satan/Lucifer, though, here Job is not facing the punishment for his inherent evilness because God himself declares him righteous – but rather as a test to ground him in his faith and redeem him from the lingering sinful nature which might stunt his spiritual growth.

Here then when we read the work of Corelli, we see two sets of spectators reading the scene in complete opposition to the other. Barabbas in the novel is almost confused as to what to think of this crucified body that was suffering in his stead (literally) as he had been released from prison as part of a religious tradition that allowed pardon for a single prisoner while the other is condemned. The redemption of one body meant punishment for the other. On a metaphorical level this serves as a microcosmic depiction of

what the purpose of the God incarnate was on Earth. Thus the constant mumbling guilt of Peter and the awe of Melchior when witnessing that which unfolded before him shows that though the Jesus of Nazareth did not take their place on the cross in literal terms, but the basic understanding was that the wrath of the divine which was to visit upon them was being visited on this body. Thus the spectators serve as the bodies that are redeemed (literally or metaphorically) who have escaped the pain that condemns the man on the cross.

c) The Resonating Bodies

In the closing chapter of the book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag describes the antiwar image of Jeff Wall made in 1992 “Dead Troops Talk (A Vision After an Ambush of Red Army Patrol near Moqor, Afghanistan, Winter 1986)”. This is done with the intention of explaining how war is a phenomenon that can be only fully understood if one has experienced it firsthand. She writes:

“These dead are supremely uninterested in the living: in those who took their lives; in witnesses - and in us. ... “We” - this “we” is everyone who has never experienced anything like what they went through - don’t understand. We don’t get it. We truly can’t imagine what it was like.”

Corelli in her work generates a class of spectators who could resonate with the body of Christ due to their close interaction with suffering and pain previously. These bodies blur the line between being spectators and spectacle. Imagine them then as beings that have experienced war as in Sontag’s work (soldiers, journalists, aid workers and independent observers) not only posing as spectators but as extensions of the spectacle. There are two such cases within the frame of the site of crucifixion- One being the thief who was crucified along with Christ - literally the spectacle at that moment but also a spectator of the suffering of Christ. Second is Mary of Magdala who once was the spectacle, though now a redeemed body exorcized of her suffering. These bodies revert to their own knowledge of pain that allows them resonance with the body of Christ.

The thief, who was enduring the same punishment as Christ, could literally experience the wounds and cuts that scoured his flesh. He addresses Christ with compassion and reverence to his divinity, while on the right; Hanan the thief verbally assaults him. This episode makes it important to establish the distinction in how even pain experienced bodies can react to the pain of others without compassion, rather what they think of pain itself in a way determines how they react to it.

Mary suffers in a more spiritual way as compared to the thief because Corelli in her novel showcases Christ to be suffering more from the separation of him from the Father. Mary weeps because her Lord is suffering and taken away from her, mirroring the separation of the father and the son. Thus, once again we see her sorrow merging with the sorrow and pain of Christ himself giving the pain a collective meaning.

2. THE SPECTACLE

In *Barabbas: A Dream of the World’s Tragedy* Christ is portrayed as unnaturally calm during his crucifixion. He does not cry out when he is scourged or when his palms are pierced with nails. The only evidence of his anguish is seen when he calls to the Father, the monologue goes thus:

“Suddenly a voice, pulsating with keenest anguish, yet sweet and resonant, pealed through the air:

“Eli, Eli, lama sabacthani!” (My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me!)

Later on his body is described as in agony yet uncomplaining. He sighs, moans and speaks of submitting his spirit to the Father.

While the suffering is glorified in the person of Christ, he seems to be pleading for the sake of the other bodies that could not comprehend the intensity and “necessity” of this suffering. In terms of theology,

the body of Christ serves as an archive that collects all evil (alluding to the idea of evil causing pain and vice versa) and accepts the punishment for the evil that it now holds. So then pain here becomes synonymous to evil which haunts the site with its desire to cause suffering which is due for mankind.

Michel Foucault in his work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* deals with the operations of power within a system so as to maintain a fixed discipline as established by the existing power structures. The old methods of punishment according to him targeted the body which focused on pain and spectacle. Foucault called this “sovereign power”. The reason for executions in public under the sovereign power was an attempt to instill fear in the minds of the subjects of a nation.

When we look at the execution of Christ, we also see Corelli discussing the political and legal manipulation that occurs- to strategically remove the threat Christ posed to the existing power structure that governed the Israelites. The priesthood was losing its sway over the general public due to the Nazarene who condemned the rich and dwelt with the poor, allowing a sense of belonging to the outcasts of the society. The only way to stabilize the collapsing power structure was through demonizing and punishing this revolutionary body so that the remaining subjects learn to submit without questions.

The spectacular manner in which the execution takes place is deliberate as crucifixion was the most humiliating form of execution practiced during the rule of the Romans. It is spectacular in the sense that the body receiving the violence is exhibited for public consumption so as to reiterate the idea of how the man was an enemy to their culture and thus deserves the pain that was vested upon him.

4. CONCLUSION

When Sontag talks of the importance of context in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, she mentions how interpretation of images depends on the context of an image and what one individually understands of that context. Once again culture and collective memory here plays a very important role in interpreting the context itself. How specific nations interpret mutilation of any given body depends on their collective history and understanding of pain, war and suffering.

The shift in perception outside of collective history only occurs when one is directly put in a space to witness or experience pain on a closer level. Like in the image of Jeff Wall, the soldiers had nothing to do with the living because they had seen war and suffering closely enough to understand the futility of it. The idea of nations and enemies mattered little to them because death, the ultimate equalizer, had opened their eyes to the truth of existence. If death is the ultimate equalizer, then pain is its companion - terrorizing the whole of mankind. Though pain can be culturally charged and interpreted differently, it allows unity through the fact that it inevitably affects all, allowing equal share over any body that suffers along with them.

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