

## PSYCHOLOGICAL GRIEF, LOVING-KINDNESS, AND THE DEHUMANIZING EFFECTS OF RACISM IN GEORGE SAUNDERS' "ISABELLE"

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### ABSTRACT

This research paper discusses how George Saunders' short tale "Isabelle" explores the brutalising impacts of racism in modern American culture as well as emotional anguish. The narrative shows Split Lip's love and concern for his daughter Isabelle, who has special needs. It also shows that Split Lip was in severe financial trouble since Isabelle required expensive care. Local businesses struggled to meet demand, which had a negative impact on the stock market and sharply decreased real estate prices, which led to a significant increase in mental illness among the populace. The narrative also depicts the racial rioting and the young adolescent boy's death because of Split Lip and Officer Doyle. Norris Crane, the younger brother, saw his sibling die and was ready to exact revenge on those who had caused his brother's murder. Split Lip passes away, leaving Isabelle by herself; subsequently, she was placed in a care facility. In the epilogue, the narrative also examines how love and devotion endure in modern society, despite its emphasis on corporate culture and consumerism.

**KEYWORDS:** Psychological trauma, financial crisis, racial riots, revenge.

In America, racism has always been a complicated and widespread problem that is represented in American literature in a variety of ways. An extensive corpus of writing that examines the experiences of many racial and ethnic groups has resulted from writers' struggles with the social, political, and cultural effects of racism throughout the nation's history. African American authors like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs wrote personal stories that revealed the horrors of slavery in the 19th century. These pieces attempted to mobilise support for the abolitionist movement by highlighting the dehumanising effects of racism. Frederick Douglass in his speech "Our Composite Nation", states,

In regard to creeds and faiths, the condition is no better, and no worse. Differences both as to race and to religion are evidently more likely to increase than to diminish. We stand between the populous shores of two great oceans. Our land is capable of supporting one-fifth of all the globe. Here, labor is abundant and better remunerated than any where else. All moral, social and geographical causes conspire to bring to us the peoples of all other over populated countries. (n.p.)

Native American writers who have explored racism and its effects on Indigenous communities include Sherman Alexie, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Louise Erdrich. African Americans have experienced prejudice and discrimination throughout American history. At

least in the early years of African American literature, this experience motivated some black writers to establish their equality with European-American writers. According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “it is fair to describe the subtext of the history of black letters as this urge to refute the claim that because blacks had no written traditions, they were bearers of an inferior culture” (61).

In January 1996, George Saunders published *Civil War Land in Bad Decline*. This collection, which combined unsettling humour and terror, felt like everything one had been longing for, sailors who danced together after saving the life of a corporate saboteur on the verge of suicide, and a historical amusement park under siege by gangs that burned for insurance money. That was the year that native-born American horror finally became a thing. Following the bombing of Oklahoma City, Ted Kaczynski was arrested following the bombing of Centennial Olympic Park. Prior to that, there were the O.J. Simpson trial, the Los Angeles riots, and the police beating of Rodney King. Columbine, the impeachment of Bill Clinton, Travelocity, Amazon, and the unholy union of Rob Thomas and Carlos Santana are all waiting in the wings. All of this is merely incidental, and it indicates nothing more than the fact that a lot always happens, whenever it happens. In retrospect, though, it’s evident that one was, subconsciously or not, becoming a more fearful and aloof person, divided between desire and dread in the same way that Saunders’s characters were. Saunders authored “the kinds of stories we need to get us through those times” (n.p.), according to Thomas Pynchon.

The combination of the Midwest’s aw-shucks deadpan and Stations of the Cross sadness, combined with Saunders’s semi-lovable losers being crucified by inadequate healthcare and wages, unfaithful lovers and cunning coworkers, racist neighbours, and psychologically scarred siblings, was a winning one. *Civil War Land in Bad Decline*, features seven characters who, to varying degrees of success, attempt to navigate stylised, ridiculous, and repressive worlds. His characters inhabit unliveable, unattractive societies beset by resource instability, class conflict, excessive regulation, and violence. These worlds might be either frigid and bureaucratic or arid and hazardous. The oppressed are invariably the protagonists making their way through these uncrushable landscapes. They struggle with dehumanisation, helplessness, emasculation, poverty, abnormality, loneliness, remorse, shame, and actual and metaphorical impotence.

“Isabelle” is the second short tale in the anthology *Civil War Land in Bad Decline*. The narrator of this narrative is anonymous, much like Saunders’ stories. Some of the incidents the narrator witnesses are dehumanising, he remains composed and does not react to them. His brother Leo, on the other hand, witnesses brutal murders committed by people based solely on their race. The situation worsens when the narrator’s mother is attacked, leaving her with a broken arm and no groceries because of racial prejudices. Following his involvement in the Nazi organisation to combat prejudice, he becomes affected by the trauma. “Sick with rage, Leo joined the Nazis” (27). Bryan Stevenson in his work *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* discusses on racial prejudice,

Of course innocent mistakes occur, but the accumulated insults and indignations caused by racial presumptions are destructive in ways that are hard to measure. Constantly being

suspected, accused, watched, doubted, distrusted, presumed guilty, and even feared is a burden borne by people of color that can't be understood or confronted without a deeper conversation about our history of racial injustice. (300)

The story also addresses the other problem, which is the decline in stock markets. Industry output, as well as product imports and exports, declined sharply. Due to the declining land value and their mental pain, many had a difficult time selling their properties. When the monastery was reappraised and it appeared that their pension was in danger, even the nuns became racist. The father of the narrator suffered greatly from this financial collapse since it forced him to sell a property at a significant loss. This had negative effects on his physical and mental well-being, and he eventually lost his vision. "Dad went almost blind, and evenings I'd guide him home from the stockyards telling him what color the sky was" (27).

Split Lip and his differently-abled daughter provide a poignant analysis of grief, agony, and pain in the novel. Though she went by Isabelle, her name was beautiful, but because of the way her limbs were twisted and useless, others called her Boneless or Balled-Up Gumpy. Like a newborn colt, her father handled her. Being unable to handle Isabelle's sorrow, Mrs. Split Lip decided to leave the family. "Mrs. Split Lip was long gone, unable to bear the work Boneless required" (23). Split Lip worked as a police officer by day, but he also sold water purifiers on the side because he needed a lot of money to care for Isabelle. When the purifier business slowly declined, it severely damaged him and caused him to go bankrupt. As a result, he stopped Mrs. Cavendish, the care taker who would regularly visit the house to give Boneless massages to treat her severe pain.

Twelve-year-old Norris Crane is the messenger of retaliation and vengeance. He is a true and loyal youngster, but when he saw his older brother die, his mind was consumed with fury and anger. Samuel Johnson in his work, *A Dictionary of the English Language* states on the concept of vengeance as, "Revenge is an act of passion; vengeance of justice. Injuries are revenged; crimes are avenged" (617). The reason for Norris's brother's death was Split Lip and Officer Doyle. Ever since that fateful day, Norris has been itching to exact revenge on Split Lip, the man who killed his brother. The narrator and his brother witnessed Norris's behaviour change dramatically every day on their walk to school, he became so rough and violent in both his mental and physical aspects. Eventually, he overcame his emotions and chose to murder Split Lip. He said he was going to assassinate Split Lip that evening at nine. "I can't live with it anymore, he said. I'll sneak in there this morning and wait all day for him to come home." You won't, Leo said. I will, said Norris. Nine o'clock tonight he dies" (26).

Split Lip begged Norris not to kill him when he entered his home with a gun, since it was his duty to care for his disabled daughter. "Please no, Split Lip said. Who will care for my child?" (26). Norris hesitated for a moment, then shot him and passed away. It was so difficult for Isabelle to stay at home alone after this occurrence, which made it very tough for Split Lip to leave for work. Split Lip asked the narrator's father for assistance because they were classmates, but because of his poor vision, he insisted that the narrator take care of

Isabelle. “But Dad had pledged me to Split Lip. They were old school pals. Since the shooting, Boneless had been a mess” (27).

The narrator started showing Isabelle a lot of love and tenderness. He groomed her hair, taught her how to type with sticks in her teeth, and made sure she was always clean and organised. Since the narrator assisted Split Lip in caring for his daughter Isabelle, Split Lip was extremely appreciative of him.

So every morning I biked over and made her eggs and Split Lip went off to work, biting his lip in gratitude and offering me unlimited rides in his squad car. I came to care about her. She tried so hard. I read to her and taught her to type using a stick held between her teeth. I brushed her hair until it shone and made sure her smocks were clean. (27)

The narrator’s family visited Isabelle on holidays after she was moved to a facility where she would receive appropriate care following Split Lip’s death, casting doubt on her safety. For months, there was nothing encouraging to report, all that could be heard were gunfire and the murders that resulted from racial unrest. Isabelle’s eyes brightened with enthusiasm when the narrator saw him during their visit. After he had taught her how to share her thoughts with others, she started talking to him in that manner. With the stability of his tiny employment, he took a little apartment of his own and brought her to their new house. Though there were difficult days in their lives, all his sorrow vanished when he saw Isabelle’s smile when he got home from work, and the world was once again a much better and more beautiful place to live.

As a result, the narrative “Isabelle” illustrates the act of loving kindness through the characters of the narrator and Isabelle’s father, Split Lip. Despite their struggles in caring for the disabled Isabelle, they never give up, and their suffering is made easier when they witness Isabelle’s naive and innocent face as she waits for affection and love at the end of a long day of heavy lifting and labour. Norris Crane, a twelve-year-old boy, is thought to have experienced psychological grief because of his brother’s death from racial prejudices. After his brother’s death, Split Lip, who caused his brother’s death through racial discrimination, completely changed his personality, and he became eager to exact revenge. The tale illustrates the pain that individuals experience because of racial prejudice. But psychological distress and retaliation are major causes of suffering for many people in society. Love and affection may counteract even the worst of circumstances.

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