



## Execution of Implausible Narrative Technique in George Saunders’ *Lincoln in the Bardo*

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### Abstract

*George Saunders, a well-known short fiction writer made his debut with the novel- Lincoln in the Bardo. His attempt was to eulogize Abraham Lincoln as a lamenting father for his beloved dead son. The unique technique that he has employed in his writing is implausible and beyond recognition, which is the reason for Saunders to be a Man Booker Prize winner of 2017. Unlike several other novels, Lincoln in the Bardo is not narrated by one or two narrators or a few characters, instead, there are a total of one hundred and sixty-six narrators and the other interesting fact is that all of them are ghosts, unaware of their death, sharing their experiences in the graveyard or say 'Bardo'. Bardo is a Tibetan Buddhist term i.e., the intermediate state between death and rebirth. Saunders' motive is not only to project what happens after life but also, he intelligently portrays the other social issues in society. Bardo, the concept, whatever might come after death, helps Saunders to bring into dialogue portraits of people from all levels of society. He metamorphically arranges fantastic shapes with odd tics.*

**Keywords:** historical; experimental; polyphony; seriocomic; magical realism

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## Introduction

*Lincoln in the Bardo* is prepared with the combination of extraordinary devices, with the “fragments of history, newspaper, articles, and biography” (Morse 25). ‘Conversation is employed as a literary device in narration and that takes place by the means of “collage of voices” (25). It possibly reminds us of ‘Bakhtin’s Polyphony’, and one of the phenomena of polyphony is the “relationship between the hero and his author” (Zhongwen 779), no doubt, Willie Lincoln and the other heroes justify Saunders’ ideas. “The hero to Bakhtin’s mind is not the object through which the author manages to issue his speech, that is to say, the hero’s argument with both himself and the world has the same value as that of the author” (779). Saunders’ writings are hilarious, violent, and bewildering. The only novel of Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, progresses with loss and grief, lamenting for the dead beloveds, the guilt, sorrows, and sufferings, but without sacrificing the comic element. Therefore, he is recognized as a seriocomic writer. The novel opens with the discussions among the denizens of the bardo; Hans Vollman takes an initiative to share his experience when he was alive. Saunders adds both humor and sympathy to provide a better beginning to the novel. The novel opens: “On our wedding day I was forty-six, she was sixteen...” (Saunders 3) the line itself arouses curiosity, various several questions and doubts might trigger the minds of readers. No wonder the novel is historical fiction filled with loss and grief but the story begins with humor. Saunders does not stretch one particular emotion all through his writing; there is always switching of emotions witnessed. Saunders in his interview, in 2014, with the former editor of Salon, David Daley, reveals that he never pre-assumes a story before writing. He writes and cuts several times until and unless the line excites him, which could construct a better flow of a story. For instance, his short story, *Comm Comm*, has moved the benchmark through the ability to stimulate curiosity and scare the readers. In this interview, Saunders shares: "I was starting to write this story, and lo and behold, a guy was living with his mother. I'd done it so many times. So, I wrote a draft where he is living with his wife and kids. That I couldn't pull off. I came back and now it's 'Ok', he is living with



his parents. But they're ghosts". (Daley 2014) Hence one cannot shake the story, without completely disavowing it.

Saunders actually had no intention of creating a lengthy note, but the story he once learned about Abraham Lincoln cradling his beloved son's body, stayed with him, and inevitably determined to write, for he found it to be very touching and enigmatic. Saunders states, in the interview by Soumya Mukerji: "I had decided that I didn't care to ever write a novel.... But I did want to write this one if you see what I mean – I wanted to do justice to this material" (Mukerji) This true story depicting the bond between the grief-stricken father and the dead son (soul) embracing him and lamenting. This image was so delicate that it took twenty-odd years for Saunders to carry that image throughout his work. He was frightened to give a try to something that appeared highly intensive because it bothered him whether he could be successful in portraying such personality (Abraham Lincoln). Finally, in 2012, he attempted, with an idea of the cacophony of voices of a bunch of ghosts, stuck in bardo since they had not been contenting and happy in life. Saunders's idea of adding taste to the story through the use of multiple voices reminds of Bakhtin's polyphony again. Thereon:

Bakhtin assumed that the fictions in the past were all under the complete control of their authors, so despite their different characters having been woven together with each other, there remained nothing but "homophony," namely, a sort of "monologic fiction." As for the Dostoevskian novels, instead of falling into this category, they were "polyphonic fiction," namely, a sort of "all-around dialogic fiction". Surely, Bakhtin's theory about "polyphony" has its originality. (Zhongwen 779)

Saunders amalgamates the historical events with his creative imagined fiction, the scenes pop realistically through the choice of historical facts but they are not true. The mixture of real events of Lincoln's loss and the imagined fictions of ghosts, narrating the entire novel weigh greater unusuality. Therefore, a reader cannot assume that whatever piece of information Saunders puts



in the book can be true or part of the history that happened. At the same time, we cannot ignore the historic snippets as an additional credit that is proffered with citations, which serves to polish the sense of realism. The imagined fiction created by Saunders was a risk-taking act since it's an inclusion of supernatural, mythical, and fantastic elements along with the true historical events, creating realistic fiction, where ghosts appear all through telling the tale he blends the fictional ghostly characters with few real historical ones viz. the reverend everly thomas, roger bevens iii, etc. This risk taken was positively successful in giving a cause to a novel. A reader obtains proper knowledge about the novel only through the conversations and untold confessions that take place among the ghosts. Although this technique is well known as 'magical realism, "mixing historical facts and stories with instances of the fantastic is a practice that Gabriel Garcia Marquez derived from Cuban master Alejo Carpentier, considered to be one of the founders of magical realism" (Echevarria 2019). Certain magical elements are employed in the novel that provides a sense of terror, creepy, scary, and horrifying effects with goosebumps. To quote a few:

<sup>1</sup>Bevens had several sets of eyes all darting to and fro several noses all sniffing his hands...picking things up, bringing them to his face...little bit scary (Saunders 27)

<sup>2</sup> May I tell you something?

It had a face of a worm

A worm I say...horrors (34)

<sup>3</sup>From out of a puddle, a vein-like tendril emerged,

Thickening as it approached the boy,

It flowed cobra-like, over the...crossed (110)



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The visual setting of the novel is narrated incredibly that a reader receives a vivid picture in the mind. One who reads the novel can well view the image set through the eyes of Saunders and we are not unaware of the outlandish vision of the author. The setting sinks remarkably in the story according to the situation, be it doom, or bliss, a fortune or misfortune, a feeling of sorrow or joy, death or salvation. Climatic conditions are described to demonstrate the happenings in the novel; there is transparency in every little emotion, for instance:

<sup>1</sup>They buried Willie Lincoln on the day of the great wind that tore the roofs off houses and slashed the flags to ribbons (291)

<sup>2</sup>As if upon some common signal... their song turning somber and mournful the trees went grey in their wake...the breeze fell, the singing ceased (101)

Saunders prepares the setting of the story in such a manner that a reader can easily anticipate what is going to take place next whether it is indicating blessings, omen, or a great downfall. Saunders' narrative style is so original and natural, whether it is storytelling, a conversation, a talk, a soliloquy, or anything. He wins a command over his techniques; he composes very diligently that appears to be natural always. In his WD interview, with Tyler Moss, Moss throws a question: "What strategies do you employ to effectively mimic the way people speak when you're writing dialogue?" (Moss 2018) the reply to this question, Saunders shares one of his beautiful experiences:

I got a lesson early from a teacher by the name of Dong Unger...if you listen to the way people talk, it's quite inefficient and...I wanted to learn how people talk, so I took a tape recorder, and I hid it under our kitchen table. I recorded my mom and grandmother...you cannot make a bit sense of it. It was all sentence fragments...' did you get the thing under the,'... 'Yeah, no, no, I won't'. 'Yeah, you can, sure'... (2018)



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Makes no sense but there lies an essence of originality; this is again what Saunders is loved for. ‘Conversation’ is the literary device executed in the novel, where one starts, the other finishes. It is exactly the way we speak in our day-to-day life; the first person starts talking about a particular topic and the second or the third person concludes it, and it doesn’t matter if the other person is also talking about the same topic that has started by the first speaker. This usually takes place in the group conversation, as in the novel *Lincoln in the Bardo*.

The man then did something – I do not quite know how to –

hans vollman

He was a large fellow. Quite strong apparently. Strong enough to be able to slide the boy –

The reverend everly thomas

Sick-box

hans vollman

The man slid the box out of the slot in the wall, and set it down upon the floor.

roger bevins iii

And opened it.

hans vollman (Saunders 45)

More than the conversation, there are a lot of interruptions. The name of the speaker or narrator is mentioned after their dialogue is delivered, a reader is unsure of the fact that whose dialogue would come next, since one doesn’t finish and the other interrupts. Hence there comes the speech first followed by the name of the one who has delivered the speech.



Furthermore, to discuss the techniques and style of this experimental novel *Lincoln in the Bardo* executed by Saunders, distinct critics have specified their perspectives about the novel. Morse stated it's a conversation, Mosely states it is fragmented and an uncommon approach to narrative. Whereas the author Saunders himself declaims that the novel written is narrative in the past tense, in the dialogic form, a script, he also agrees to a theatrical style. Every reader for sure would confess that such narrative is individual and exclusive from anything.

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