

Intersection of the Personal and the Collective in George Saunders's *Lincoln in the Bardo*

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Abstract

This paper examines how George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo* reconstructs historical memory through factual accounts and fictional inventions to illustrate the intermingling of Lincoln's private grief and collective suffering, demonstrating how the personal becomes inseparable from the public, and vice versa. The loss that the country as a whole and Lincoln as an individual suffered was traumatic, immense, and long-lasting. The novelisation of the critical phase of the President's life during the American Civil War, when he was shattered by the death of his beloved eleven-year-old son, Willie, and the pressing need for his leadership to steer a nation devastated by the war, explores emotional and psychological dimensions of trauma more deeply. The multiple conflicting historical accounts collectively enrich the reconstruction of the historical past. Drawing on the postmodern techniques of fragmented and polyphonic narrative, along with historiographic metafiction, the paper investigates how the novel foregrounds multiple perspectives that intersect between the real and the imaginary. Ultimately, the paper argues that this formal fragmentation mirrors the fractured nature of both personal mourning and national crisis.

Keywords: Abraham Lincoln, Willie Lincoln, Civil War, Bardo, Suffering, Liminal, Cultural.

Abraham Lincoln, the Sixteenth President of the United States, is a renowned, revered, and towering figure in the historical, cultural, and political life of the nation. His courage, determination, sacrifice, and resilience at the time of the bloody and decisive Civil War (1861-1865) made him a great leader who upheld the integrity and constitutional values by ensuring the abolition of slavery, and forcing the confederates to surrender. *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017), written against the backdrop of the Civil War, is the winner of the Man Booker Prize. The novel showcases his complex and enigmatic life, as well as the postmortem life of his son Willie Lincoln, who died of typhoid fever. Drawing on the idea of the Bardo (the in-between stage of transition from death to the afterlife) according to Tibetan Buddhism, George Saunders narrativizes Lincoln's doubly weighted life by endowing it with purpose and meaning at an extremely difficult and chaotic time. The Civil War demanded Abraham Lincoln's wholehearted, dedicated, and committed leadership as the future of millions of slaves was at stake in case the opposing Confederates emerged victorious. The huge casualties among the Union soldiers, the future of the slaves, and the untimely death of his beloved son intertwine the collective and the personal. Peterson shows that there is no single, objective "Lincoln" in American history.

The employment of disruptive narrative, supernatural elements, magical realism, multiple voices, self-conscious, metafictional techniques (Patricia Waugh), and stream of consciousness enables Saunders to draw a comprehensive picture of Lincoln's distorted and fractured life as a father and a leader. The non-linear narrative, innovative and unconventional dialogic pattern, the names of the dead beginning with lowercase letters, the violation of the rules of proper nouns, and incomplete phrases underscore the chaos and meaninglessness of the condition of the Lincoln family following the untimely demise of their younger son. The postmodernist narrative style represents the outer disorder and unsettling inner by suspending

what appears to be rational and meaningful. The narrative's form and content echo the shattered life of the nation and Lincoln. The postmodernist techniques of narrating the story enable Saunders to incorporate a wider range of possibilities in terms of form and content. The retelling of the significant phase of the Civil War, with the incorporation of extensive material available to restructure the past in light of the present, becomes possible due to experimentation and historiographic metafiction.

“Historiographic metafiction refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction. It refuses the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity.” (Hutcheon 93)

The wide journalistic coverage and the monumental body of literature produced to offer a truthful account of this phase were carefully examined by Saunders to provide an insight into Lincoln's persona. The president's deep engagement with the war sharpened his ability to tackle the complexity of the issue. He engaged himself with soldiers at the forefront, the cabinet members, citizens, and the common masses to foster a sense of togetherness and achieve humanistic goals. His flexibility in incorporating agreeable views of his opponents, along with his easy accessibility, and his use of persuasive and simple language made him a desirable leader. Lincoln, the leader of men, the novel demonstrates, was present behind every strategic political move and following social development. But Willie's death deeply affects Lincoln's political engagement. The novel describes how Lincoln withdraws from public life and submerges himself in trauma. This tragic incident causes a severe emotional collapse, and the narrative unfolds during the phase of Bardo.

According to Tibetan Buddhism, the concept of Bardo described in *The Book of the Dead* refers to the stage of transition, an in-between state, a 49-day period between death and rebirth. Saunders' incorporation of the idea of the Bardo to portray the lives of both of the Lincolns —Abraham and Willie— shows that the realm of the Bardo is a period of grief, attachment, and pain as well as of enlightenment, detachment, and liberation. Here, Bardo serves as a metaphor for transition in the life of grief-stricken Abraham, who isolates himself from social and political life. As per records of “Funeral Oration for Willie Lincoln by Phineas D. Gurley in Illinois State Journal” mentioned in the novel, Willie is described as:

“His mind was active, inquisitive and conscientious, his disposition was amiable and affectionate, his impulses were kind and generous; his words and manners were gentle and attractive” (Saunders 51)

Lincoln's fondness for Willie demonstrates that the child was a genius and gifted with a magnetic personality and charm, “in whom Lincoln had invested his fondest hopes. He was the true picture of Mr. Lincoln, in every way” (Saunders 49). The loss leaves Lincoln as feeble and vulnerable as a child. The rugged face of Lincoln symbolises the toughness, strength, and courage; he, who never wore any emotions, is now full of tears and pall of anguish. The dead body of Willie was laid to rest in the cemetery at Oak Hill, where the president is reported to have paid visits to embrace the body. Deep attachment to Willie forces him to keep visiting the cemetery, which the dead of the Bardo dislike as it may not let the boy be liberated from his present life. The lingering of souls in the Bardo underscores the importance of detachment and enlightenment. The dimension of the Bardo also offers this perspective of the ghosts and apparitions who wish junior Lincoln's successful transition through this stage. Willie, unbeknownst to the fact that he is dead, desires to return home, enjoy himself, and play with his toys:

“It is soon to be spring / The Christmas toys barely played with / I have a glass
soldier whose head can turn / The epaulettes interchangeable / Soon flowers will
bloom / Lawrence from the garden shed will give us each a cup of seeds / I am
to wait / I said.” (Saunders 30)

The novel foregrounds that the period of the Bardo is a critical phase for both the family and the deceased, as the family’s emotional breakdown and the dead’s attachment to the family make transition painful, but with the passage of weeks, the deceased begin acquiring true knowledge about the inevitability of the afterlife.

The reportage and documentation of this period indicate that Lincoln organised a grand party at the White House, which was denounced by people from various quarters. The death of the child at the time when the party was on draws severe criticism as Lincoln is being responsible for not taking care of the child. The burden of this unbearable pain takes a heavy toll on the health of Mrs Lincoln, who gets bedridden for months after the irreparable loss. Even she could not attend the burial of her son. It is also a transitional phase for America as the Civil War causes immense upheaval. The country faces a tough time achieving the noble ideals of the American Revolution. A number of mothers suffered the same agony as Mrs. Lincoln did. The Confederates’ endeavours symbolise the attachment to the unethical and immoral status quo. Lincoln, in his initial phase of political activism, did not reflect on slavery as he did during the transitional phase of the war, as it reframes America and Lincoln altogether. “Although Lincoln aroused love and respect among many, he was also an object of hatred and disdain.” (Schwartz 64) Despite all kinds of criticism from the South, Lincoln strives and evolves through the real experience of the war. Saunders’ narrative marks an important shift in perspectives, as both Lincoln and the Nation are shown in continuous reshaping. Moseley observes that:

“This is the macrocosmic history within which Willie Lincoln’s death is the microcosm. The two situations resonate against each other and the novel suggests that the president’s experience of his son’s death in some way strengthens his resolve as a war leader—that is, it strengthens his tragic willingness to inflict a similar grief on thousands of other American families. The causal connection between Willie’s death and the President’s firm resolve, and between his awareness of the sufferings of African Americans (acquired, in this telling, from or somehow through the activities of the dead) and the Emancipation Proclamation—these are Saunders’s inventions.” (Moseley 2019)

The nation under his visionary leadership passes through the imaginary realm of the Bardo. The pre-war period in the lives of the nation and Lincoln is marked by the pre-Bardo i.e. mundane, stationary, and full of attachments, without any marked shift in the lives of the characters. The Bardo offers an extraterrestrial and supernatural realm that intersects the sufferings of the dead and the living. Ghosts in the *Bardo* are trapped, as they only ponder their own unrealised experiences and unfulfilled desires, expressing dissatisfaction. They reject the transitional and purgatorial role of the Bardo. They wish to relive and wait for their return to life. The motive of return is to experience the pleasures of the material world; they desire to take revenge and vengeance; they wish to experience the existence of what they were before death. Willie himself does not realise that he is dead. He expresses his desire to return home repeatedly. Saunders offers a psychological journey through the minds of the dead in Bardo. It enables the readers to deeply ruminate about the world and beyond.

The day of the burial of Willie witnesses a huge casualty on the Union forces. The number of dead soldiers, as per the documented records, was unbelievable, as the bodies piled up on the battlefield. The loss was immense, as lakhs of families faced the same trauma and sufferings as the Lincolns did. The narrative technique also recovers an alternate history about

the president and the nation. Metafictional narrative breaks the continuity and congruity to weave facts and fiction together to portray a more comprehensive picture of the time, with multiple viewpoints and perspectives. The ghosts' prolonged stay in the Bardo signifies that the stay is not only painful for the dead, but equally for the family members of the dead. Roger Bevins' entering into the body of bereaved Abraham Lincoln makes him feel the unbounded pain of a father for his son. Many of the ghosts' entry into Mr. Lincoln's body reveals the importance of transition as inevitable. "Experiencing one's individual bereavements as part of a greater community of loss is something that Lincoln begins to learn at his son's tomb; in an extraordinarily powerful scene, we see the dead inhabiting his body, willing him to keep walking away from the graveyard, back towards life." (Clark) The temporality of the Bardo is enlightening as the progression of life should not stop, no matter how difficult the time is. The ghosts get the perspectives of the living by entering their bodies and begin to realise how painful it is for the living to accept the loss. The non-literary accounts of the time reveal what Mr Lincoln looked like during bereavement. His face, colour of eyes and skin, and overall health narrate his suffering and trauma. The attachment between the dead and his family through forty days of mourning gradually lessens, and the ways of both worlds must be followed by the respective inhabitants. Willie's eager waiting for his father prolongs the transition, and does not allow Willie's spirit to transit to the next stage. The supernatural and the real world intertwine in such a way that it offers nuanced meanings, and reframes the history of the President's life during this critical juncture. Hiltrop finds this transition as important phase in reconstructing memory:

"However, more than just transitional, the Bardo is a liminal space of possibilities: a place that exists in the mind, allowing events and experiences to be reframed. This reframing occurs explicitly in Lincoln and the ghosts: the President's interaction with the ghosts reframes the way in which Lincoln and

the Civil War are remembered, and the ghosts are able to reframe the grief and trauma from their lifetimes into something more positive after inhabiting Lincoln's body, enabling them to move on to the afterlife." (Hiltrop 557)

It looks at the multilayered realities where Lincoln, as a common man and as a diplomat, negotiates his pain. Magical realism offers alternate dimensions with plausibility by blurring the boundary between the fantastical and the real. The ghosts in the Bardo are individuals as well as a community that shares the stories of their lives. The stories, told through the stream-of-consciousness technique, offer a commonality. The wish to return to life and experience unfulfilled desires ties the ghosts to the real world. The Bardo, as a parallel space, offers a unique canvas to weave vibrant stories about the dead. The living and the dead undergo a realisation of the ultimate truth about their mortality. The dead also contribute to the historical records of the political life of the nation by connecting fragmented memories, as they are trapped by unfinished desires and, in turn, begin recalling their regrets and attachments. Lincoln's personal suffering enlightens him to the sorrow of others by fostering empathy. The liminal space of the Bardo and in the life of Mr. Lincoln provides enough time to revisit the past memories and to restructure the future course of action. Mr. Lincoln's realisation about the trapped nation in the Civil War enables him to accept the truth about life. The state of liminality needs to be crossed. "Liminality is also expressed as the product of disease, despair, death, suicide or the breakdown from normality without any compensatory replacement. It leads to anomie, alienation and angst in the person experiencing the victimhood of the same." (Turner 78) The Reverend like the ghosts' enlightenment occurs once they start entering Lincoln's body. This intermingling of apparitions with the living and vice versa underscores that love and sorrow are inseparable parts of human life, and that healing is necessary to recover from the trauma. Human life is not about living with sorrow and pain but about moving on to the next stage. The intense psychological pain affects the physical well-being of those who suffer it, as

Mrs. Lincoln gets bedridden and Mr. Lincoln shatters emotionally and physically. If they keep remembering and do not let go of their suffering, they can not move forward in life. Mr. Lincoln's acceptance is that if he keeps visiting his son, Willie's soul can not be freed from the in-between state, and it will be detrimental to him to be trapped there. He feels that Willie's moving on is necessary for the cosmic order. True redemption, Nirvana, comes when Willie also begins to accept that he is dead. Mr. Lincoln's transformation after recognising the importance of freedom motivates him to reflect on slavery, as everyone deserves freedom from bondage. He resolves to emancipate the slaves. The paper examines how the surreal setting of the Bardo illustrates how Lincoln's perspective changed, and he decides to achieve the noble goal of ending slavery. Saunders concludes that the policies adopted after this realisation reflect a deep understanding of the importance of the freedom of every individual in America. It also adds to the ethical, spiritual, and moral developments of Lincoln. Saunders apprises the reader through the words of Hans Vollman, "Dead! The lad shouted, almost joyfully, strutting into the middle of the room. Dead, dead, dead! That word. That terrible word." (Saunders 296) The souls' movement to the next stage symbolises the impermanence of life. The "matterlightblooming phenomenon", an invention of Saunders, is a kind of luminous explosion into which the spirit bursts before finally vanishing.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper demonstrates how Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo* offers an alternate history about the life of the great leader Abraham Lincoln, and how Lincoln undergoes a transformation after the death of his beloved son Willie. This loss makes Lincoln withdraw from his responsibility to lead the nation. This state of withdrawal parallels the sojourn of Willie in the liminal space of the Bardo. The family and the nation endure a similar phase of mourning, which intermingles with the supernatural realm of the Bardo, where the presence of the souls of the dead linger near their bodies in the cemetery. The interaction between both worlds

reshapes the perspectives of the dead and the living, leading to the realisation that it is wise to move on in their respective paths. This realisation leads to the wisdom that acting contrary to the cosmic order is unethical and dangerous. The real goal of a soul is to attain salvation from desire and attachment after death. Drawing on the teachings of various religions, especially Buddhism, Saunders weaves the narrative to recreate history and memory by illustrating Lincoln's personal suffering as collective, and eventually his attainment of remarkable moral and ethical strength to lead the nation through war.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of all the authors, declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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