

## **Betwixt and between: Liminality in George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo***

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**Abstract:** The Civil War (1861-65) and the presidency of Abraham Lincoln have been game-changers in the history of America predominantly because of the Emancipation Proclamation that provided freedom to the slaves. George Saunders' debut novel *Lincoln in the Bardo* extends the scope of the plot through the fictional depiction of Abraham Lincoln's personal and presidential roles. The paper seeks to focus on the in-between state/s of the fictional character of Abraham Lincoln influenced by the settings and situation that produces transitional attributes to the novel. Availing the 'processual framework' of liminality proposed by Victor Turner, the liminal existence of Abraham Lincoln in the novel caused by the demise of his son Willie Lincoln and the savage political situation in America is traced. The findings derived from the analytical interpretation of the text reveal the presence of multiple liminal experiences in the character of Abraham Lincoln.

**Keywords:** Abraham Lincoln, American literature, civil war, liminality, slavery, George Saunders

Of war and violence, there exist many literary works and analytical perspectives that explore the in-depth existence of the characters who become victimised. However, perspectives of fiction in drawing attention to historic events and situations give more flexibility and opportunities for analysing the psychological aspects of people involved and affected. Although there is an apparent variance between the historical event of the American Civil War (1861-65) and the period of writing *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017), George Saunders' experiments with verisimilitude in the novel help to narrow the gap between the two. The application of both factual and fictional references in the novel about the Civil War period, the challenging

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presidential term of Abraham Lincoln, and the events occurring in connection with the unfortunate demise of his son Willie Lincoln bring life to the novel. The experimental style in the novel applied by Saunders produces an efficacious result to combine the unusualness of the fictional situations with that of the historical events. Such narrative elements based on verisimilitude point to the concurrent efforts and denial to deliver the past accurately (Rousselot 2014, 4). Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo* effectively brings together the historical, political, situational and religious thoughts through the liminal interconnections between the spatial and situational facets of bardo. The word bardo originates from the Tibetan word 'bar-do' having the meaning of an intermediate state of transition between death and afterlife. To understand the true essence of bardo, one has to refer to the classical Tibetan Buddhist text *Bardo Thodol*, a work of Padmasambhava in the 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. It has been translated into English in the title *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (1927). A suitable translation for the Tibetan word 'bardo' is 'in-between', 'gap', or 'the middle' for *bar* and 'island' for *do* (Trungpa 1992, 73). Referring to the liminal aspect of Bardo, it can be identified as a peak point of experience and a situation of extreme tension caught between two opposites (Fremantle 2001, p. 54). From the Indian perspective, in Sanskrit, the bardo is understood as *antarbhava* - a "transitional state, in-between state and luminal state of the consciousness of the karmic souls after leaving a human body and before taking another form or getting liberated" (Chaudhari 2017). Saunders, being a practitioner of Buddhism, has adapted the concept to provide a fictional setting for his novel. The gradual progress of the novel through the perspectives of the characters gives the idea that Saunders' bardo is a space where the dead souls wait before entering their afterlife. The in-between state of the bardo-dwellers, developing through their ambiguous and uncertain existence in the bardo, provides hints to their liminal existence. The setting of the bardo in the novel can be identified as a liminal space as it is a crossing-over space for the bardo-dwellers. Liminal space is often considered as a transitional space where one leaves behind something but yet not fully accommodate into the new. It, therefore, possesses the quality of a potential threshold.

The publication of the debut novel in 2017 was a milestone in George Saunders' writing career and also a tremendous shift for his readers who had only been familiar with his short stories, short fiction and essays. *Lincoln in the Bardo* has been widely appreciated for its

peculiar experimental way of writing that distinguished it from his previous styles of narration. Saunders effectively directs the sensitivity of his readers to progressively develop the qualities of empathy and compassion towards the correlated fictional and historical situations in the novel. He discusses the unanticipated crisis and grief of Abraham Lincoln in the demise of his son Willie Lincoln. His unusual visit to the cemetery to see the body of his son in the crypt develops the plot. A parallel description of the *'bardoic'* existence of Willie Lincoln and other souls from the perspective of the three major characters – Hans Vollman, Roger Bevins iii, and the Reverend Thomas merges to the point of salvation for the bardo-dwellers and revival to Abraham Lincoln's loss and grief. At this point, Saunders gives hints to interpret the altered attitude of Abraham Lincoln towards the wretched situation of the slaves. With the example of Thomas Havens, a slave who went along with Abraham Lincoln rather than moving out to the afterlife, the novel indirectly reveals the transition of Abraham Lincoln as positive. The historical event of the Civil War (1861-65), the underlying politico-social debates on slavery, and the presidency of Abraham Lincoln are incorporated into the plot of the novel by the author highlighting the existence of spirits in the purgatory-like bardo-setting inspired by the Tibetan Buddhist traditions.

The objective of the paper is to accentuate the 'in-between' transitional progression of the character of Abraham Lincoln in George Saunders' novel as a reflection of the spatial existence of his son Willie Lincoln that defines his situational characteristics. They both intersect each other as one accounts for the other and vice-versa. The bardo existence of Willie Lincoln and the resulting liminal experience in the spatial setting felt disturbing to Abraham Lincoln. He who suffered from the grief of losing Willie Lincoln escapes from the liminal entrapment at the same time when Willie moves out of the spatial setting of bardo through *matterlightblooming* phenomena (Saunders 2017, 302). The British cultural anthropologist Victor Turner's 'processual framework' of liminality discussing the tripartite structure – the pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal phases – is employed to trace the 'betwixt and between' state of Abraham Lincoln. The pre-liminal phase denotes the separation from "a previous word" (Gennep 1960, 21) or "a detachment from the earlier fixed point in the social structure" (Turner 1970, 47). The liminal phase is the intermediary in-between state often considered as a transitional phase of an individual from the pre-liminal to the post-liminal. It projects the

ambiguous and uncertain state where the subject “passes through a realm that has ‘few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state” (Ibid., 47). The post-liminal phase that comes after the liminal phase is the “incorporation into the new world” (Gennep 1960, 21). The application of the ‘processual framework’ would distinguish the liminal phase of Abraham Lincoln from that of the pre-liminal and the post-liminal. By focusing on the transition of the character through its liminal phase, the paper depicts the correlation between the ‘bardo’ state of Abraham Lincoln’s son Willie Lincoln and the liminal existence of Abraham Lincoln.

The existing scholarship provides a general idea about the related areas in which researchers have explored George Saunders’ novel. Sandler (2017) mentions the surreal and melancholic vision of Abraham Lincoln’s presidency in crisis where he describes the explicitly political and obliquely allegorical aspect of the novel. As a political implication of Saunders’ novel, Sandler has positive concerns about the activeness of people who react against the undemocratic grotesquerie perspectives of the Trump administration. In the article, he used the purgatorial characteristic of bardo and goes in a match with the critics who names it ‘zombie modernism’ to criticise the polemics against literary fiction. Éigeartaigh (2019) uses Victor Turner’s perspectives on liminality to elaborate the concept of liminal space in Saunders’ *Lincoln in the Bardo* where he relates literary texts as a major factor in challenging the intransigence of political debate in contemporary societies. He utilises liminality as a tool to express contested narratives, social critiques and alternative perspectives. In *Lincoln in the Bardo*, George Saunders showcases the events of the American Civil War as a problematic situation for Abraham Lincoln. He was forced to concentrate on the progressing violence in the States for a longer period without even having enough space and time to engage with his family matters. The novel “ruptures the generic bounds of historical fiction to create a transhistorical meditation on mortality, purpose and legacy, emerging as a sharply contemporary, distinctively American symphony of voices” (Hayes-Brady 2020, 74).

The parallelism between the civil war and the bardo settings of the novel influences the “long-dead historical and/or invented characters that appear far more mobile, more fantastical” (Morse 27) to determine their spatial freedom in the expression of grief and loss. The peculiarity of being in such settings drives them to be in a ‘betwixt and between’ situation that defines their existence to be neither in one state

of mind nor in any other. Identifying the transitional states of each character in the novel, especially that of Abraham Lincoln and Willie Lincoln, produces empathy in the reader. Apart from direct examples of the racial distinction between the Blacks and the Whites, the novel symbolises the same through the distinction between the living and the dead. The liminal setting of the bardo where the souls suffer from their in-between existence points to the unfortunate conditions and situations suffered by the slaves. The conclusion of the novel suggests such empathy towards the discriminated and the exploited (Strehle 2020, 167). The state of mind of the characters in the novel including the character of Abraham Lincoln is considered to have undergone the experience of development through a transition from instability to permanence and enlightenment (Nagpal and Tramboos 2019, 769).

The rediscovery of the intermediary phase in the rites of passage introduced in Arnold van Gennep's *Les Rites de Passage* (1909) by Victor Turner has led to flexible possibilities of application in various disciplines. Turner added further insights to van Gennep's tripartite structure – the pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal phases. Analogous to the Buddhist traditional concept of bardo and the setting used by Saunders, the three phases of liminality also have moving-in, moving-through and moving-out transitions (Goodman et. al. 2016, 50). It helps to determine the separation from an earlier fixed point in the social structure or a set of cultural conditions through the liminal phase of the person involved in the transition. This process of transition is ambiguous and the reintegration phase becomes consummated (Turner 1970, 47).

Saunders parallels the tensions of the American Civil War to that of the personal incidents related to Abraham Lincoln and his family. Even at the peak moments of Willie's illness, Abraham Lincoln is seen as incapable of fixing his attention to its seriousness which was fatal enough to grab the life of his favourite son. The crucial status of the American Civil War that was haunting the nation as well as its President even at the time of the death of Willie Lincoln can be identified through a description in the novel saying:

Young Willie Lincoln was laid to rest on the day that the casualty lists from the Union victory at Fort Donelson were publicly posted, an event that caused a great shock among the public at that time, the cost in life being unprecedented thus far in the war. (Saunders 2017, 152)

Saunders quotes the reference to Jason Tumm's "Setting the Record Straight: Memoir, Error, and Evasion" to show that Abraham Lincoln was highly disturbed by the news informing the death of many people from both sides of the Union and the Confederate groups. This loss of civilians is later reflected and symbolised through the death of his son Willie Lincoln. The excerpts from various historically relevant books, letters, diaries, newspaper articles and personal testimonies are discussed in the novel by Saunders from the point of view of Lincoln's friends, colleagues, opponents and even employees in the White House who were close to Lincoln. Though some of them are authentic, as said in this paper's introductory section, he has mixed certain quotes and testimonies for presenting the verisimilitude aspect of the novel that helped to fulfil the uninterrupted flow of its plot.

The inability to concentrate neither on official matters nor in the case of Willie Lincoln presents the helpless, anxious and uncertain days of Abraham Lincoln. Even after Willie Lincoln became physically weak due to the illness, Abraham Lincoln could not spare his time to be with his son. In the book *Lincoln in his own Time*, P. D Gurley states that "Willie's death was a great blow to Mr. Lincoln, coming as it did in the midst of the war, when his burdens seemed already greater than he could bear" (Gurley 2011, 65). Abraham Lincoln's grief for his personal loss was intense as Willie was his favourite who always wished to be with him. The two were very much close to each other and were seen together most of the time (Willis 2011, 73). This attachment to Willie made Abraham Lincoln weaker even though he did not expose it in public. It was the reason behind his visit to Willie's crypt when everyone had left the place after the funeral function. Nathaniel Parker Willis mentions the visit of Lincoln to the funeral thus "with a burden on his brain at which the world marvels – bent now with a load of both heart and brain – staggering under a blow like the taking from him of his child!" (Ibid., 73). While considering the convergence of various coincidental troubles and tensions of the time, it is true that "of all the multitudinous sorrows life dealt Lincoln, none could compare to the death of Willie" (Wheeler 2008, 183). These factors led Abraham Lincoln to visit the crypt of Willie Lincoln in the early morning on 25<sup>th</sup> February 1862.

The liminal phase of Abraham Lincoln regarding his personal life had already been initiated when he was informed about the seriousness of the illness faced by his son Willie Lincoln. It can be considered as his shift from the previous phase of normality and structure (pre-

liminal phase) to an intermediate phase (liminal phase) expressing the gradually developing unusualness different from the normal situations or an anti-structure to what had been before (Turner 1970, 47). This unusualness in the phase of liminality produces ambiguity and uncertainty in the person experiencing it. The invisibility of the structure that was profound in the pre-liminal phase has been neutral (Ibid., 49) and in the opinion of Mary Douglas, it produces a situation that is similar to “neither one thing nor another; or maybe both; or neither here nor there; or may even be nowhere, and are at the very least ‘betwixt and between’” (Ibid., 48).

The demise of Willie Lincoln is seen as unacceptable for Abraham Lincoln as it was an unanticipated event for his family. The paramount emotional outburst has made him hold Willie’s body in his hands (Saunders 2017, 58). It resembles the picture that Saunders had in his mind two decades before writing the novel. He had received the idea from the newspapers of those times about the grief that Abraham Lincoln had for the demise of his favourite son Willie Lincoln. The visit can also be interpreted as his regret for not being able to spend time with his child when it was much expected by Willie. Saunders projects the fatherly figure of Abraham Lincoln to its maximum possible extent to produce empathy in his reader.

More than being a historic adaptation, the novel tries to explore the altering state of mind in an individual during unusual periods of life. As he completely shifted to the identity of a father figure during his visit to the crypt, the liminal phase of the period gets intensely strong in producing the resultant emotions of grief, anxiety, uncertainty, ambiguity and indecisiveness in him. It can be described as a blank state of mind wherein he could have experienced a limbo effect in life. The moment after realizing that someone or something has been lost forever would evoke a feeling of hollowness in the victim of the situation. Saunders, through the narration of Willie Lincoln’s ghost character stuck in the bardo space, describes the emotional outbreak of Abraham Lincoln when he held the body of his son in his hands (Saunders 2017, 61). The uncertainty out of loss is reflected in Abraham Lincoln when he went to the cemetery to see the crypt of his son. The descriptions of the hollowness of mind as a result of his intense grief are scattered when expressed through the perspective of Hans Vollman, Roger Bevins iii and the Reverend Thomas. Saunders informs, “The gentleman seemed lost. Several times he stopped, looked about, retraced his steps, reversed course” (Ibid., 41). Also, by

mentioning “he was softly sobbing, his sadness aggravated by his mounting frustration at being lost” (Ibid., 44) and “he emitted a single, heartrending sob. Or gasp. I heard it as of a gasp. A gasp of recognition” (Ibid., 44), the outburst of Abraham Lincoln’s emotions for his lost son is pointed out. As part of the experimental writing, rather than sharing the thoughts of Abraham Lincoln as his own, it is conveyed through the bardo-dwellers as if they produce it directly through his voice when they get into him. Such a thought process of Abraham Lincoln highlighting his anxiety, unusualness and uncertainty about the situations is shared through the perspective of Hans Vollman as,

It is out of control. Who is doing it. Who caused it. Whose arrival on the scene began it. What am I doing. What am I doing here. Everything nonsense now. (Saunders 2017, 115)

This moment of Abraham Lincoln can be identified as liminal through these textual extracts and also from an overall analysis of the plot of the novel. As discussed earlier, while categorising the existence of the character of Abraham Lincoln in the novel, it can be understood that he moves through situations that are unfamiliar and unanticipated.

From the perspective of Saunders, Abraham Lincoln, who kept aside all his other engagements as the President of America, was overwhelmed with “sadness, guilt, and regret” (Saunders 2017, 231). 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 1974, 78). In the case of Abraham Lincoln, he chooses to be alienated from the external world activities and responsibilities of being the President for the sole purpose of being at the crypt of his demised son. The death of Willie is reflected in Abraham Lincoln as his death or despair evolves out of the loss that he had to face in his personal life. With reference to Smith Hill, Saunders observes that “the tension and grief in the chapel were palpable. The President’s head, as he spent these last precious moments with his boy, was bent—in prayer, weeping, or consternation” (Saunders 2017, 293). The gradual elevation of grief in Abraham Lincoln due to the demise of his son can be linked with his



liminal phase. He is seen disturbed throughout the novel – from when he comes to know about the severity of the illness of Willie Lincoln until he leaves the chapel. Though he was busy with his official meetings and discussions, he was tensed and anxious about the health condition of his son. Saunders tries to emphasise the sadness of Abraham Lincoln who comes to visit his son's crypt leaving behind all his official responsibilities. The in-between existence experienced through this situation is unusual to him. The uncertainty of the political situation and the loss incurred to his personal life eliminates him from the previous state of mind and situations of normality. Though all moments of grief cannot be referred to as liminal conditions, this particular situation of Abraham Lincoln's gradual shift from the previous phase (pre-liminal) to the phase of tranquillity (post-liminal) can be regarded as liminal.

Abraham Lincoln's multiple liminalities – the first related to the official matters with the civil war and the second on the personal loss he had at the same time - resolve towards the end of the novel that initiates the conclusion by providing freedom to the majority of characters in the novel. The uncertainties and anxieties about the civil war and also the resultant unusual political situations in the country determined his mental state. Towards the end of the novel, Saunders highlights Abraham Lincoln's transformed perspective. His recognition that America is "for everyone, for everyone to use" (Saunders 2017, 308) makes him decide that the slaves have to be made free like any other person in the country. The transition of Abraham Lincoln reflected in the transformation of policies in America that led to the situation of overcoming the challenges raised by the most crucial liminal event in the history of the country. The surreal elements of the experimental novel draw interconnection between the events, characters and spaces at the particular moment when Willie realises the truth of his death from the recollection of the events of his death and funeral by Abraham Lincoln. When Willie realises that he is dead and cannot return to his father, he attains the wisdom that takes him out of the uncertain and ambiguous condition of bardo. Saunders informs 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 2017, 296)

Willie's testimony about the realisation of the truth that they were all dead and is entrapped in their liminal phase with no possible return made almost all the bardo-dwellers except some to be part of the *matterlightblooming* phenomenon that led them out of their bardo. They moved out of the liminal phase that had hindered their freedom and individual identity. While the liminal period of Willie Lincoln is based on the liminal space of bardo and the liminal experiences there, the liminality experienced by Abraham Lincoln confines to his mental state and the political situations. Though separate, the liminal experience of both the characters coincides with each other to mutually influence the transition. While Abraham Lincoln's recollection of the funeral helps Willie Lincoln to transit from the bardo state to the afterlife, the transition of Willie makes Abraham Lincoln feel revived from his grief into hopeful positive decisions. The decision to free the slaves in the country is implied through the thought process of Abraham Lincoln narrated through one of the bardo-dweller named Mrs. Francis Hodge,

I will go on, I will. With God's help. Though it seems killing must go hard against the will of God. Where might God stand on this. He has shown us. He could stop it. But has not. We must see God not as Him but as IT, a great beast beyond our understanding, who wants something from us, and we must give it, and all we may control is the spirit in which we give it and the ultimate end which the giving serves. (Saunders 2017, 310)

At the time of this realisation and moving-out process of Willie from the bardo, Abraham Lincoln is seen startled and jolted as he could feel free unlike before (Saunders 2017, 302). He then could accept the existing situation of the loss of his son and could adapt to it. The interconnection between Abraham Lincoln and Willie Lincoln is evident from this particular moment. Willie could not move beyond the limit of the liminal space because of the memories and affection towards his father. Likewise, Abraham Lincoln is haunted by his love and care for Willie Lincoln. Their situation initiated liminality in them which was resolved with the realisation of truth by Willie. Abraham Lincoln's second liminality which had gradual progression due to the prevailing conflicts and riots in the country, also interconnected with the major plot of the novel, is also resolved with his historic decision. While moving out of the chapel where he was sitting during the time of the process of his revival, his decision was in support of the slaves in the country. Through the act of Thomas Havens' entry into the body of

Abraham Lincoln, Saunders gives a hint to the decision taken by Abraham Lincoln in signing the historically significant Emancipation Declaration bill that abolishes slavery and provides freedom to the slaves in America. The decision to give a conclusion to the American Civil War provided a solution to Abraham Lincoln's liminality concerned with political matters, thus marking his exit from the intermediate phase to the post-liminal phase.

Converging the highlights of the discussion, the conclusive finding of the paper is that the character of Abraham Lincoln in *Lincoln in the Bardo* undergoes multiple liminal experiences on a parallel basis at the same time. The pre-liminal phase, considered as the period before the unusual event of the illness and death of Willie Lincoln, the liminal phase that highlighted the grief, and the post-liminal phase giving hints about the relaxed state of mind presents the tripartite division and expression of liminality in Abraham Lincoln. While the former denotes liminality based on his personal life, the liminal phase of being the President of America is also indirectly reflected in him. This intermixes with the historical background of America which has to be a reference point for the reader to understand the background of the plot based on the civil war. The pre-liminal phase can be understood as the period prior to the position of the President of America, the liminal phase that witnessed uncertainties, anxieties and ambiguities regarding the civil war, and the post-liminal phase providing certain hints to the famous Emancipation Bill. It becomes Abraham Lincoln's second tripartite division and expression of liminality. This transition of Abraham Lincoln from the pre-liminal phase to the post-liminal phase through the unusual liminal phase can be found in the novel. It helps him to get himself relieved from the haunting dilemma and uncertainty about the civil war. The liminalities caused by the sickness and death of Willie and the other that is indirectly mentioned due to the unfortunate and recurring civil attacks in the country can be interpreted to have re-aggregated to a transitional post-liminal phase of revived personality and presidential qualities.

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