

Sense of Historicity in *Lincoln in the Bardo*: A Novel by George Saunders

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ABSTRACT

In American history the greatest event after its independence in 1776 is the Civil War 1861-65. The end of slavery, the proclamation of equality, rights and the spirit of America got a realization after this. This also sowed the idea that the citizen is the prime and central unit of America, no matter what could be done and what could not be, he/she will remain supreme. Certain things also follow this, where the law is supreme, discretion is reasonable and also sides with the citizen. The idea where liberty, equality and pursuit of happiness remains supreme along with him/her. But there is some gap, why did they forget all this along with the proclamation of independence or still there is some space which needs to be filled up now or is it long to live the struggle? There was slavery till civil war, the gulf between industrial and more prosperous north and the less developed and full of slaves agricultural south is huge. They were partaking with so much tension that separation was imminent but nonetheless the nation rose under the leadership of Abraham Lincoln and all these above-mentioned gaps were taken care of. Here also lies the historicity between the political Lincoln and family Lincoln, one should be present always without the body and another should always be present along with the body. The turf carries Lincoln to the grave of his son and what led there in the background of history along with the three souls lies ahead.

Our paper will try to rediscover all this through the sense of historicity of the novel *Lincoln in the Bardo* by American author George Saunders.

George Saunders's 2017 novel Lincoln in the Bardo is a historical novel by all the usual criteria, whether they rely on its content, its temporality, or the significance of its themes. (Mosley)

This is the first novel by the best-selling, National Book Award nominee and short story writer George Saunders, and through this novel Saunders sailed through the Man Booker Prize in 2017. This novel is about Abraham Lincoln and the death of his eleven year old son, Willie, at the dawn of the Civil War on 20 Feb 1862. This novel takes course through a night two days after the death of Willie, where Abraham Lincoln suffering from the grief of loss of his son, visited his son's grave alone in darkness of night, so that he can spend some time in alone with his son's body. It tested the timelessness of literature in its subject when it covers a period where many aspects of history are explored and time of more than one and half century has been covered. It also has the fine compounding of fiction and history intertwined with the meta fiction and hyper textuality. As noted by Mosley in his article:

The simplest way of recognizing a historical novel, of course, is by the lapse of time between its narrated events and its composition. One rule of thumb used to be sixty years; apparently this derived from the subtitle of Walter Scott's *Waverley, Or, 'Tis Sixty Years Since'* (1814). A slightly shorter period is suggested in the definition offered by the Historical Novel Society. It declares: "To be deemed historical (in our sense), a novel must have been written at least fifty years after the events described, or have been written by someone who was not alive at the time of those events (who therefore approaches them only by research)" (Defining the Genre n.d.). The gap of over one hundred and fifty years between 1862, when Saunders's story takes place, and its composition and publication comfortably satisfies the temporal requirement for the genre. (Mosley)

In the course of that one night and surrounded by ghosts (souls- more suitably term for oriental readers) of the recently passed and the long dead ones. *Lincoln in the Bardo* is an unnatural lightening of death, grief, good and evil. It is also, in the end, an exploration of the deeper meaning and possibilities of life, with humor, pathos, and grace with fun and satire. Its nature is complex, full of stupidity and childish with a background in history in the realm of souls. This stupidity and childishness is not of the text but of the environment, background and of the characters and their sketches.

Lincoln is about, among other things, grief and rebirth, and it goes through you that way: You shed one way of looking at the world and emerge with another. (Smith)

Set in the background of the American civil war, where the utmost question is of sub humans (Black Race People,) an apparition of souls could be a symbol of it. Hans Vollman and Roger Bevens III discuss their life and death, their beliefs, their disbeliefs, their illusions and their reality of life and death and the interregnum before rebirth. These two

will be later joined by the son of Abraham Lincoln Willie. All these discussions, confusions, acceptances and treaties are the part of Bardo; a Buddhist concept of time between death and rebirth.

In Tibetan Buddhism, Bardo is a plane populated by spirits who are either ascending towards Nirvana or falling backwards through increasingly frightening hallucinations until they are ready to be reborn. In Saunders' interpretation of the afterlife, he combines Bardo with something of Dante's Inferno and the Christian idea of Purgatory, and populates it with spirits who are in different ways haunted by their past mistakes and the future they never had.(Mishra)

Vollman and Bevins agreed on the peace where Bevins on one side is unhappy in his life for his love with Gilbert being objected by Gilbert himself, that to live correctly they have to end their homosexual affair, on this Bevins replied that if this is live correctly than their should be no life, and on the other side Vollman who wants to live correctly with the consummation of his marriage with a much younger wife was stopped by the enigmatic beam, as he is dead now but in bardo. In both the cases there is nothing left in life whether you are correct or incorrect and to be correct and incorrect in full terms in any sense is rare. This is also anecdotal with the historic abolitionist lobby confronting Lincoln and even Mary Lincoln is correcting her husband Abraham Lincoln. As you can have support for the slavery also. All these have one thing in common is that they understand each other and correct themselves when they see others in the bardo from a small child, their mothers and others. The colours of life get many visuals when they get many angles. This also displays the understanding of the political nature of nature and that of the nation where facts, thoughts, truth, lies, religious, personal and political differences are intertwined with each other. This also creates a stupidity and childishness in the textuality and narration where abstract and illusionary characters become delusional and readers get confused but what to do is the nature of the human and nation. It is so complex that simplicity lies somewhere else when dealing with it.

But the historical novel is always a sort of hybrid: fiction interspersed with facts, or facts leavened with fiction; creation alongside archival research, imaginary people (usually) sharing the space with "real" people known to have lived and died, imagined events placed within the matrix of real ones. (Mosley)

All these human sufferings being reimagined in historicity in *Lincoln in the Bardo* by merging metafictional archival techniques with a deep metaphysical inquiry. By setting the historical event of the American Civil War within the metaphorical time and space of the bardo, Saunders demonstrates that historicity is fundamentally about how we remember our history. The novel suggests that history is neither a cold sequencing of events nor triumphant myth, but an ongoing, haunted dialogue between the living and the past—a collective awakening that requires us to look upon our shared tragedies with clarity, sorrow, and enduring grace.

Lincoln in the Bardo features ghosts inhabiting a graveyard who have all the time in the world to tell and retell their stories to one another. Like the denizens of Dante's Inferno, these spirits are eager to rehash their memories, and unwilling to accept that life has been taken from them. Their graveyard is more a purgatory than an inferno.(Mishra)

This same idea follows the event where the three souls encounter souls who were new born to the one who are not even teenagers like the son of Abraham Lincoln who was only eleven when he entered the bardo. They make ideas, discuss them and finally accept all these just by recounting that what they have looked upon in life, the world and destiny is different and all that is there is just to add up with God.

This idea was based on the Christian notion of the double embodiment of God and man in Jesus Christ.(Polak) The historicity and its implications on the psychology and behaviour of man is testified with the events of history and their assimilation both with the text and its characters and see what they produce is sheer stupidity of souls and nothingness. This tells us that what is good and evil is all fragmentary and is in the limits of time. As Gloria Steinem said "*Always ask the turtle.*" What is good and what is bad is all personal opinion and its background and foregrounding. History tests all and certainly all will not pass. But this is not the answer which Saunders wants to tell; rather he wants to tell that in the end all will end with God and lamentation is the reality.

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