

# Living Through the In-Between: Manifestations of Coercive Liminality in George Saunders' Selected Short Stories

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## Abstract

Human beings often get situated in their unfortunate conditions due to certain external factors that define their existence. This research paper seeks to study George Saunders' selected short stories from four anthologies through the theoretical lens of liminality to explore how the dominant power structures induced by ideologies of capitalism, consumerism, and authoritarianism produce problematic in-between states. The interpretive analysis highlights specific instances of the characters, providing a conclusive finding that the characters experience coercive liminality subject to the formation of threshold states of betwixt and between identities of instability.

**Keywords:** American Literature; Coercive Liminality; Domination; Liminality; Threshold.

## Introduction

The act of coercion has always been a successful tool for dominant powers to establish their supremacy over the vulnerable group that does not have adequate resources to resist the injustices directed towards them. The continuity of repression over time normalises the situation and produces the feeling that such a system has the right to subjugate the thus formed subservient category of people. This act of normalisation is attained with time by injecting the thought that there would be nothing better than the present condition. "The theoretical position that depicts domination as inevitable has always provided the most effective rationalisation for repression" (Matušítk 177) as it is believed that "a non-repressive civilization is impossible" (Freud 16). The successful implementation

of this viewpoint in society has made room for unquestioned exploitations through direct and indirect forms of servitude. The American Psychiatric Association defines repression as “a mechanism in which the person is unable to remember or be cognitively aware of disturbing wishes, feelings, thoughts, or experiences” (“American Psychiatric Association” 394). The increasing instinct of the dominant class to repress the basic rights of the lower class through the exercise of exploitation points to the degradation of moral values in society. The significance of the advocacy put forth by the American contemporary writer, George Saunders, is highly relevant when different forms of exertion of power control the living situations of vulnerable groups of powerless and unconsciously repressed people in various sectors. Layne Neeper (2016) highlights the intention of Saunders’ works saying,

What readers do come away with is a new or renewed attentiveness to unironic empathy for the characters harassed and oppressed by the miserable failures that their lives have become. (285)

Saunders’ works advocate for the practice of empathy, kindness, and compassion, which would help to develop harmony in society. His essay “Manifesto: A Press Release from PRKA” gives a list of activities that are based on empathy, kindness, and compassion in which Saunders satirically mocks the activities of violence, invasion, racism, war, rape, and similar exhibitions of power over others (Saunders, *The Braindead Megaphone*). While reading the works of Saunders, one would easily recognise that he writes literature with the application of moral agency where the troublingly ambiguous are highlighted rather than merely moralising the stories (Ellerhoff and Coleman vii).

The purpose of this research paper is to substantiate the presence of coercive liminality experienced by the characters representing the powerless class of society under the exploitation conducted by the dominators. The function of coercion exerted by the power structures and experienced by the sufferer is interpretatively traced from George Saunders’ selected short stories. It showcases the in-between states of characters under conditions that facilitate the presence/absence of multiple positions, producing instability in their identity. The methodology devised in the research paper analyses the short stories according to the three interconnected ideological themes such as capitalism, consumerism, and authoritarianism. The existence of a subjugated and restrained group under the overarching pre-eminence of a corporate system inspired by the capitalist

ideology is criticised in “CivilWarLand in Bad Decline”, “The 400-pound CEO”, “Pastoralia”, “In Persuasion Nation”, “Exhortation” and “My Chivalric Fiasco”. From the viewpoint of the theme of consumerist ideology, Saunders’ short stories such as “I CAN SPEAK!<sup>TM</sup>” and “My Flamboyant Grandson” provide an inkling of the persuasive nature of the dominant groups’ handling of power that silences people on the other side. Further discussions to substantiate the experience of coercion are conducted with the help of textual extracts from “93990”, “Escape from Spiderhead”, and “The Semplica Girl Diaries”. From the outline description of the short stories, certain dialogues and situational existences of characters are identified and interpreted to trace their liminal experience of having neither/both identities of self and the other. The application of theoretical insights on liminality discovered by the symbolic anthropologist, Victor Turner, substantiates and aids the existing thoughts discussed related to the capitalist, consumerist, and authoritarian ideologies from the perspective of the subjects that are categorised as victims. The discussions and subsequent findings on the coercive nature of liminality have relied more on the textual references that reflect the quintessence of real-world society.

### **Existing Research: Discussions on Domination, Exploitation and Coercion**

The scholarly research conducted based on the short stories of George Saunders has been informative in understanding the basic interests of the author. Spread in four different anthologies, such as *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* (1996), *Pastoralia* (2000), *In Persuasion Nation* (2006), and *Tenth of December* (2013), the short stories project intolerance, exploitation, and violence against the helpless and voiceless groups in society. David Rando (2012) writes in “George Saunders and the Postmodern Working Class” about the inclination of George Saunders’ stories towards the marginalised groups in society who are vulnerable to the dominant structures of power. He appreciates Saunders’ writings that speak for the dispossessed, the oppressed, or merely those whom history’s winners have walked all over on their paths to glory, fame, or terrific wealth (Rando 437). The essay written by David Huebert, identifies that Saunders’ fiction manipulates and subdues the human body. The essayist comments on Saunders’ biopolitical dystopias that it threatens their denizens not with death but with a prolongation of debased and unnatural ways of life (Huebert 106). The condescending, regulatory, and all-pervasive surveillance of the inmates who become human zoo animals (106) is viewed as the narrator’s alienation from his own organic existence (111). Based on the analysis of “My Flamboyant Grandson”, the article “Changes in Totalitarianism:

Hannah Arendt, Franz Fuhmann, and George Saunders” identifies that the character Mr Petrillo “gladly fulfils his duty up to the point where it means sacrificing dignity” (Cesaratto 74). The capitalist degradation of values is discussed as the dissatisfaction with the prevailing authority of their respective empirical environments that possess lived experience, oppression, and drudgery (76). In addition to “The Semplica Girl Diaries”, the short stories “Exhortation” and “93990” included in *The Four Institutional Monologues* and in *Tenth of December* peep into the subversive and absurd familiarity of the American corporate culture that produces distraction and disconnection (Lee 98) and suggests meaning of the alienated absence of characters and theme (79).

With the significant thought that “human beings are born with a series of built-in confusions regarding how we conceive our own position in the world” (Basseler 154), the short stories with the ‘betwixt and between’ essence aim at “an artistic uncoupling with regard to the limited notions of real life” (154). From his analysis of the works, Michael Basseler has the opinion that Saunders’ narrative empathy makes the readers sensitive to the situations of the characters and thereby experience the perspectives of other people (154).

In the article about *Lincoln in the Bardo*, Clare Hayes-Brady (2017) has the opinion that the kindness, compassion, and empathy that are prominent in George Saunders’ works are representations of individual kindness and empathy that would overthrow late capitalism (89). Though the writer exclusively mentions the ideological standpoint of capitalism, from an analysis of the same, the opinion can also be stated for the soullessness existing in the other forms of domination. The stories of George Saunders are a “contest between meanness and kindness, empathy and apathy, and community and solipsism” (Ryan 46), where he includes “empathy and kindness even while depicting absurd cruelty, poverty, entrapment, and misfortune, failures of empathy and communication” (6).

In the viewpoint of David Kipnis (1976), humans apply enforcement to their fellow beings mainly out of their aggressive drives to punish and harm, out of fear of the need to maintain ego, for material gain, and out of strong involvement in an institutional role. The coercion experienced by the victims produces anomic periods of disruption that alienate individuals from society, creating a state of normlessness where traditional social customs and pressures have weakened, therefore producing feelings of dissatisfaction, anxiety, and uncertainty (Tsuda 136). George Saunders occupies his views with the oppressed, exploited, and voiceless people of

society, as is evident from his writing, where he places major characters as the representatives of people who face such conditions in real-life scenarios. The empathetic storytelling of Saunders amplifies the heartbeats of the poor and powerless (George 122). In *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (2001), Iris Young mentions the five faces of oppression as exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence (64). All these faces of oppression, except cultural imperialism, can be traced in the selected works of Saunders. The form of oppression can be through direct and indirect means of the exertion of power and influence that hinders other options of exit for the victims, thus making them vulnerable to such conditions.

Though there have been various discussions on the exercise of power and resultant repression based on the thematic content in George Saunders' short stories and other fictional works, the in-depth analysis of the existence of the in-between states of the characters has yet to be discovered. The research gap identified from the access to the existing research points to the direct and indirect victimisation of the powerless group, leading to the experience of a state of coercive liminality.

### **Coercive Liminality: Understanding the Anthropological Roots**

Coercion is the result of adverse conditions influencing a person to be different from what is actually wished and eventually being unsatisfactorily aligned with the interests of the opposition forces. The meaning of coercion is described as "the use of threatened force, including the limited use of actual force to back up the threat, to induce an adversary to behave differently than it otherwise would" (Byman and Waxman 9). The psychological nature of coercion is to persuade rather than exercise brute force (9). The discussion of coercion in this article is based on the reflection of the adverse conditions that force a person to adapt to the interests of authorities who are inspired by the ideologies of domination. Rather than the physical acts of coercion exercised by the power structures, the impacts on the victims are highlighted from the perspective of liminality.

The historical root of liminality lies with the anthropological concept of Arnold van Gennep's rites of passage in *Les Rites de Passage* (1909). He, who was an anthropologist and folklorist of Dutch-French origin, stated it as an intermediate phase of transition that is situated in-between the rites of separation and its incorporation into the rites having post-liminal attributes (Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* 21). His viewpoints based on the rites performed in certain tribal groups were rediscovered and elabo-

rated by the British anthropologist and symbologist, Victor Turner, in the 1960s and 1970s. Turner's work centred on the liminal phase is defined as a transitional intermediate in which individuals or groups can acquire new identities, statuses, or knowledge at the expense of experiencing ambiguity and leaving behind old social positions (Meyer and Land 2005). If the complex nature of liminality is simplified, it can be defined as the existence of people who have multiple identities or positions in which neither one nor the other(s) or both are expressed within the same context. The "liminal personae" (Turner, *The Forest of Symbols* 47) or also termed as "liminal entity" (Turner, "Liminality and Communitas" 95) undergo identity transformations and encircle liminality in terms of spatiality (Cook-Sather, "Newly Betwixt and Between") during the transitional phase of liminality. Victor Turner's insights on liminality and related concepts are scattered in various essays and books, which altogether combine the theoretical ideas of having a multitude of labels (Deflem 21). Victor Turner, based on his research conducted among the Ndembu ritual culture, defines liminality as a state of being neither one nor the other, but sometimes both – or at times nowhere to be called betwixt and between (Turner, *The Forest of Symbols* 48).

The specific attention to the terms in the extract, such as neither/nor, both, and the archaic phrase 'betwixt and between,' is significant in defining the meaning of coercive liminality that is crucial to the discussion of George Saunders' short stories in this article. The ambiguity of the inter-structural period denotes the situation of "no longer/not yet" status (Deflem 13) for those experiencing liminality. George Saunders' selected short stories provide a hint on the in-between states of the characters where they neither belong to their self-identity/ideological standpoint nor completely align with the identity/ideology that is directly or indirectly enforced on them.

### **Capitalism, Consumerism and Authoritarianism: Reflections of Coercive Liminality**

The first set of short stories can be considered under the theme of capitalism because the general aim of the stories is to satirically criticise the improprieties of the authorities under the influence of capitalist ideology. The tools and methods used for coercion in the stories vary from threats to the injection of drugs. Liminality, in relation to the context of capitalist-influenced corporate structure, primarily denotes the suffering from work-life imbalance and workplace pressure. The struggle of the unnamed narrator in the amusement park of "CivilWarLand in Bad Decline" can be explored from

his hatred for his job, his commitment to his children, his desire to please his dissatisfied wife and the desire to do good, and the actual requirements of his job as Verisimilitude Inspector, which necessitates firing subordinates, hiring war criminals, and covering for said war criminals' bloody crimes.

(Jansen and Adams, "Good Work and Good Works" 4)

The choiceless plight of the narrator is highlighted by the author when he tells his wife to check the side of the bread for her butter as a reply when she calls him a bootlicker (Saunders, *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* 3). He was left with no option other than to stay with his authorities to do whatever was possible to solve the gang fight problems at the premises of the amusement park. He thinks about quitting the job but restrains himself from it as he knows the immense commitments and responsibilities in life. He says,

I think of my car payment. I think of how much Marcus and Howie love the little playhouse I'm still paying off. Once again I decided to eat my pride and sit tight.

(Saunders, *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* 2)

The narrator is found to be uncertain about his future as the ambiguity and anxiety in connection with his workspace had already made him stay in his liminal phase of life without making permanence in his decision. The liminal subjects in such situations of pressure and dilemma continue to behave differently from their ideological beliefs and self. Saunders symbolises this shift in the liminal subjects in "Pastoralia" where the caveman roast goats, squat or pretends to eat bugs in front of the guests (Saunders, *Pastoralia* 4). In doing so, the caveman aligns with the expectations of the authorities of the amusement park. This temporary adaptation is a result of his incapability to oppose the system as to how Janet managed to quit. The liminal existence of the caveman can be identified when he says that he has to admit that he does not feel the best about the things around him, though he doesn't feel it so bad. He negates the point that he has something to complain about the system and confirms that he does not complain as he thinks and speaks positive (Saunders, *Pastoralia* 1).

The in-between state of the characters represents the anxiety of the working class. It is because of the constrained space provided for them to enjoy their rights as employees and, moreover, as human beings. Todd's memorandum to his subordinates in "Exhortation" reflects the threat of possible

termination if the assigned works (of any kind) are not completed in accordance with the corporate company's requirements. He reminds them to "minimize the grumbling and self-doubt regarding tasks" (Saunders, *Tenth of December* 85) as it is highly recommended that the deeds of good/bad/indifferent as per the morals should not be dissected (85) due to the resulting situation where the work would be done either by the existing employee or someone who replaces them and gets the pay check (84).

When Martha replies, "Voluntary fling" (Saunders, *Tenth of December* 204) to Don Murray as an acceptance of his will, and when Ted admits the economic instability that makes him hide the secret of molestation, "My Chivalric Fiasco" reminds us about the intensity of the coercion experienced by the voiceless community that results in their silent acceptance of injustice and immorality even when they do not wish to be a part of it. In "The 400-Pound CEO" Jeffrey hates his authority for assigning overload work to him when it is late and others have left the place. He says he does not "expect decent treatment from someone who's installed a torture chamber in the corporate basement" (Saunders, *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* 49). In the words of Ding-Dong from "In Persuasion Nation" saying, "We just want to express ourselves the way we want to express ourselves" (Saunders, *In Persuasion Nation* 186) to the question asked by Jim -

Couldn't we all, working together, devise a more humane approach? An approach in which no one is humiliated, or hurt, or maimed, an approach in which the sacred things in life are no longer appropriated in the service of selling what are, after all, merely-  
(195)

reflects the common tone of dissatisfaction and opposition to the dominance that produces coercive liminality in them.

Consumerism, as discussed by George Saunders, can be considered as a subsidiary supporting element of capitalism. Through the persuasive tone of consumerist culture developed by the corporates, they aim for the same kind of domination and exploitation. Saunders presents certain symbolic elements in the stories related to the theme of consumerism to highlight the exercise of power and dominance. The product introduced in "I Can Speak!<sup>TM</sup>" assists babies to express their thoughts and feelings. But, in reality, the product speaks for the baby giving the illusion that the baby knows it (Saunders, *In Persuasion Nation* 5). The natural identity and capability of the baby are exploited to imbibe external assistance. It refers to the limitations that individuals face in expressing their self-inflicted

thoughts as a result of the dominance of society's power structures. The persuasive nature of such domination results in the loss of individuality, self-respect, and innateness. A similar tone of persuasion is the subject in "My Flamboyant Grandson" where the corporate system behaves like a totalitarian regime "going beyond insults to intelligence – comes in the form of the command 'shop till you drop'" (Cesaratto 81). The rejection and opposition of Mr Petrillo, the grandfather-character who struggles in the story, is identifiable in the words saying that he expected an America that has the right to speak and shout all the time, as groups and individual voices, even though most of them may be wrong (Saunders, *In Persuasion Nation* 22). Torturous and forceful persuasion of the power structures is represented through the tool of advertisements and promotions that has already turned out to control the interests and desires of the consumers. The situation of consumers, when likened to a general perspective, helps to delineate the effect of coerciveness presented through corporate agendas.

The act of subjugating the opposing voices makes the conditions worse by evoking coercive liminality in the powerless group of people. The authoritarian aspect behind the presence of coercive liminality can be traced to the short story "93990", where Saunders symbolises the test monkeys that are treated with antipathy and unethical behaviour during a scientific trial as the vulnerable group. Powerless people are particularly susceptible to neglect, abuse, exploitation, and violence (French et al. *Witness to the Young Republic*). Undoubtedly, the test monkeys do not wish to be treated in such inhumane conditions, but they are also helpless with no choice other than to be part of it. Conceiving Turner's theoretical perspective on such situations of torture and oppression in life, it has to be interpreted in real-life matters that they pass through a "state and process of mid-transition" (Turner, "Variations on a Theme of Liminality" 37).

Resembling the situation of Martha in "My Chivalric Fiasco", the tortured prisoner who is used as a test subject also submits himself to the dominant exhibition of the power of Abnesti by saying "acknowledge" (Saunders, *Tenth of December* 48) to the instructions, even though he points out the truth that he was not at the test centre by choice, but as a result of the crime he committed (54). It reveals his partial acceptance due to the opposing situations that caused a shift in his standpoint. Abnesti uses dosages that make the test subjects submit themselves to obeying the orders (75). The use of Darnkenfloxed™ makes them act in accordance with the requirements of the dominant authority. Similar inhumane behaviour that evokes coercive liminality is discussed in "The Semplica Girl Diaries"

where the Semplica Girls bought from third world countries are used as exhibits for materialistic enthusiasm. Due to the worsening conditions in their homeland, they are forced to adopt the slave-like identities enforced by their owners. The narrator describes Laotian (Tami) as having two sisters who are already in brothels; Moldovan (Gwen) as having a cousin who is a sex slave in Kuwait; Somali (Lisa) as having a tiny hut where her father and little sister died of AIDs; and Filipina (Betty) as having a family that cannot afford her brother's high school, as well as living with other three families in a tiny home (Saunder, *Tenth of December* 135). Their escape from a suitable situation makes it clear that they were not satisfied with their present situation of hanging them by their heads with unseen threads to connect each other.

### **Analytical Interpretation**

When evaluated through the theoretical lens of liminality, the textual references tend to suggest that the external dominant powers have a significant impact on the characters with sensitive qualities. They were unable to oppose and resist the oppressors' actions, making them victims of the darker sides of brutal ideologies such as capitalism, consumerism, and authoritarianism. The three thematic ideologies that classified the short stories expressed nearly identical forms of coercion on a group of people who were marginalised, voiceless, and subjugated. Though diverse in the contexts and themes discussed, the expression of coercive liminality in the victimised characters is prominent throughout the selected short stories. The working class, the powerless groups, the tortured, and enslaved characters represent people in society facing similar situations. The tortures of the dominant power structures can be seen as the authoritarianism exercised by certain groups over others.

The victimised section can be related to the situation of forced migrants, displaced refugees, political prisoners, slaves, unsatisfied employees, unconsented test subjects, etc. It is evident from the textual references that though they were provided with choices, they are unable to select the best that would suit to help them to move out of their liminal situations. If they were able to act according to their wishes and decisions, they would have been safe from getting into more trouble. However, the unfortunate circumstances of the characters mainly associated with financial and personal liabilities limited their choices and prevented them from making such safe decisions. Thus, they continued to be in their in-between state possessing instability in their identities. The separation of the characters from their self-identity that highlighted their interests and their eventual

existence of not being able to completely adapt to the identity enforced on them by the power structures of society creates the 'betwixt and between' condition that leads to the situation of coercive liminality. Saunders drags the characters to transit from their pre-liminal to the post-liminal phase by projecting their liminal experiences that directly and indirectly affect their existence. Therefore, this paper, with the utilisation of the textual references and theoretical discussion, states the argument that George Saunders' short stories are directly and indirectly interlinked with each other using the single thread of liminality.

## Conclusion

Under the thematic representation of capitalism, consumerism, and authoritarianism, these short stories project dual standpoints of the characters due to their unsettled anxiety and uncertainty. "The states of being or states of mind, as well as physical spaces, as we pass from a period of stability to one of ambiguity or undergo some kind of transformation" (Jewkes 376) are identified as liminality. At certain points in the stories, the characters that are pressurised to be in the coercion of their authorities or the system that controls them go through "structural invisibility, ambiguity, and neutrality" (Turner, *The Forest of Symbols* 49) due to their "submissiveness and silence" (Turner, "Liminality and Communitas" 103) that results in the absence of a definite and fixed status (106). Being in instability regarding a fixed state of mind, the liminal personae possess a condition of no status (49) and become equal to the state of a tabula rasa (103). When analysed for their experience of coercive liminality, these characters develop an intense comradeship, egalitarianism, and homogeneity (Turner, "Liminality and Communitas" 95) that ties them together under the term *communitas*. Victor Turner defines it in terms of rituals and tribal culture as an unstructured and undifferentiated community of equal individuals who are submitted to the authority of the ritual elders (96).

The anti-structural essence possessed by the victims of oppression produces an effect of anomie, alienation, and angst (Turner, "Liminal to Liminaloid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual" 78). Such cases of being in in-between states are caused by external and internal reasons, where it affects the production of ambiguity, paradox, and confusion (Turner, *The Forest of Symbols* 48). This can be termed as a binary occurrence of being in transition without a proper state as well as having the status of a state (Turner, "Liminality and Communitas" 107). The coercive liminality experienced by the characters results in the swing between positions, causing a condition of not being able to situate themselves with their self-identity and also not

being in a position to be completely submissive to the identity enforced by the dominant power structures. Thus, the major finding of the research paper revolves around the transitional nature of human beings from one particular situation to the next. Here, the specificity is that it is initiated as a result of external forces.

The essentiality of the practice of empathy, compassion, and kindness advocated by George Saunders thus becomes significant in this context for its influence to eliminate/reduce the effect of coercive liminality in the victims of similar domination. In short, it can be concluded by stating the observation that human beings are both structural and anti-structural entities who grow through the anti-structural characteristics and conserve themselves through the structure (Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors* 298) where the different forms of liminality become essential and inevitable.

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