

REDUCTION TO THE ABSURDITY IN THE WORKS OF GEORGE SAUNDERS

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Abstract

George Saunders the master of short stories in America has accumulated many accolades concerning his works which have been laced with absurdity, consumerism, surrealism, capitalism, and neo liberalism of contemporary American society. The present article mainly focuses on Reductio Ad Absurdum in the works of Saunders. Saunders delves into the problems of society and tries to answer them rather satirically using absurdity as a means to target the evils.

Keywords: *Absurd, satire, America, sympathy, argument.*

How does one save girls being swept away by the strong current and on being mediocre at swimming? Is it by jumping into the river? This will be certainly ridiculous because he will be dead. How is man castigated for ogling at every woman passing by him? Is it by being compassionate? How is a man chastised for looking at the kids in his underwear? kill him? This becomes silly if he is effaced out of the people's memory. How does a man earn his livelihood? Is it by showing cock? This is ludicrous if he is making out money by this mean obscenity.

How about inventing a scale that rates the gender of each person so that each one marries suited to his or her own rating. But how to invent such a scale? what are the methods? Thus, scaling one's gender is absurd, how does one can rate or measure abstract things which can never be measured out quantitatively. How does one decorate his house: is it by hanging the girls in his yard? If he does so this becomes so weird and he becomes inhuman, void of righteousness and sympathy. How about a dead aunt, coming back to life within the graveyard and returning to her house to do what she has missed out on and the desires she has not quenched? What does a cave dweller do to save himself? Is it right to stay back not wanting to face the crude realities of the present world? Thus, his world

becomes so wild that it turns out to be a human going back to the primitive stage. He becomes an animal and loses his conscious being if he obliges to move out of the cave.

All this is plausible with Saunders as he embraces the absurdity of inventing a cruel world where the human is hunted and the hunter. The cruelty with which he embellishes his short stories is freaking and yet sometimes unconvincing. He adorns his world with lost, deprived, dejected, and forsaken identities. Saunders, an epitome of absurdity, reveres the inauthentic detail of disgrace and disfranchised human world with ridiculous, illogical, and inviable happenings. The absurdity can be kernelled out not only in his works but in his life itself. The master of short stories, Saunders, doesn't seem to consider himself an authentic figure in literature but compares himself to a welder. In an interview with the Wag Chats, Saunders tagged himself with a welder setting out to design dresses. He is a welder with odd background: a Geophysical prospector, a doorman, a technical writer, and a knuckle puller. He claims the originality of his work dates back to the times of struggles of survival with the crouching responsibility of his family upon him. Certainly, he is a stupendous figure in the contemporary literary world who welds his stories with irony, satire, and especially his trademark style absurdity.

The critics like Charles Holdefer, in referring back to the David Foster Wallace comment, “Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naïve, anachronistic” considered Saunders as a new literary rebel who rejected post-modern irony. He went on to assume that Saunders would even be called a FIRPO, the name which is named after Saunders’s character. The meaning of FIRPO is not known but can easily be sensed through the short story “The End of FIRPO in the World”. The name symbolizes a child crazy and revolting. The readers might think Saunders, a crazy maniac, with uncanny characters and archetypes of authors whose writings are very complex with newer fathoms indiscernible to comprehend. Other writers like Adam Kelly joined him in the new genre of writing titled “The New Sincerity”. He supported his claim that Saunders’s use of first-person narration supports his New Sincerity element, “...allowing him to explore the limits of expressive subjectivity, ethical consciousness, and detached spectatorship under neoliberal conditions”. (49)

The questions that have been asked at the beginning of this article and the assumed responses are rather recalcitrant marking weird farcical elements emanating in the Reductio Ad Absurdum which means reduction to absurdity. Wikipedia defines it as saying, “...is the form of argument that attempts to establish a claim by showing that the opposite scenario would lead to absurdity or contradiction”. Saunders’s logic which he uses in the stories is clueless and ends in absurdity. In fact, Saunders’s argument is very passive like his character Jeff under neo-liberalistic conditions. It is a passive rebellion that Saunders concentrates on the characters victimized and asks the victims to be kind rather than pointing out their inhuman tendencies. Adam Kelly says affirmatively, “Neoliberal capitalism does not require active permission or support in order to function, but is “served” simply by passive and docile acknowledgment” (49). Saunders argues for the downtrodden and satirizes against inhumanity which is prevalent under a liberal attitude. His answer lies in his empathetic vision of the people who work in delusive kindness be rated by corporate illegitimacy. The answers which Saunders offers to the questions of inhumanity are cocooned with absurdity.

Art to Saunders has a higher purpose and in an interview with *Publishers Weekly*, Saunders highlighted the true purpose of the fiction, “Art should comfort the oppressed and oppress the comfortable” (Bahr 322). Saunders speaks of art as the black box which takes upon charge to change the reader. In using the black box, a writer may invent absurd material and that is accepted (Mr. Vonnegutin Sumatra). The absurd material and technological inventions which Saunders invented went on to create a great volume of effect on its readers such that the writers like Junot Diaz extolled Saunders:

There’s no one who has a better eye for the absurd and dehumanizing parameters of our current culture of the capital. But then the other side is how the cool rigor of his fiction is counterbalanced by this enormous compassion. Just how capacious his moral vision is sometimes gets lost because few people cut as hard or deep as Saunders does. (Lovell).

Saunders’s eye penetrates deep into the life and shoots a glance at it because living life itself is absurd. In fact, the whole human race in the universe is like the readers in the black box, the human race doesn’t know the happenings between entry and exit and we come altered. Living in these troubling times when the doubts about the existence of a divine being perforated the faith of the believers and particularly the absence of the meaning in the life recounts to absurdism. The unrealistic settings and happenings which loom over his page hint back to his saying, “artistic uncoupling from the actual”. Joshua Ferris highlighted the unique style of Saunders in treating absurdism. He elucidated it rather elaboratively in his introduction to the book *Civil War Land in Bad Decline*:

[W]hile Saunders does satirize, or, in other words, render the real absurd, he also carefully and lovingly and artfully renders the absurd real, which is a much harder trick to pull off and, once done, moves the so-called satirist out of the pigeonhole and in to the open air of the first-rate artist. (xiv)

Saunders characters live in a gruesome, unwanted, and uninhabited world of dystopian settings. Saunders’s version of satire is to bring down the flags of capitalistic society and write on the flags the words of sympathy. In other words, Saunders gives a knee-jerk to the comfortable taste of incongruities with

which contemporary American society is suffering. We laugh at the characters at the same time feel saddened by the tragedy which befalls them. In “‘To Soften the Heart’: George Saunders, Postmodern Satire, and Empathy” (2016), Neeper has written about satire which he calls as an “absurd alternative” which he replaces satire saying the only option to change or to generate sympathy with the characters likewise the replicas living in the world:

With his post-modern proclivities, Saunders burlesques the quotidian horrors and degradations visited upon characters in a nearly parallel universe to our own contemporary American life, but without even the faintest possibility of prescriptive remedies, instead supplanting the logos of traditional satire, the reasonableness of implied correction, with the pathos of empathetic recognition, an absurd alternative, but the *only* alternative, given the grotesqueries of Saunders’s fictional worlds and hapless characters that inhabit them.(Neeper 286-287, italics original)

In his review for the Guardian, Adam Begley regarding the previous works said, “Saunders’s bitterly funny stories here and in his extraordinary debut, *CivilWar Land in Bad Decline*(1996),succeed in squeezing meaning and emotional resonance out of absurd, post-real predicaments. His satirical jabs are sharp and scary, but also unexpectedly touching”.

The primitive man hid in the caves where he found his security and life. Sarcastically, the modern being has been so submissive that he voluntarily leads himself to the cave of corporate authorities. The cave, on the contrary, is not the guarantee to the contemporary man, because it’s not an assurance of life in the darkness where he had to go the extra mile to save his family by providing them with all the desired goods. Comically, modern man has been subsidized as an animal to another man to give him pleasure from an aesthetic glimpse. Saunders satirizes extremely the contemporary man in his second book *Pastoralia*. Reductio ad absurdum can be ferreted out in the book that the main narrator acts like the then primitive man of an uncivilized and barbaric world for his survival. America, the land of fulfilling dreams, is deeply satirized to the core. Every citizen can avail what he wants and live a free life but when looking at things deeply, the man

seems to be living in a cave of America detached and neglected where theme parks are the superficial highlights to the outsider. The modern man, the cave dweller, had to dwell in it where there is no escape, and if he tries to escape it intends a clear conscious death planned by him.

David Heubert draws out the comparison between the main character of the novel to that of animals. He compares the theme park to a human zoo. He says in “*Pastoralia*” as a Human Zoo:

The performers of *Pastoralia*, like those peoples whose formerly broad and flourishing territories have been reduced to ecologically and economically impoverished reservations, have been compelled to sacrifice their traditional relation to animals and the land in order to conform to the strictures of a hegemonic bureaucracy. (108)

The boredom and the monotonous living such as job does find it too difficult to live according to their whims. Linda who replaces Janet eats the real bug is a fine example of reduction to the absurdity. The narrator finds it too absurd and says, “It gets old but she doesn’t stop, all the time she’s grunting, and once or twice I could swear she actually catches and eats an actual small bug” (65). The real bug stands as a metaphor for the indiscriminatory choice for the people who don’t try to act in the other possible way. They live in acting which is the source of inauthenticity. Saunders set his wagon against those who live inauthentically who try to impress their authorities and live for their selfish motifs. Linda thinks that she is acting authentically forgetting that she is modern, and goes back to the primitive stage of living losing her consciousness.

“The Falls” is another glimpse that characterizes absurdity in a distinctive style which leaves the readers in a tone of bafflement questioning interiorly the actual meaning inherent in Saunders’s conclusion. The readers find no conclusion because the reader is left clueless and unanchored, this thinking is normally obvious in an open-ended conclusion. There is some kind of irony or some sort of humor in the conclusion that could be discerned because the action of Morse, the main protagonist, was reduced to absurdity. Not giving himself any other linear thought of saving the girls who were about to be drowned, is troubled by

consciousness. The dual consciousness which he suffers from rises from two spheres: the one is with himself who questions himself of those possible actions which he intends and the consequences and the other is with his wife, he becomes his wife in thought and analyses her reaction if he doesn't save the girls. Divergently, if he takes the chance to jump to save the girls, he would be surely dead because he doesn't know swimming. If he does it, it is an act of suicide. In the tumult of this troubled consciousness, Morse prefers to jump into the river only to save himself from the consciousness. Adam Kelly explores this story given consciousness and tells this consciousness is a special reference to the "New Sincerity". Morse's action makes some illogical and ridiculous assertion which stands to be absurd because Morse's reaction is a result of an imaginary conversation with his wife. The reader finds it difficult to digest such an ending and compels him to think a lot better about what might be happened to Morse. The reader would find a smile at the absurdity which Morse has taken a chance to be part of it.

"The Semplica Girl Diaries", a fabulous story, is narrated through a father of two kids who accounts his details through a diary format. He feels dopey and low when compared to his neighbors and friends in terms of wealth and status. In times of severe financial crisis, he wins a lottery, sarcastically, instead of developing his poor financial background, he decides to throw a birthday party. The basic plan of the party includes Semplica Girls, who are from the Third World Countries, are to hang like lamps in the yards of rich people. Their brains are connected through a micro line which helps them not to get separated and to be hung like a lamp. The girls willingly submit themselves to such cruelty to provide for their families back in their countries. Saunders has mastered himself in telling us the unreal with tactful technique in a compelling way that convinces the readers to think beyond normalcy. The girls were commodified into some decorative objects which would adorn their yards. This is already obvious with the heroines pictured in the movies. The women were considered as sexual goods to which the audience might get attracted. In the adjacent view, the SGs are displayed for the mere visual pleasure of the audience and feel alien over the pain of the SGs

that they were enduring. The reduction to absurdity with which this story is attached might propel a question related to the treatment of immigrants. Then, what should be the treatment of immigrants in an unknown world like America which is otherwise called paradise? Saunders answers this question with his unique style of highlighting the guests and the host countries' tenderness towards the guests in an absurdist way. He puts it in rather comically such that the guests are known to be laborers to develop their country economically. In an interview with Heather Sappenfield, Saunders said, "So I put a so-called "absurd element" in because I think it is the best way of describing the way life really is, and really feels, when we can momentarily shuck off our habituation". (More Scope & Kindness & Power in My Books an interview with George Saunders).

For Saunders, his stories with an absurd element are displayed on the canvas of world literature with a distorted reality. In an interview with Saunders, Debora Treisman said that SGs are a metaphor for the poor immigrants who work low-paid jobs to support their families and to survive. Further, she asked Saunders if that is what Saunders tries to explore. Saunders confirmed it and said that the girls are symbols for the oppressed (Treisman). Saunders relates these SGs to that of immigrants who go to Dubai to work and to provide for their families. He calls these workers real-life SGs. The narrator of this story feels that he is incapable to provide or making family status hold equal to peers. Saunders feels he is many parts of the narrator being the father of two kids struggling to earn status. However, Saunders compares the actual happenings to the slavery days in the U.S. The younger daughter of the narrator feels sympathetic towards these SGs. She cuts loose these SGs from the micro line, and the SGs vanish away from the scene. We do not know why the SGs left or where they headed to. Eva, the younger daughter of the narrator can be said as the alter ego of Saunders because he was one of the speakers who stressed kindness towards the people and all alike. The story ends on an absurd note when the narrator thinks of SGs and their background. He is not different from them because of the common thread with which SGs and the narrator is pondering over their families. The SGs struggle for existence where

as the narrator struggles for status. The confusion can never be resolved until one learns to be happy with oneself and the limited means.

There is more to add to such absurdity such as in the story "Adams" Adams is killed by Roger, the reason for his killing strikes the reader as silly without a perfect reason. Saunders has directed his guns from American Capitalism towards American political consciousness. He wonderfully dramatized the turn of political events that troubled America. The trouble with which America is pained is due to the fear of terrorism and other nations which support it.

American foreign policy with other nations made it not the superpower because it was caught up in sheer anxiety. "Adams" is narrated by Roger who was scornful towards his enemy. The enemy is a neighbor who looks at his children in his underwear. Thinking of revenge, Roger says, "I wonk him in the back of the head and down he goes"(211). Roger was being troubled by the constant fears which were imaginative, unsettling with the idea of him looking at his kids, he once again goes to wonk him. Not feeling justified in his revenge and the look of hatred Adams passes causes much trouble to Rogers. He goes to Adams's room in the absence of his family and steals steak knives, butter knives, knife sharpener, two-letter openers, and a heavy paperweight. He tries to sleep better but he was once again worried about the things present in his room such as paint, thinner, and household chemicals. Once again, he goes to Adams's house but this time, he faces much retaliation from the family. Finally, Rogers sets Adams's family and his house on fire and leaves from there. This is very disturbing to the reader who might not understand why did Roger do that. Once again, the crazy ending makes the reader or made witness to the sheer absurdity which is played in the short story. However, this story was written aftermath 9/11 incident where America was threatened by the terrorists. Keeping all these incidents, Saunders has written the story, which the real-life beings altering their names a little. For instance, Adams is Saddam, and Roger is George. W. Bush the then president. He wreathed his fire on Iraq as it supported terrorist action. Hawkins said:

George Saunders wrote *In Persuasion Nation* in 2006, a more politically charged time than

Infinite Jest's pre-9/11 pseudo-innocence. Fear and distrust of the outsider had gained a powerful voice in the rise of hyper-politicized cable news programming and the Shock and Awe campaigns of George W. Bush's War on Terror. (16)

A question seems to arise in the mind of Saunders regarding the detection of gender proximity and helping them marry their equals. However, this becomes so absurd as it projects so silly to find out the exact measure of gender. Saunders cleverly puts this in his style by launching it in the reduction to the absurdity. The story "My Amendment" is a satirical piece on same-sex marriages. Saunders has written this short story as a reaction against the policies and conditions put forward by the Bush government which framed a constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriages. The notion of absurdity that was present in the story is that Saunders devices a scale to find out gender rating which he calls as, "Manly Scale of Absolute Gender". (173) Through this scale if a man scores '8' he is rated as a man, and if he scores '0' he is rated as a neuter gender. The idea behind this invention is to find out the best match and solve the problem of same marriages. This is an indirect attack on the government which imposes certain conditions on their nature of sex.

"The Barber's Unhappiness" echoes humor with absurdity pointing at the human ailments. Saunders relates his true experience behind the story. He says he saw a barber who usually ogled at women and Saunders wanted to give him a fitting reply through this story. Any other writer put the barber in a humiliating way and would tease the barber until the writer's hatred extinguished. At the beginning of the story, Saunders tried to put him negatively but didn't feel the story going forward. So, Saunders changed to his masterly style in creating sympathy against the same character by taking out one of the toes of his foot. The punishment which he wants to give to the character is not the punishment but rather understanding the barber and his problem.

He gives a deep jab into the human tendency which raveled against the innocent and ignored. The story "Sea-Oak" is an adequate answer to the American Dream which is still believed to be true. It is a story of a ghost (aunt Bernie) who comes alive and

suggests the narrator earn more money ignoring a moralistic attitude. The narrator is a male stripper who shows his privates to the group of ladies. His argument is laid open to the world through the displaying of the narrator's cock for his survival, which is a mockery against the government which neglects the case of an individual. Reductio ad absurdum, a significant feature of Saunders's works: the absurd endings which he offered in the stories and particularly to some questions like the people who engage themselves in the service of capitalism and the people who are much attached with consumerism. If "Pastoralia" is a fitting reply to capitalism, "Semplica Girl Diaries" is a mockery against consumerism.

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