

THE PATRIARCH'S BALLS: CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS, VIOLENCE, AND DYSTOPIA IN GEORGE SAUNDERS' VISION OF CONTEMPORARY AMERICA

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89

Every day I understand more deeply how violent we are.
Violent to others and violent to ourselves.
(Olmstead 2013)

In late 19th Century America, the Patriarch's Balls united the wealthy New York elite. The Society of the Patriarch organized lavish balls to foster a sense of self-satisfaction at belonging to the society of "The Four Hundred", namely those who mattered as against the rest who plainly did not. In 21st Century America, the tables have been turned and the class-conscious are less able to enjoy the fruits of their labor sans guilt (or the realization of a nasty pun). As Slavoj Žižek asserts in *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, contemporary America's "culture of capital" is marked by the systemic violence that allows the West to maintain its First World status and North American writer George Saunders, for one, knows it. This paper will look at how Saunders returns to those East Coast, greater New York communities in the 21st Century, communities that are now more egalitarian and "open" yet just as concerned about keeping up with the Joneses. Writing their stories with a dystopic twist, he intimately explores the anxieties that plague their communities, while also maintaining a sense of the universal in his work that allows for its wider interpretation and relevance to the American national identity in general. Saunders writes as the moral compass of a community that while successful

according to American standards cannot help but feel all the dirtier after “the help” have cleaned the kitchen. In this paper we will discuss some of the techniques Saunders uses to explain the violence at the heart of American life, from the most obvious—the image of the Semplica Girl—to his more subtle use of analogy, co-opted discourse, and embedded narrative. Drawing on Slavoj Žižek’s tripartite notion of violence, this paper reveals how the Saunders short story “The Semplica Girl Diaries” engages with the latent violence inherent in America’s post-colonial capitalist system. The paper aims to show that Saunders’ figure of the Semplica Girl metonymically embodies the violence of outsourced slave labor while invoking colonialist America; whereas, Saunders’ protagonist is the fruit of a moronic confluence of modern-day liberal guilt and historical colonialist desire.

“The Semplica Girl Diaries” tells the story of a few unusual weeks in the life of a petit-bourgeois American family whose class anxiety leads them to fear not meeting the expectations of their community. That is until they win “TEN GRAND” from a scratch-off lottery ticket and can join the Establishment in their dystopic admiration of the Semplica Girls. Narrating the story in his diaries is the naïve, but caring family guy who “having just turned forty [...] embark[s] on grand project of writing every day in this new black book just got at OfficeMax” (Saunders 2013: 109). After this characteristically satirical yet realistic point of departure Saunders reveals the budding writer’s motives: a desire to share with future generations, family and otherwise, what life “was really like” (2013: 109). However, just two pages later the unnamed narrator hides the discovery of a “dead large mouse or small squirrel crawling with maggots” in his family garage (2013: 111). Hiding certain ugly truths is merely another chore that is necessary to maintain the discourse of optimism, a discourse essential to the American psyche and its uncanny ability to normalize the absurd. Shortly after, the narrator also hides a subsequent moment of sadness looking at his house, feeling it inadequate (2013: 112). This feeling of inadequacy will persist and become essential to the conflict as it provides impetus for the family’s hegemonic aspirations, or social striving. In fact, it is the confluence of the protagonist’s feelings of inadequacy (as a father) and a familial urge to “keep up with the Jones” that leads him to the Semplica Girls. In the book *Violence and the Sacred*, René Girard unpacks the mimetic nature of desire, which he claims is always “directed toward an object desired by [a] model” (1972: 147). The lavish and over-the-top birthday party of their daughter’s classmate becomes the scene of the narrator’s initial identification with a model worthy of his desire. Finding the family, their home, and their garden enviable the narrator adopts the patriarch of the wealthier family of “refined taste” as the center of his own mimetic desire. The scene also becomes the location for the initial encounter with the Semplica Girls (though Saunders does not initially reveal what they are) which the narrator then incorporates as the object to be

mimetically desired. Recounting the party, the protagonist writes, “Very depressing birthday party today at home of Lilly’s friend Leslie Torrini. House is mansion where Lafayette once stayed: now their ‘Fun Den’” (2013: 113). Soon after, he sums up the experience feeling pathetic: “Do not really like rich people, as they make us poor people feel dopey and inadequate. Not that we are poor. I would say that we are middle. We are very very lucky. I know that. But still...” (2013: 119). In this way readers are introduced to an unreliable narrator inhabiting an ominously recognizable world of bourgeoisie America, concerned with maintaining appearances and feeling the ravenous pull of mimetic desire, the urge to “keep up with the Joneses”.

As a point of departure and for the sake of clarity it is necessary to further discuss Saunders and class representation. It is important to note that while the affluence of the families represented in the Saunders short story “The Semplica Girl Diaries” is moderate compared to the families of the Patriarch’s Balls: the comparison of the naivety with which prior generations of Americans enjoyed their wealth to today’s sense of self-aware guilt is telling as it marks a critical change in American culture (and perhaps in Western culture in general). Most critics categorize Saunders as essentially a writer of working class Middle America, or, pursuing that line of thought, the direct descendent of Ray Carver or better yet, Kurt Vonnegut—inheriting their literary project. However, that would be a gross simplification of what Saunders does. As did Toni Morrison, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and Cormac McCarthy, Saunders continues to grapple with America’s violent imagination, a mythology astutely articulated by American intellectual Richard Slotkin when he pronounced, “that the myth of regeneration through violence [was] the structuring metaphor of the American experience” (1973: 5). As critics David Rando and Sarah Pogell have pointed out, aesthetically, Saunders borrows and assembles techniques from both high and low art, from both realism and postmodernism. Thematically, he is able to encompass the sliding scale that is class in First World countries, as well. So that even though one might argue that “The Semplica Girl Diaries” is another story representing the middle class, that would be an error, as the story in great measure problematizes class in America and in the First World in so far as Saunders endeavors to establish the relativity of socioeconomic standing not only within America’s boundaries, contrasting one family’s expectations to another’s, but also peripherally by making comparisons with the others who populate and work at the margins.

To speak meaningfully about those who ‘work at the margins,’ it is helpful to have a term with which to synthesize the presence of the Semplica Girls in the story. In sociology as well as in conflict and peace studies, we often find the term ‘structural violence’ cropping up in the research papers. As used by peace studies scholar

Johan Galtung, it signifies the presence of violence arbitrated without a clear actor and thus may also include or refer to institutional violence, cultural violence, or social injustice. While this term is certainly useful and has since its penning promoted the burgeoning of various fields of study in the Humanities and Social Sciences focused on structural violence as pertaining to gender, class, and race, it will not be the preferred term for the current paper. We will be using a term that takes as its point of departure structural violence but is more astute when it comes to naming the author of this violence. Like ‘structural violence’, Slavoj Žižek’s “systemic violence” refers to forms of ‘objective violence’¹ that while not necessarily visible, hold sway over society to a large extent through its systems and institutions. Nevertheless, Žižek moves quickly to specify the actor of this violence as Capitalism. Žižek explains systemic violence as: “the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems” (2008: 2). A few pages later Žižek clarifies, “[it is] the violence inherent in a system: not only direct physical violence, but also the more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation, including the threat of violence” (2008: 8). While both Žižek and Galtung go far towards identifying the insidious presence of a supposedly invisible violence, it is Saunders’ story that provides a more tangible representation of systemic violence in short story form. This point of departure implies a certain kind of reading; and our particular take on the story is that it can be best read through the guise of a “cultural artifact” or “socially symbolic act” in the sense that Fredric Jameson so infamously upholds in *The Political Unconscious*, claiming that “there is nothing that is not social and historical—indeed, that everything is ‘in the last analysis political’” (1981: 5). Clearly, Saunders’ story is neither the first nor the last analysis of its kind and many narratives have related the exploits of colonialism, exploitation, and the domination of one culture or worldview over another. Nevertheless, Saunders joins the ranks of the few who have undertaken such an analysis from a locus within the dominant country and with such a touching and profoundly prosaic simplicity. He has already spawned look-alikes, e.g. Charles Yu. The SGs are literally the metonymic representation of the commodification of life and living beings by and through capitalism. The girls strewn on the line are a part alluding to the whole of the history and actuality of migrant/illegal/slave labor and the subjugation of marginal bodies for the use and benefit of the dominant classes—a part of what Foucault refers to as “the asymmetries of power” (1975: 223). Later on in the analysis the implications of the girls’ status as beings quite literally “strewn on a line” will be unpacked. For now, as in the story structure developed by Saunders himself, a sense of their looming and mysterious presence here will have to suffice. The family, on the other hand, is at times victim of and at other times beneficiary of Pierre

Bourdieu's "symbolic violence". That is, the power and honor mistakenly ascribed to status when its real source is economic and cultural capital and it authorizes the perpetuation of its practices and resulting stratification of the social space (Weininger 2002: 145). They are victims and perpetrators of what critic Ana Manzanás calls "the society of sameness and accumulation" in which the SGs represent the "dominant model of life" as much as, if not more than, their predecessor, "the assembly line of the early decades of the twentieth century" (2014: 5-6).

Aesthetically, "The Semplica Girl Diaries" works on readers in ways subtle and yet jolting. Saunders employs a variety of techniques to reveal the violent 'heart of darkness' at the opaque center of affluent American life. This opacity shows as in a glass darkly a narcissistic America that finds itself embarrassingly impotent to adjust or deflect the reflection away from its unwanted margins. Similarly, the narrator in the story is unable to maintain the discourse of optimism however hard he tries. Although obfuscated this mirror represents a growing postmodern sense of self-awareness about inequality and violence in the North Atlantic societies, a subject we return to later in this paper. To make matters worse, this violence is accepted, though considered deplorable, because it is the very system upon which America was and is constructed. This appears in "The Semplica Girl Diaries" via the threatening presence of a sub-textual narrative—a doppelgänger narrative of violence and fear—juxtaposed with the story being told, lurking just below the surface at the level of the subconscious like a nightmare, or at a subterranean level, like the basement of a suburban home. In particular, Saunders builds an extended analogy between the Semplica Girl diary and historical slave-owner diaries. This similarity rises to the surface in poignant moments offering semantic clues. When the Semplica Girls escape, they are described as "connected via microline like chain gang" (2013: 155). In another example, during oldest daughter Lilly's birthday party—what should be the happy, domestic scene of a family celebration—the children play a game of "crack the whip" (2013: 134). Although a real children's game, in the context of the story and seen against the backdrop of the line of Semplica Girls swaying in unison as did punished slaves, the name can only be read as a satirical allusion to the flogging of slaves. This analogous story of slavery from the "naïve" colonialist perspective is arguably more disturbing than when told from the slave perspective. The family's indifference, and, moreover, pride in the SGs agonizing existence marks the party with violence. This extended analogy with colonialist slave owner narratives is also present in the characters' obsession with their yards. Their overabundant admiration for their lawns is not unlike the colonialist's pruning of the plantation. In fact, the SGs' presence can be equated to the mandatory spectacle of human property working on the horizon of the colonialist estate. Saunders acknowledges having read slave owner and abolitionist diaries during the writing of "The Semplica Girl Diaries" (2013a). One can

imagine that Saunders' story imitates the tone of quotidian normalcy with which the slave owners went about their daily habits on the plantation: at nine in the morning, breakfast, at ten, study Latin, and, at noon, a slave lashing.

In his book on violence previously mentioned, Slavoj Žižek takes as a point of departure a childhood story about the Russian philosopher Nikolai Lossky (2008: 9). Lossky and his family were members of the Russian bourgeoisie exiled during the Bolshevik revolution. As a boy Lossky could not understand why he was the object of scathing remarks at school or why the others seemingly wanted to destroy his comfortable and normal way of life. What problem was there with the family's servants, nannies, and love of the arts? Žižek argues that the boy was blind to the systemic violence latent in the social arrangement beneficial to him —like those slave owners that had normalized even the subjective violence of life on the plantation mentioned above. Similarly, in "The Semplica Girl Diaries" the latent violence beneficial to wealthy American families is realized and played out through the Semplica Girls. While most of the family feigns naivety in order to legitimate their middle class desires, the Semplica Girls are a constant reminder of the violence used to maintain and secure their position. The Semplica Girls are a specter, an embodiment of the modern-day version of the historical structures of systemic violence that loom over the postcolonial world as sustained after-effects. The Semplica Girls bring to the fore those mechanisms Foucault describes as being "on the underside of the law, a machinery that is both immense and minute, which supports, reinforces, multiplies the asymmetry of power" (Foucault 1975: 223) as well as "those 'sciences' that give it a respectable face" (1975: 223). The Semplica Girls remind us of the proximity of a bloody past and an equally troubling present; one that relegates the violence at its center to its margins in an incredible exercise of prestidigitation whereby a profit is made thanks to the illusion of distance and peripherality.

The ghost-like apparition of the SGs in their white, flowing garb over the yards of American middle class families might well suggest a kind of modern-day Dickensian Ghost of Christmas Past that similarly brings this out-sourced guilt back to center:

There in the dark, fifteen (I counted) SGs hanging silently, white smocks in moonlight. Breathtaking. Wind picks up, they go off at a slight angle, smocks and hair (long, flowing, black) assuming same angle. Incredible flowers (tulips, roses, something bright orange, long stalky things of white clusters) shaking in wind with paper-on-paper sound. From inside, flute music. Makes one think of ancient times and affluent men of those times building great gardens, roaming through while holding forth on philosophy, bounty of earth having been lassoed for the pleasure of etc. (Saunders 2013: 121)

This comparison, of course, would brand our narrator (and his peers) as a kind of Scrooge. However, while an exaggeration, this is not wholly surprising when the identity of the Semplica Girl is later revealed as girls from developing countries employed as garden streamers in the yards of affluent American families. What could more powerfully symbolize the love of power above the love of fellow human beings? And what better reminder of that anniversary than young girls strewn around the yard as decoration. Here the Ghost of Christmas Past would be redundant. The dehumanization of the Semplica Girls as products and docile bodies that can be bought, sold, and strung out on a line as an adornment is mirrored by their place in the narrative—they are not even characters in their own right. In our diarist's account they are purely background, never really stepping into the foreground and speaking only in indecipherable whispers.

Here we pick up the loose end in our comparison of the modern sense of guilty self-awareness in the face of affluence with historical naivety. In the continuation of the description provided by the narrator of his initial sighting of the SGs in the quotation above, he writes, "Wind stops, everything returns to vertical. From across lawn: soft sighing, smattering of mumbled phrases. Perhaps saying goodnight? Perhaps saying in own lingo, gosh that was some strong wind" (Saunders 2013: 121). Here we can see the difference between our modern day narrator and the slave owners in their diaries. The modern day narrator seems to know the SGs are people even if dehumanized and serving as lawn ornaments. In trying to interpret their signs, he displays an at least minimal comprehension and awareness of their humanity and possibly their subjugation. Yet his perspective is limited showing little or no understanding of causality as the story progresses. He seems incapable of—or positions his narration in such a way as to avoid—offering meaning to his readers, especially concerning the reality of the SG trade. The construction of this limited perspective adds another layer of intertextuality to the already layered scene, one in which the narration displays commonalities with the slave narrative form: "To varying degrees all slave narratives are conditioned by the narrator's partial understanding of his situation [...] He is a blind receiver whose perspective on the motive behind all the demands and actions which govern his life have been short circuited" (Willis 1985: 202). Unlike the slave owners whose stance on why the slaves were only 3/5 human was justified by law, Saunders' narrator simply avoids providing a realistic frame for the SGs subhuman conditions. It is common knowledge that in the past, wealthy planter aristocracy effectively conceptualized slaves as property or animal livestock in the same way as they would a pig or a cow. Again, this is not to say that the slave owners somehow occupied moral high ground on account of this belief. Both groups, the modern and the historical, had their delusions that allowed them to sustain a sense of morality in the face of the unethical. Rather, the point here is similar to the one made by the

anecdote about the Patriarch's Balls; part of modernity is a sense of self-aware guilt about perpetuating inequality and benefiting from it. There are no more Nikolai Losskys. The modern day affluent class is aware that they benefit from the domination of the poor and working classes of the world and that they live at arm's length from its margins, even if, as in the case of Saunders' narrator, they simply try to avoid it. Let us return for a moment to Saunders' use of a limited, or naïve, narrative voice for his main speaker in the story. We have compared it with both the intentionally limited perspective of the historical slave owners (shored up as it were with support from the law) as well as with the ostensibly avoidant gaze of the modern-day affluent class (trying to divert their attention from unsightly realities). This wide-ranging comparison makes it even more important to clarify that *the literary use* of a similarly restrictive point of view in actual, historical slave diaries had quite different motives; specifically, the authors of the slave narratives we have today wrote in a limited point-of-view to dodge allegations that the white abolitionists were truly the ones writing the diaries (even if they were on occasion). Also, the limited narrative lens was used at times to defamiliarize images of the slave trade to which contemporaries would have been desensitized (Benito and Manzanos 1994: 40).

96

Saunders' stories can often appear at first glance comical and absurd, yet their messages require audiences to reexamine cultural notions that they may feel as intimately as their "second skin". Saunders compels readers to confront the realities of their societies while urging them to continue onwards towards individual responsibility and purpose given that current, prevalent methods of confronting those same realities can echo the absurdity of the condition itself. To illustrate Saunders' use of the absurd as rhetorical strategy, one has only to look at the accuracy of his formulations with regard to the absurd (and manipulative) rhetoric emerging in the American linguistic landscape of today. Saunders' playful revisiting of these linguistic realities involves using them as the basis for absurd themes and situations in the fictional worlds he creates. Ultimately, their 'absurdity' serves a function, inciting readers to question the logic underpinning the supposed values and ethics of contemporary consumer culture. Warranting Saunders' caustic humor, inequality in the United States already has a meme, a twitter hashtag, a name in popular culture: "#First World Problems". Referring to a problem that is relevant to the First World but admittedly irrelevant and gloating when contextualized globally, the phrase seems to get to the heart of America's digitally enhanced self-awareness and American pop culture's peculiar way of addressing it. Furthermore, as in the curt, jumpy, almost journalistic language of Saunders' narrative, the hashtag points towards the violent severing of language necessary to rationalize the irrational. If there is, as well, some kind of perverted ethics implicit in the hashtag, the character most representative of this ethical sense in the story

—if in a more genuine and less farcical way— would be the narrator's youngest daughter Eva. However, she does express her honest concern with an almost anachronistic sincerity only capable of a child, or, of Saunders himself. Literary critic Sarah Pogell has pointed out that Saunders' reverent treatment of human conflict and emotion could easily garner him accusations of maudlin triteness (2011: 475). I would have to agree that his desire to address real world problems demonstrates an optimism the majority of postmodern writers and theorists may not share with him, but which may be exactly what Literature with a capital "L" needs. Saunders' attention to real-world problems and his Eva character, rather, link the story generally to the realist tradition of anti-slavery literature and specifically to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The seminal American text features a prominent character—little Eva—that is also a depiction of the innocent girl-child vehemently against slavery. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, as we know, Eva befriends Uncle Tom after he saves her life and she begs her father to buy him. Towards the end of the story Eva once again pleads with her father this time to free his slaves and specifically to free Uncle Tom. The resonances with "The Semplica Girl Diaries" are quite clear, again pointing towards the story's intricate and intentional connections with slave literature. In a kind of sad, happy and ironic ending, "Eva" of "The Semplica Girl Diaries" eventually frees the SGs out of sympathy for their pain, this time leaving her parents with loads of debt to pay—modernity's brand of indentured servitude.

The intuition that the story is set in our own contemporary world—Saunders' brand of realism—is joltingly suspended when the mechanism of the Semplica Girls' acquiescence is revealed. In a postmodern, sci-fi twist characteristic of the writer, we are asked to observe the apparatus of the semplica girls' pain but also to ontologically question the proximity of this world to our own: "[A] microline though brain that does no damage, causes no pain. Technique uses lasers to make pilot route. Microline threaded through w/silk leader" (Saunders 2013: 142) explains the father to the story's most conscientious objector, aforementioned Eva. Saunders writes the SG girls as literally having a hole burned through their skulls for easy hanging in the yards of yuppie Americans. Nevertheless, this invention approaches reality when the narrator assures Eva that the mechanism does not hurt as doctor "Lawrence Semplica" ingeniously designed it (2013: 142). This is Saunders' nod towards a world not only entrenched in corporate discourse, but also as Foucault diagnosed in the 1960s and 70s (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*), hegemonically invested in the rhetoric of science and medicine to a fault. Consider that many people are willing to undergo potentially lethal and expensive cosmetic surgery based on the promise of comfort and ease doled out by doctors (and, of course, those mimetic desire machines called "style magazines" aid the process). The establishment of science as the official discourse of knowledge—"an indefinite discourse that observes, describes and establishes

the ‘facts’” (Foucault 1975: 226)—endowed the medical/scientific community with alarming power (as during slavery). In short, the violent mechanism used to hang the SGs is disturbing but so is the narrators’ willed belief that it could be as innocuous as a simple haircut, again revealing the violent subtext underlying the characters’ daily lives which surfaces at key points in the story.

But the SGs’ acquiescence, we are told, is not only a byproduct of the subjective violence that literally holds them in place. Short bios on the girls called “microstories” comically gesture towards the saturation of “societal marketing programs²” in modern media while also realistically providing a backstory to the SGs’ forced immigration to the US. Saunders employs the postmodern aesthetic of embedded narrative and discourse to remind readers of the similitude between the world of the short story, however absurd, and their own. At the same time, Saunders also sardonically points towards how “#First World” guilt is co-opted and managed by the capitalist system. By now, most people are quite aware of the methods of “societal marketing” and can immediately identify the sort disseminated by the Semplica Girl Company and reified by the family themselves:

98

Pam: Sweetie, sweetie, what is it?

Eva: I don’t like it. It’s not nice.

Thomas: They want to, Eva. They like applied for it.

Pam: Don’t say like

Thomas: They applied for it.

Pam: Where they’re from, the opportunities are not so good.

Me: It helps them take care of the people they love.

Then I get idea: Go to kitchen, page through Personal Statements. Yikes. Worse than I thought: Laotian (Tami) applied due to two sisters already in brothels. Moldovan (Gwen) has cousin who thought was becoming window washer in Germany, but no. sex slave in Kuwait (!). Somali (Lisa) watched father + little sister die of AIDS, same tiny thatch hut, same year. Filipina (Betty) has little brother “very skilled for computer”, parents cannot afford high school, have lived in tiny lean-to with three other families since their own tiny lean-to slid down hillside in earthquake. (Saunders 2013: 134-135)

Saunders’ family portrays postmodern American culture’s concepts of responsibility and idealism, as well as its political, economic, and social superiority and personal identity. In his aforementioned book on violence, Žižek critiques the tendency of modern-day capitalists like Bill Gates to refer to themselves as ‘liberal communists’ and with fanfare laud their latest donation to charity in front of the media. Žižek asserts that it re-establishes the balance essential to the capitalist system’s ability to perpetuate itself and the objective and systemic violence at its heart (2008: 23). “The same structure —the thing itself is the remedy against the threat it poses— is widely visible in today’s ideological

landscape” writes Žižek (2008: 21). Like the nuclear family version of Bill Gates, the American family are “good people who worry [...] the catch, of course, is that in order to give, first you have to take” (Žižek 2008: 20). The societal marketing method of packaging the human element via story for consumers is used to accommodate the family’s sense of the charitable. Their profiles, and the family’s bourgeois sense of philanthropic righteousness, are consequently bought and consumed along with the girls in all their physicality legitimating their violent and painful existence on the lawn. For the speaker the embedded *semplica* girl narratives undoubtedly re-invoke his latent sense of guilt—but their true function is to evoke a sense of relief and complacency. As a father, he is also able to or at least hopes to transform the microstories into manageable tales of hope for daughter Eva. Žižek analyzes this function of ideology in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* concluding that “the function of ideology is not to offer us a point of escape from our reality but to offer us the social reality itself as an escape from some traumatic, real kernel” (1989: 45). Hence, the “microstories” engender that false sense of knowledge that Žižek alleges exists in today’s ideological landscape; the father escapes the real of his guilt into the social reality of the girls’ awful conditions on the lawn—finding a solace in them that is in equal parts utterly believable and preposterously offensive. Furthermore we see ideology at work in the family’s paradoxical belief that the exchange of money for power over human beings, however marginal, is the morally correct action to take in order to combat the very issue of modern slavery: “Only violence can put an end to violence, and that is why violence is self-propagating” (Girard 1972: 26).

On another level, these prepackaged narratives of the lives of each *Semplica* Girl are a form of symbolic violence themselves—just like the narrative, another “line” to assuage the pain. Symbolic violence, a term used by Bourdieu and later by Žižek, can describe the violence enacted by a symbolic community via its rites and rituals of stratification, or, by its use of language and representation. Here language’s capacity for violent “essencing” (Žižek 2008: 67-68) is used to strip the girls of humanity reducing their entire lives into nothing more than a sterilized pair of compressed sentences. Furthermore, this is yet another form of the linguistic distancing that the narrator practices throughout his archiving of the girls’ story. He consistently uses semantics to deceive himself, as in his refusal to acknowledge the girls’ utterances as “language” instead calling it “lingo” or in his wilful belief that the microline “does no damage, causes no pain”. Across the story, this symbolic violence enacted through language and discourse is generally evident in the pervasiveness of the curt, reduced syntax the narrator uses to write the diaries—more reminiscent of journalistic briefs than of the diary form in which he claims to write. As some would argue about modern news media, the narrator’s focus on ‘the now’ and on his own desire blinds him to the importance of history and more

importantly to the particular history behind the Semplica Girls and their seemingly immaculate and estheticized presence on the lawn.

Saunders writes an all too familiar America with a sardonic twist, but does so for the purpose of revealing an urgent need for readers to see through beliefs made popular by modern times, chiefly the grass root tendencies that cultivate and protect systemic violence at all levels. Saunders' incisive criticism of the capitalistic ways of the USA is at its best when unpacking (or ridiculing) the sense of class-consciousness that informs the hopes, desires, and decisions of its households. As we noted at the beginning of the paper, the speaker's impetus to buy the Semplica Girls derives from his feeling of inadequacy and ineptitude at not being able to "keep up" with his affluent peers. In a critique of capitalist dogma, Saunders helps us to understand that class-consciousness today simply comes down to acquiring the same or better products as the others in our imagined community. Our narrator buys the SGs in order to "keep up with the Joneses":

We step out. SGs up now, approx. three feet off ground, smiling, swaying in slight breeze [...] Effect amazing. Having so often seen similar configuration in yards of others more affluent, makes own yard seem suddenly affluent, you feel different about self, as if you are in step with peers and time in which living. (2013: 133)

100

Saunders could just as easily have written that the family had "stepped up" a rung on the invisible ladder that is social mobility and class (at least conceptually) in the USA. He includes the narrator "stepping out" and reports finally feeling "in step with peers and in time". This is what class-consciousness translates into in contemporary America, warns Saunders. An invitation to The Patriarch's Balls would signify less today than the size of one's house and its contents. The systemic and subjective violence implicit in the seemingly miraculous apparition of the objects that populate our domestic lives is of little importance. Nevertheless, by the end of the story the family no longer owns the Semplica Girls, who having escaped with the aid of the narrator's youngest daughter, Eva, are now labeled illegal immigrants "on the loose". The loss of the SGs results in the Greenway Company suing the family for some \$8000 dollars for back-charges. This, of course, plunges the family into debt. And so the family's precious social status falls to the level it was at the beginning of the story, or even lower. Debt in modern-day America is clearly the primary capital of the working classes, if not of the petit bourgeoisie, as well.

"The Semplica Girl Diaries" is an attempt to narrate the violence we inflict on ourselves and on others in the mindless and irresponsible pursuit of happiness. Saunders' rendition of the modern American family designates power as a byproduct of colonization or at least globalization as it is understood contemporarily. He offers a critique of the coloniality of power and those ways of gathering

information that often complement and uphold its systems, which are also constitutive of modernity. This critique, or Saunders's message, appeals to readers to free themselves from social and political definitions of success, instead embracing individualized concepts of ethical responsibility towards others. It is this sense of responsibility that child character Eva seems to represent, suggesting that we are born with a capacity for empathy that society and its funny games quickly takes from us. Furthermore, Saunders reveals discourse as one of the mechanisms used to rationalize the irrational and humanize the profoundly inhumane. As a result we contemporaries may suffer a guilty awareness, more so than our historical counterparts, but as in the wealthy estates of the past there is always a trapdoor, a manner in which to ask to be excused from the table, to leave early from the ball. Nevertheless, by bringing the First World's exploitation and dehumanization of third world bodies to the center of American family life, Saunders also performs an act of magic allowing the Semplica Girl to be in two places at once: at the center of his story and sweating in the factories of the Global South.

Notes

101

¹. In *Six Sideways Reflections on Violence* Žižek differentiates between three types of violence: (1) subjective forms of violence, the most obvious being the abuse of force, (2) objective violence being the standard level of violence to which we compare the subjective forms in order to perceive them, and, (3) systemic violence explained further above (Žižek 2008: 1-2).

². "We define *societal marketing programs* as company initiatives involving the provision of money, resources and/or publicity to socially beneficial causes in a way that seeks to create an association in the minds of consumers between the cause and the company or one of its brands" (Bloom et al. 2006).

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