

Interpellation and Children's Identity in Saunders' Short Stories

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Abstract

This study examines the construction of children's identities in George Saunders's *Tenth of December* (2013). It investigates how ideological state apparatuses, including family, consumer culture, technology, and social institutions, shape children's subjectivities within contemporary society. The study employs Louis Althusser's theory of ideological interpellation and Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of dialogism and heteroglossia to analyse the competing ideological discourses influencing children's identity formation. A qualitative textual analysis based on Alan McKee's textual analysis framework has been conducted. The findings reveal that Saunders portrays children as subjects of consumerism, surveillance, and moral regulation, while simultaneously presenting them as active agents who negotiate and challenge dominant ideologies through imagination, empathy, ethical reflection, and dialogic engagement. Unlike conventional studies that emphasize political or dystopian representations of childhood, this study highlights the subtle operation of ideology in everyday life and its psychological and emotional effects on children. It argues that Saunders's fiction presents literature as a critical space where power, ideology, and identity are continuously constructed, negotiated, and resisted.

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Introduction

Postmodernism emerged in the mid-twentieth century as a complex and multifaceted intellectual movement. It critiques modernism and Enlightenment rationality. The leading postmodernist theorists, such as Lyotard and Jameson, critiqued prevailing paradigms of coherence, progress, and universal truth, arguing in favor of multiplicity, fragmentation, and the instability of meaning. While modernism attempted to impose order through innovation and introspection, postmodernism revels in disorder, the absence of grand narratives, and a suspicion of absolute knowledge, objective reality, and fixed identities. More recently, scholarship has attempted to engage with the postmodern condition in the era of hyper-mediated and globalized cultures (Hutcheon, 2013; Connor, 2016; Kim, 2021; Stalder, 2023).

In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard (1979) characterizes postmodernism as involving "an incredulity toward metanarratives," arguing that overarching explanations for history, culture, and humanity's progress no longer capture present-day realities. Postmodernism, in contrast, accepts truth as fragmented, provisional, and plural. Such a paradigm shift mostly emphasizes the local and discursive elements of the phenomena in focus. This focus has impacted Literary Studies and the

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consideration of language, ideology, and discourse as defining and shaping factors of identity and perception (Hassan, 2015; Eagleton, 2020; Gardiner, 2000).

Throughout different genres of literature, human identities and their construction, contestation, and alteration, as well as the intricacies of language, ideology, and narrative voice, interplay. In modern fiction, representing children entails more than a narrative to tell; it becomes an ideological act reflecting deeper cultural, political, and psychological intricacies. One of the leading American short fiction writers of the 21st century continues to place children and childhood at the center of ideological inscriptive vulnerability. Within his short fiction, and particularly in his collection *Tenth of December* (2013), Saunders illuminates the process by which children are positioned by social, technological, and cultural structures, then formed, reformed, and resisted in contexts of power. The act of interpellation, defined by Althusser (1971) as how individuals are 'hailed' into social roles and subjectivities by 'Ideological State Apparatuses' (ISA's) such as schools, families, religion, and the media, can be applied to literature to show how characters— especially children—are not autonomous individuals, but rather subjects that are formed and disciplined by ideology. This is significant in Saunders' fiction, where children are trapped in the border zone of innocence and adult social forces. Their identities are constructed not only by the parents and the institutions, but also by the consumer and commodified popular culture, media technologies, and the ideological apparatuses of late capitalism.

Bakhtin's dialogism and heteroglossia provide insight into the many voices that coexist in Saunders' stories. Children are placed at the confluence of competing discourses— parental authority, peer culture, the market and media, and voices of self. This synthesis of many voices presents how identity is not stagnant but rather negotiated in ideological spokes. Bakhtin makes clear that children in Saunders' fiction are compelled by surrounding discourses, and they shape the voices by conforming to or resisting the ideologies.

As opposed to ISAs, Althusser calls Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) those institutions, such as the police, the army, and the judiciary, which impose and uphold ideological domination and control (Althusser, 1971/2014). While Saunders' short stories focus on the more subtle forms of ideological conditioning, there are instances of outright oppression that, alongside the more subtle forms, highlight the different modalities of power, including control and overt domination, that can be exercised to shape the behavior of individuals. Such instances, which include surveillance, the punitive aspects of institutions, and other rational devices that discipline and regulate children's behavior and subjectivities, are about overt oppression. In this regard, and by emphasizing the functioning of RSAs, this work accounts for and illustrates the work of the ideological and the coercive simultaneously, paralleling the relations of power in control that are constituted externally and internally to shape identity in children.

Understanding the arrangement and exercise of authority and influence in society and in literary works requires an exploration of power structures. Foucault (1990) defines power differently. He does not see it as a possession of an entity but as a relational and dispersed force. Power circulates through and within institutions, discourses, and practices of everyday life. In the works of Saunders, the power structures include family structures, consumerism, technology, and the socially constructed behaviors and mentalities of children. Power works through and within constraints and

enables and disRauf'sproofreadables (subject) power. By looking at these issues, this study aims to show how children are located within intersecting, disciplinary power structures, which constitute their identities and, within them, oppositional moments of resistance, negotiation, and role reinterpretation in the social order.

This research emphasizes the importance of childhood subjectivity and the ways in which children construct, understand, and navigate their identities within ideological and social contexts. Rather than treating childhood as a natural, universal stage of innocence, it approaches childhood as a historically and culturally produced category, shaped by power relations, institutional practices, and dominant discourses (James & James, 2012; James & Prout, 2015). Childhood is therefore understood as something made and remade through the everyday operations of families, schools, media, digital technologies, and economic systems, as well as through children's own interpretations and responses (Spyrou, 2018). Children are addressed as pupils, future workers, consumers, "at-risk" bodies, and moral subjects, and these overlapping positions provide them with sometimes complementary, sometimes contradictory scripts for who they should be (Giroux, 2012, 2014).

Within this framework, the short stories of Saunders become an important imaginative space for examining how such scripts are taken up, negotiated, or resisted. In these narratives, children are not portrayed as passive ideological recipients into whom norms are simply deposited. Instead, they appear as active participants who engage with the forces that attempt to define them, reinterpret familial and institutional expectations, and, in many instances, quietly or overtly oppose them (Nodelman, 2008; Stephens, 2013). Their encounters with parental control, school discipline, religious and moral rhetoric, media saturation, and consumer culture reveal that childhood is lived as a series of negotiations rather than a smooth progression toward maturity, echoing recent accounts of childhood as a site of "thick" social and political contestation (Spyrou, 2018; Millei & Kallio, 2018). The same scene can operate simultaneously as protection and constraint, care and control, opportunity and coercion.

Accordingly, this study positions childhood subjectivity in a way that acknowledges children's dual status. On the one hand, they are objects of ideological inscription: they are named, categorized, monitored, and disciplined by powerful systems that seek to stabilize their identities in line with prevailing social orders (James & Prout, 2015). On the other hand, they are agents who test, bend, and sometimes subvert these prescriptions through imagination, refusal, humor, misrecognition, and small acts of defiance (Spyrou, 2018). By foregrounding this tension, the thesis treats children in Saunders' work not simply as symbols of innocence or victims of ideology, but as complex subjects whose identities are formed in the ongoing, contested interplay between structural constraints and their own creative, resistant responses.

Thesis Statement

This research analyzes Saunders' short story collection *Tenth of December* (2013) to explore how children are interpellated by ideological frameworks and how their identities are constructed, negotiated, and resisted in these situations. Utilizing Althusser's theory of interpellation, Bakhtin's dialogism and heteroglossia frameworks, and McKee's (2003) Textual Analysis, the research analyzes the workings of power structures—familial, cultural, technological, and institutional—in

Saunders' fiction to inscribe subjectivity in children. The thesis contends that Saunders presents children not as ideology's passive recipients, but as active subjects, with their identities as constructions of their agency and interplay with social discourses, psychological conflicts, and resistance

Research objectives

- 1.1. To analyze the power structures that interpellate the children in the selected texts.
- 1.2. To examine the identity of children shaped by power institutions in the selected texts.
- 1.3. To identify the consequent psychological struggles of children in the selected texts

Research Questions

- 2.1. What are the power structures that interpellate the children in the selected texts?
- 2.2. How is the identity of children shaped by power institutions in the selected texts?
- 2.3. What are the consequent psychological struggles of children in the selected texts?

Power, Identity and Ideological Structures

Postmodern literature embraces new philosophical shifts in paradigms with a variety of different techniques. These techniques consist of fragmentation, non-linear storytelling, metafiction, pastiche, intertextuality, irony and parody. This type of literature frequently blurs the distinction between truth and fiction, questions the author's control, and offers numerous, frequently conflicting perspectives. According to Waugh (1984), techniques of metafiction highlight the writing process and challenge the boundaries that separate fiction from reality. In the same vein, Fredric Jameson (1991) describes postmodern cultural production as the "cultural logic of late capitalism," addressing its commodified essence, surface logic, and pastiche. Most new theorists, unlike the others, examine hyperreality, late neoliberalism, and digital capitalism as interlocking constructs (Baudrillard, 1994; Best & Kellner, 2017; Anderson, 2019; Chicchi, 2023).

Postmodern condition also changes how the concept of the subject is understood. Instead of viewing individuals as stable and wholly autonomous constructs, postmodernism considers the self as fragmented, fluid, and socially constructed. The reshaping of literature and theory about identity, agency, the individual, and the social order owes much to Michel Foucault's articulation of the subject via power-knowledge and Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of language and meaning (Foucault, 1980; Derrida, 1978). In recent years, some scholars have sought to understand how identities and subjectivities are shaped by algorithmic, technological, and global ideological systems, coining the term "algorithmic subjectivity" and theorizing new digital interpellation (Gane, 2018; Chicchi, 2023; Davis & Sarukkai, 2022).

In this light, postmodernism compels readers and critics to interrogate the fundamental order of reality and subjectivity in a work of literature. The focus on language, discourse, and meaning in a text is where engagements on ideology and the politics of power and identity crystallize, forming the basis of this chapter. It also sets the stage for exploring contemporary fiction, particularly the short stories of Saunders, where postmodern ideological frameworks are applied in the construction

of child subjectivity in contexts where digital media, saturated advertising, and platform capitalism intertwine with childhood (Jansen & Adams, 2018; O'Connell, 2024).

The issue of power is important in critical theory, philosophy, and literary studies. It is not only a matter of overt domination and authoritarian control, but also a matter of subtle, diffuse, and systemic forms of power. It is exercised via social practices, language, and knowledge, as well as through social institutions and everyday practices that constitute and regulate social norms, behaviors, and individual subjectivities. Michel Foucault transformed the modern understanding of power in his works, *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*. Foucault (1977, 1978) theorized that power is not simply repressive, but also productive, and that it flows freely within and across social networks. Moreover, power is not only situated within institutions or laws. The relations of power and knowledge are intertwined. Every exercise of power constructs a knowledge system, and all knowledge systems are situated within a web of power relations. Therefore, power is exercised not only through punishment and control. It is also exercised through normalization, surveillance, and the internalized social expectations of order. Contemporary childhood studies continue to use Foucault's ideas in analyzing the spaces configured for children, particularly in schools, welfare systems, and digital infrastructures (Treiber, 2022; Brando, Lawson, & Stalford, 2022).

An expansive approach to power that considers it relational, performative, and integrated within cultural practices permits the examination of power within literature as both a reflection and a vehicle for its exercise, wherein culture is acknowledged and appreciated.

Ideology occupies a special place within culture and literary theory as well as criticism. Defined as a system of beliefs, values, and assumptions, it determines how one comes to know and understand oneself, one's society, and one's social location, as well as one's ideological system. Filters that structure a person's worldview and reality and construct social order and hierarchies are self-concealing—meaning they perform best when hidden under a guise of naturalness or common sense (Eagleton, 1991; Hall, 1996). Nowadays, ideology operates advanced systems of social control that shape subjective experience, identity, and order, well beyond the conventional gazes of surveillance and discipline (Zuboff, 2019). Algorithmic culture, consumer capitalism, and the internet are primary vehicles of ideological control (Fuchs, 2021; Dean, 2020; Davis & Sarukkai, 2022). Analyzing how a piece of work demonstrates or challenges cultural values is made possible through the interaction of ideology within literary criticism. Ideology embedded within the structures of a narrative, characterizations, and language use shapes affective values and moral sentiments. In Saunders' short fiction, ideological considerations are embedded within children's lives and understandings shaped by institutional, parental, and technological structures. Literary work may serve as an ideological instrument, and concurrently, in the way the literary work attempts to wrestle with and undermine hegemonic conditions it embodies, a site of counter-hegemony.

Identity is a self and others part of a social construction. In addition to the social, political, and ideological contexts of the self and others, the structures surrounding the self and others are also a part of identity. An individual self is a social construction whereby the self is situated and negotiated with social discourse and power relations, contested. Because of the multifaceted and complex social discourse and power relations, identity is dynamic and ever fluid (Hall, 1996; Butler, 1990;

Bhabha, 1994; Foucault, 1977; Ahmed, 2017; Smith, 2021). Identity is a coherent self and autonomous. This construction was articulated from a critical theory or a poststructuralist perspective that cited a cultural discourse in the form of language whereby the self-subjective and in turn the identity is splintered, dispersed, and fragmented (Hall, 1996; Smith, 2021; Ricoeur, 1992). One of the fundamental contributions of Michel Foucault revolves around the interplay of discourse and power in the formation of the self. Foucault (1977, 1980) depicts, in his genealogical works, how disparate disciplines and their respective institutions and epistemic structures produce various subjectivities, or selves, across different contexts and historical periods. Foucault illustrates how “regimes of truth” determine and regulate identities by marking individuals as normal, deviant, or worthy. Recent scholarship builds upon Foucault’s insight by addressing more cultural and technological contexts that are described as Foucauldian (González & Vázquez, 2020; Gane, 2018).

Exploration of fluidity in identities as discursively articulated and ideologically enacted reveals the intricacy of identities and the subsequent examination of the power relations in the subjectivities’ construction frameworks. An explanation of relations in power structures requires the study of the situated and subjectified frameworks. Althusser has provided one of the most significant insights into this. He argues that ideology is not to be viewed only as a set of ideas. Instead, he understands it as a material and constitutive force that shapes people from within (Althusser, 1971/2014). Althusser’s interpellation theory describes, in part, a collection of the ideological state apparatuses (schools, family, religion, and media) that “hail” people into specific social places, thereby forming and constituting the ideology within a person.

In this essay, entitled “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” (1970), Althusser portrays a conceptualization of a theory of ideology and how subjects come to be constituted from a system of power. Unlike traditional Marxism, where ideology is seen as a mere illusion or false consciousness, Althusser goes beyond that. He argues how consciousness and subjectivity are shaped, and how ideology is also active in the material world and constitutes everyday practices and institutions.

Ideological state apparatuses refer to schools, religion, the family, and the media. These reinforce state ideology in a subtle yet powerful manner. Unlike the state’s repressive apparatuses—such as the police and the military, which instill and maintain ideology by coercion—ISAs work through consent and normalization. Within literary studies, this model allows characters to be interpreted in a sociopsychological manner, that is, in relation to the institutions that shape them and the language through which they are described and prescribed. Contemporary sociological and pedagogical works have focused precisely on interpellation in educational discourse and media narratives, further validating Althusser’s model as an analytic framework (Stanley, 2022; Smith & Taylor, 2023).

The study of literature, particularly literature that includes children, is an ideal context for such a discussion. Children are the most susceptible to this kind of ideological capture. Although this section discusses the theory in abstract form, later chapters will focus on demonstrating Althusser’s ideas on subject formation and ideological hailing through the work of fiction by Saunders.

In contrast to Althusser, who lays out a structural understanding of ideology formation, Bakhtin approaches it from a philosophical and linguistic dimension, emphasizing multiplicity, dialogue,

and discursive interaction within a text. Bakhtin describes dialogism as a fundamental characteristic of both language and narrative in *The Dialogic Imagination*. To Bakhtin, language is a social phenomenon and is shaped by the voices, ideologies, and hierarchies of power present in a given society. Hence, it can never be neutral or wholly private. Bakhtin's contemporary work on narrative identity emphasizes how selves are shaped and formed through dialogic negotiations of many voices (Ricoeur, 1992; Worth, 2004).

Althusser and Bakhtin provide different and yet valuable perspectives in regard to the ideological as well as discursive formations of subjectivity. Althusser aids in understanding how institutional ideologies situate child characters into particular social roles, while Bakhtin offers an understanding of how those roles get legitimized, contested, or destabilized through voices and dialogues. Althusser primarily focuses on the structural dimensions of subject formation, while Bakhtin emphasizes the dialogic dimensions of the self in a work of literature.

The examination of childhood in modern literature remains a vibrant and varied area of inquiry. Over the past few decades, the scholarly exploration of childhood has grown beyond a biological and developmental view to include socio-historical and cultural contexts within which childhood is situated. This shift has allowed literary critics to portray children not solely as innocent beings, but as individuals who have historically been embedded within complex power relations, discourses, and identities. The recent special issues and collections on the construction of childhood in both fiction and nonfiction continue to highlight the importance of these issues (Spyrou, 2018; Brando et al., 2022).

For his emotionally complex, ethically intricate, and satirical short stories, Saunders has received sustained and well-founded praise. The stories in his collections, *Tenth of December* (2013), continue to attract attention for their postmodern styles, socio-political insights, and moral scrutiny. Critical attention has focused on the exploration of consumerism and empathy, as well as the moral and ethical failures of late capitalism in contemporary America, although the representation of children's identity within ideological structures has received less attention. Interest in the children in Saunders' fiction has, albeit slowly, developed into a relevant discourse.

Although most of the scholarship on Saunders focuses on ethical issues, postmodern aesthetics, critique of neoliberalism, and analyzing adult protagonists, the child characters have not received sustained attention. The role of ideology in the construction of children's identities—via institutions, language, and the media—has received little attention. Moreover, the ways in which the major theoretical constructs of Althusser's interpellation and Bakhtin's dialogism and/or dialogism have been used to understand the ideological construction, positioning, and resistance of Saunders' young characters in narrative discourse have remained unexplored. This highlights the need to focus on the ideological and discursive construction of children's identity in his fiction.

Research Methodology

The present paper is qualitative descriptive research based on textual analysis of *Tenth of December* (2013), a collection of short stories written by George Saunders. The stories have been analyzed using Textual Analysis by Alan Mckee. He defines text as "something that we make meaning from"

and, by dint of textual analysis, “most likely interpretations” can be established (McKee, 2003). Through the application of Althusser’s (1971/2014) concept of interpellation, this study examines how children are “hailed” into subject positions through ideological institutions such as the family, school, and media. Bakhtin’s (1981/2010) concepts of dialogism and heteroglossia are employed to explore how multiple voices intersect within Saunders’ fiction, creating a polyphonic space in which children’s subjectivities are negotiated and formed.

Power Structures/Institution

Saunders constructs a moral and ideological microcosm in *Tenth of December* (2013), in which power operates less through overt force and more through the nuanced languages of the mundane—speech, discipline, emotion, and even solicitude. Through these stories, domestic, educational, and social spheres function as what Althusser (1971) calls Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs): frameworks that sustain social order by distorting how people think about themselves, their moral duties, and the bounds of their actions. Saunders’ children and young protagonists are enmeshed within a constellation of soft, yet inescapable, controls—families that enforce submission as love, schools that teach compliance as virtue, and societies that police the moral emotion through shaming or rewarding. Through these systems, ideology is rendered as common sense—deeply submerged within the cadences of conversation, ritual, and the imaginal engagement.

Applying McKee’s (2003) textual model, these stories disclose the mechanism of representation, discourse, and ideology functioning together. In *Tenth of December*, representation may, at times, seem realistic or comic, but beneath the recognizable surfaces is an encoded discourse of control. For example, in *Victory Lap*, Kyle’s internal monologue echoes the language of parental injunctions: “If you want the privilege of competing in a team sport, Scout, show us that you can live within our perfectly reasonable system.” (Saunders, 2013, p. 14), which illustrates how ideology is internalized and penetrates the private mind through banal orders. Such lines, in this case, do more than provide domestic comic relief; they serve as linguistic frameworks for conduits of behavior, and are yet another testament to the domestic sphere as an arena of moral conditioning. In McKee’s framework, the representation of parental love captures an imposition of surveillance of the discourse, and obscures the mechanism of obedience that is smuggled in, disturbing the affection that is in disguise. Through this, Saunders showcases what Althusser calls “the reproduction of the conditions of production” (p. 128): the family structures the individual for submission to the hierarchy, even prior to encountering the state, which is baffling to the individual.

Power in *Tenth of December* is not singular; it is discursive and relational, embodied in dialogues that Bakhtin (1981) voices as tension. Each story turns into a cacophony of irreconcilable beliefs, one in which power remains both recognized and contested in the deepest recesses of the psyche. In *Puppy*, the tug of war between the weak, moralized view of Marie and her statement, “the filth, the mildew smell...the spare tire on the dining-room table... the glum mother dog...dragging its rear...,” (Saunders, 2013, p. 38) and the pragmatic, defensive stance of Callie, who says, “he just needed not to get killed...she’d fixed it so perfect,” (Saunders, 2013, pp. 31-45) represents two ideologies at war. The power relations at work here operate through a classed discourse: Marie’s ‘s critical and judgmental discourse positions her as a moral authority, while Callie’s resistance is through her realistic, humanized, colloquial discourse. Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia is the struggle of

multiple, contending social languages and voicings. Bakhtin's lenses strengthen heteroglossia. Within the cacophony of irreconcilable ideologies and shrinking language, the structure of meaning and the meaning of morality are heated, not given, especially to the children, exemplified by Callie's son Bo.

In *Tenth of December*, the family functions as the first site of ideological inscription, where the languages of love and control are so fused that love becomes obedience, which becomes a godly virtue. Althusser (1971) assigns the family the role of the first ideological apparatus that reproduces social order by conditioning children to see social authority as natural and necessary.

A good example, though less dramatic, is in *Sticks*, where the father's odd home ritual demonstrates the enduring dominance of paternal power enacted through performance rather than speech: "One Autumn he painted the pole bright yellow. He covered it with cotton swabs that winter for warmth and provided offspring by hammering in six crossed sticks around the yard." (Saunders, 2013, p. 30) The pole, a domestic monument, serves what McKee would call a representational code: an object in which power is invested and through which it is transmitted. The order of discourse in the ritual joins violence with pity, thus teaching the children that love is discipline and that an apology restores order without diminishing a hierarchy. Ideologically, this pattern is a form of legitimizing patriarchal domination—the father's actions are not seen as oppressively controlling but rather as oddly affectionate. Children are taught to perceive authority as love and ritual as moral balance. Bakhtin's perspective reveals a certain obliteration of dialogic voices: the emotional dimension is captured in one monologic performance articulated year after year, turning the home into a stage for ideological repetition

As discussed in *Tenth of December* (Saunders, 2013), schooling seems to have an ideological context as opposed to a neutral one, which allows children to cultivate discipline, competition, and self-surveillance. Saunders suggests that the children in the story begin to know themselves via education, which describes them as self-regulating and self-performers in the competitive, institutionalized world.

Alison's fantasized views of teachers and peers, and Kyle's nervous absorption of institutional control, exemplify and deepen these dualisms in "Victory Lap." "Although actually she loved Ms. C. So strict! Also loved the other girls in class. And the girls from school. Loved them. Everyone was so nice. And the boys at her school. And the teachers at her school. All of them were doing their best. Actually, she loved her whole town" (Saunders, 2013, p. 5) exemplifies how, in Alison's eyes, the school is a moral community where order and affection coexist. There is, however, a severe divergence of views in the assertion that "everyone" and "all of them" are "doing their best." This shows a form of discourse that is devoid of any critique. Institutional power relations are described as uncontroversially philanthropic, and strictness is rephrased as concern. This exemplifies Althusser's notion of ideological state apparatus, within which the school functions; the apparatus in which the disciplinary boundaries of the school are presented as self-evident and well-intentioned, and in which children are "gratefully" interpellated as subjects of control, surveillance, and assessment reconfigured as care.

In *Tenth of December* (Saunders, 2013), media and technology serve as something more than mere neutral background details, but rather as subtle yet strong mechanisms defining family life and

childhood scenes used to determine what success, happiness, and belonging should be. Saunders captures this phenomenon through the character of Marie and her son Bo. On their excursion to gather the Puppy, Marie insists almost to the point of delusion that if she can manage to keep Bo "what was not bullshit was a call to Child Welfare...a very no-nonsense lady who would snatch this poor kid away" (Saunders, 2013, pp. 31-45). Even at this stage, the image is benign: a frazzled mother uses 'the device' to tame an exuberant child in an otherwise frantic day. But the discourse around the device and the game is telling. It is not just a pastime but rather, Marie's most effective means of controlling her son's emotions and his conduct, a technological means of disengaging from the emotions of his distress. In Althusserian terms, the device is a form of ideological control that conditions Bo to self-soothe through self-immersion in a digital realm and not the negotiation of feelings with others. To this child, achieving a state of happiness is not so much a matter of interrelationship but rather a manipulated feeling brought about by the proper stimuli. It is at this stage, and particularly with the enhancement brought in by McKee, that the ideological outlines become clearer: representation connects the device with 'proper' mothering (Marie is prepared, organized, equipped), the discourse celebrates digital diversion as routine and even obligatory, and the basic ideology equates the child's silence and immersion in the screen with parenting that is effective.

In *Tenth of December* (Saunders, 2013), justice and law seldom manifest in courtroom scenes or direct police action; they function as a subdued background presence that shapes adult behavior as well as how children and adolescents learn to anticipate punishment, liability, and blame. Althusser's distinction between Ideological and Repressive State Apparatuses helps understand the legal system in these stories as both an implied threat and a set of internalized constraints. Justice and law are less the guarantors of fairness than the forces that protect, albeit uneasily, the property, procedure, and institutional interests that are often at odds with humane or ethical impulses.

McKee's textual framework helps clarify that representation keeps legal authority largely at the periphery of the narrative: discourse calls it in through consequences, trouble, and felonies, while ideology teaches children and adolescents to be cautious of legal intervention. Bakhtin's dialogism further suggests that the voices of law and punishment become intertwined with characters' inner speech, contributing to their psychological self-monitoring. *Victory Lap* emphasizes this dynamic by illustrating a situation in which formal law is absent yet persistently underscored. Kyle's parents create a complex web of rules regarding his actions and decisions in the name of keeping him "safe" and "out of trouble" (Saunders, 2013, pp. 16-18). This may seem to be a case of domestic discipline, yet the legalistic anxiety of "liability," being "held responsible," and misinterpretation by legal authorities dominate the discourse. Kyle has internalized this thinking so thoroughly that when he sees Alison being forced toward the stranger's car, he does not immediately act but begins a series of risk assessments in his mind, including the questions: what if he is blamed, what if he is punished, and what if he is accused of doing something wrong. Although there is no visible repressive apparatus of law, its presence is felt as a narrowing of choices. Through McKee's model, the representation of Kyle's hesitation, the discourse of "getting in big trouble," the "consequences" of which are unspecified, and the ideology that equates safety with rule adherence converge to illustrate the internalization of legal rationality within the adolescent psyche.

From the Althusserian perspective, Kyle's internalized Repressive State Apparatus self-constrains in the expectation of legal or quasi-legal penalties. Using Bakhtin's dialogism, we can articulate how his dispersed monologue is simultaneously a critique of the parental, institutional, and legal heteroglossia that argues against ethical action. The tension of the story stems from Kyle's desire to silence these repressive voices, even if for a moment, to take action.

In *Tenth of December* (Saunders, 2013), religion seems less like an organized theology and more like a diffuse moral atmosphere that surrounds and saturates daily life. Saunders invokes pastors and churches and speaks of ethical discourse not to dramatize piety itself, but to illustrate how moral ideology functions as an Althusserian apparatus through which children and adolescents learn to interpret the world. Home exhibits a more complicated version of this moral ideology. Mikey comes back from the war to a community that uses the language of thankfulness, sacrifice, and forgiveness to patch over his trauma and the injustice he has been dealt. Relatives and neighbors insist that he should be "thankful" for his return, "let go" of his trauma, and that "everyone has their cross to bear" (Saunders, 2013, pp. 169-203). Literally, Mikey's cross is his trauma, his war memories. These statements are meant to be consolations; as a cultural framework, they draw, without hesitation, on Christian-inflected redemptive discourses of suffering and universal notions of suffering. Ideologically, such moralizing shifts the frustrations of war and abandonment, and the legal mishandling of Mikey, into a moral appeal for patience and humility. The younger family members who watch this encounter learn that virtue is more about absorbing injury and performing their familial roles, the Mikey systems.

McKee's model shows the naturalization of passivity through a complex of over moral ideals of submission to a higher moral order. Within this context, Bakhtin's dialogism indicates that the developing inner speech of children will be filled with moral clichés like 'to complain is selfish' and 'to suffer silently is noble.'

Identity

In the work *The Tenth of December* (2013), the children's identities are shown as flexible identities, constructed through interpellation, through discourses, and ideological struggles. In the case of younger characters within Saunders' stories, they learn through exposure to familial, educational, mediatic, and religious discourses, and the law, who they are and what place they occupy, which resonates with Althusser's description of subjects being positioned by the Ideological State Apparatuses. However, children and adolescents are not simply passive subjects.

Drawing on Bakhtin, these children possess inner minds configured as dialogic spaces where contending social voices are at play, producing cohesion and fragmentation, conformity, and at times, resistance. Requirements, in the form of a textual framework by McKee, develop the concept that identity in these stories is constructed at the points of intersection of representation (how children are depicted by narrators and other characters), discourse (the words used about and by children), and ideology (the social attitudes that render certain identities as "natural" and desirable).

The characters in *Tenth of December* exemplify how interpellation can be specific to types of children. These types include "good girl," "obedient son," "poor kid," "problem child," and so on.

In *Victory Lap*, Alison is constructed as the prototypical “good” student and daughter, compliant, upbeat, and socially integrated. Alison’s descriptions of her relationships with her teachers, her classmates, and even her pastor are saturated with affect; she loved Ms. C. ... Loved them. Everyone was so nice, which signals that Alison has internalized the identity of the cheerful and morally earnest girl who thinks “people are basically good and life is fun” (Saunders, 2013, pp. 4-5). This position is indicative of an ideological position that sees benevolence in institutional authority and ignores systemic inequality. In contrast, Kyle is constructed as the “responsible only child” and the “top” athlete, whose subjectivity is structured around compliance and self-discipline. In “*The Semplica Girl Diaries*,” Lilly is interpellated as the “middle” girl, expected to strive to fill the gap and belong with a higher wealth tier, while Eva is regarded as the “problem” child when her act of compassion toward the *Semplica Girls* disturbs the family’s social ascent (Saunders, 2013, pp. 109-169). Discourse and representation consistently impose these labels on children, and, in children’s inner speech, these labels become so internalized that they suggest identity results from externally imposed ideological naming, rather than being an inner truth.

In *Tenth of December*, moments of interpellation are most visible where children are explicitly marked, named, or told who they are by institutional voices. In *Victory Lap*, Alison hears herself and the surrounding discourse referring to her as “good girl,” “good student,” and “good student.” Inner speech—“people are basically good, and life is fun,” and the urge to “do good” and “stand for what is right” shows (Saunders 2013, 9-10) how the children are internalizing the moral lexicon of school and church. She is visible in the eyes of the teachers, parents, and pastor as a model child, and she self-recognizes in that ideological mirror. Kyle is also self-recognized as the “responsible only child” and “promising athlete,” whose worth is attached to his ability to maintain good grades, submissive cheerful compliance, and to run varsity cross-country as “a sophomore.” His parents’ rules assisted in interpellating frame: each command is given under the cert that he is, or is supposed to be, a certain kind of compliant son.

In *Tenth of December*, Alison goes through the piece. In *The Semplica Girl Diaries*, the children’s identities are formed in the crossfire of a multitude of competing discourses. Among them are the father’s anxious merchanting narrative, the school-based partitions of a party lite and yard saloon, Eva’s case, mute agony of the *Semplica Girls*. This cacophony leads to different reactions and responses. While Eva is angry, Lilly is able to want more. Lilly’s reflection is disconnected from the rest of the theory, which makes all the other hypothetical components much stronger. The rest of the narrative showcases the characters’ thoughts and impulses, demonstrating current identity as constant negotiation rather than immutable essence. His repositioning of the narrative makes visible as much as it disguises the inner pluviosity that defines every self.

In *Tenth of December*, a persistent, admirable confidence held by children is “imposed” by an institution. One can view Alison as an individual who “is hopeful,” could “do good” by “standing up for what is right” as a consequentialist. But there may be elements of Alison’s optimism that are shaped by powerful ‘imaginative geographies’—ethics of schooling, prescription of a certain kind of action, religion—discourses that highly suggest, support, or mitigate certain types of actions (Saunders, 2013, pp. 4–8). Alison’s self-conception “as a good person” absolutely cannot be conceptually separated from the community sociologically structured in such a way that happiness and submissiveness are the dominant emotional posture. The constructive reconfiguration of making

trouble and being in an ethical subordinate relationship with one's parents is what Kyle undergoes. Kyle's individual fear of being in trouble is in direct conflict with the collective envisioned ideal of being a hero that is provided in the school's Ethics classes and cultural narratives. (Saunders, 2013, pp. 18–20).

Psychological Consequences

Tenth of December (2013) illustrates that children's and adolescents' psychologies are some of the tightest registers of ideological capture. The processes of interpellation through family, school, the media, religion, and law achieve much more than the production of behaviorally obedient subjects; it psychically embeds anxiety, guilt, self-surveillance, and self-fracturing. Using McKee's framework, the surface depiction of "ordinary" childhood—school projects, family outings, ads, and parties—has underlying narratives that attempt to situate children within rigidly defined structures of merit, class, normality, and desirability, and these structures are suffused with ideology. These narratives operate ideologically, accruing as affective pressures: to be good, to belong, to perform properly, to be safe, to not be punished, etc. The psychological consequences in both collections are not secondary effects, but the primary mechanisms through which ideology tightens its grip. Psychological consequences frequently appear as internal disruption rationed as fear, as well as anxiety regarding conflicting obligations, in Tenth of December.

In the story Victory Lap, Kyle is the child subject who has been so thoroughly disciplined that he now internalizes dread in the form of anticipatory anxiety. He's frightened of the "wrong thing," punishment, lest he disappoint parents or institutions. "Paralyzed" in the "moment of the crisis" as he does "obsessive" mental rehearsals, epiphanizes interpellation as 'the obedient, responsible son', the psyche is always on trial. Alison's cheery moral optimism betrays her. She has endorsed the dictum, "People are basically good, life is fun," only to be unarmed by the savagery of the attempted abduction. The inability to process that rupture triggers foundational distrust, and ideologically, her vetting is far wider. In *The Semplica Girl Diaries*, Lilly is ashamed, humiliated, and quietly in despair, while Eva, confused and guilt-ridden for releasing the Semplica Girls, highlights the emotional burden of being trapped in power imbalances of which she is not the author. The psychological manifestations in children of anxiety, anger, as well as confusion, and 'bursting' of emotions are due to contradictions within the ideology. It shows being unable to understand or accept the concepts of being oppressed and the need to be sympathetic, and the aspiration to achieve 'something'. 'The emotional and psychological exhaustion and the anxiety that identity formation at this stage is bound to existential self-doubt' are the thoughts and the aim of self-recognition, which Saunders is highlighting.

In Tenth of December, in Victory Lap, there is a pronounced element of anxiety focused on punishment in the way Kyle constructs his subjectivity. He has learnt to consider every act as a possible infraction because of a very detailed and thorough, and then policed, system of rules, which his parents call 'directives,' work points,' and 'treat points.' He rehearses 'WHAT IF . . . RIGHT NOW?' scenarios (Saunders 2013: 13-23) in which he imagines courts where he has to defend himself to his parents and institutions. Disturbing as this might seem, it is not only a manifestation of anxiety, but also the emotional register of interpellation. In order to retain his interpellated subjectivity as a 'good, obedient son,' fear is the primary mechanism of choice. Then, during his

witnessing Alison's kidnapping, he is beset by anxiety: he is worried about 'doing it wrong,' about 'getting in big trouble,' and about not being seen as the aggressor but the rescuer (Saunders 2013: 13-23). The only fear present is the fear of being judged, not the fear of being attacked by the attacker.

In *Tenth of December*, the internalized ideology assumes the form of everyday paranoia, where both children and adults imagine themselves watched and evaluated, even when there is no observable gaze. In "The Semplica Girl Diaries," the father's narrative itself reads as anxious, almost paranoid. He observes what his family shows the world: the yard, the clothing, the presents, and how they will be looked at by the neighbors, the superiors, and the teachers (Saunders, 2013, pp. 109-169). They are more than merely minors and social cues, but are taken as judgment or approval. His daughters are socialized into this scrutiny. Lilly comes to focus on how her contemporaries will view her family's house, and Eva comes to understand that adults may willfully reinterpret what she does irrespective of her intention. These children grow up missing the idea that they are being looked at, judged, and monitored on some unknown standards. Psychological control, therefore, functions not in the form of overt orders, but in the form of internalized self-suspicion in the form of control: control of one's own self, of one's own inner self, and of how one will be perceived by others.

In *Tenth of December*, Metsäharju and Meyer note that depression and despair appear in the context of the clash between ideological promises and everyday experience, especially where the attempts at goodness or any effort at all seem not to be rewarded. Characters such as Don Eber or the father in 'The Semplica Girl Diaries' wear the signs of depressive exhaustion more openly, but the emotional trajectories of the children suggest they are heading towards something similar.

In Lilly's case, the class-based humiliation, the visits to the homes of rich classmates, and the classroom during the "My Yard" project, where she is the only one who has made the effort to 'be good', begin to erode the belief that hard work pays (Saunders, 2013, pp. 109-169). To some extent, she attempts to 'cheer' up but ends up 'watching' as such children live a life insulated in extreme wealth, while her life is mortified, embarrassing, and lacking in necessities. This quiet disillusionment is, to a child, depression: a withdrawing of expectation and hope. Despair, in contrast, is a quite different phenomenon, which finds expression in Eva, who, having liberated the Semplica Girls, agonizes in a state of confusion, guilt, and emerging despair as her apparently kind act is framed as a calamitous wrongdoing.

Saunders reports that Abstract sees the parents' worries, and the discussions that adults engage in are concerning bills and the court. Those make Abstract realize that in her reality, taking III step actions will be "punished, not acknowledged or praised". Her compassion will not be celebrated and appreciated. Symbolically, the destroyed yard with broken "microlines" and absent SGs is a sign of ideological burnout. All the moral resolutions seem to be gone. Only the perception of anxiety and debt is ever-present. In the midst of psychological despondency, whose emotional toll is despondency, is Identity formation inside the vague, self-contradictory system.

Internal conflict is the psychological hallmark of children and adolescents. In the case of children and adolescents, one must grapple between the demands of moral duty and personal safety, empathy and conformity, and aspiration and honesty. Perhaps the most explicit example is Kyle's inner

conflict in Victory Lap. Kyle has to grapple with the identity that his parents have shaped for him: rule-following, risk-averse, and “cheerfully obedient,” and the moral duty of defending Alison, who is in an immediate life-threatening situation. The narrative focuses on the conflict, which is described in terms of hesitation, the rapid-fire unreasonable thoughts, and the unmistakable signs of conflict—nausea, racing heart, and frantic mental bargaining (Saunders, 2013, pp. 18-23). This conflict of thinking and ‘indecision’ is the result of an ideological contradiction. The safety, obedience, and trust in adult systems that shaped him leave him with no clear script for the emerging moral situation, yet his own emerging conscience demands action. This presents acute psychological distress. It is an ideological distress that best exposes the limits of a moral framework that equates goodness with mere compliance.

In Tenth of December, losing one’s innocence is not just being made aware of what is difficult. It is also ideology teaching children to reinterpret suffering, injustice, and the absence of empathy as a normal and inevitable part of life. Alison in Victory Lap experiences an innocent breakthrough of the kind described: the girl who thought life was “fun” and that “people are basically good” is confronted with real harm in a suburban setting (Saunders, 2013, pp. 2–4, 16–18). The infliction of this harm on her is a lasting complication to her moral simplicity. While the story does not follow her beyond the immediate and obvious aftermath, it strongly implies that she is unable to return to an uncomplicated state of faith in the institutions of benevolence and the safety of her environments. Childhood innocence is lost in part from the realization that ideological narratives affirming safety and goodness are grievously incomplete.

In both collections, ideology replaces empathy, or reshapes it in more covert ways. There is an emotional imperative encouraged in children to feel deeply about certain sanctioned objects – national symbols, brand commodities, and “our” community – while disregarding or minimizing the emotional suffering of those outside those boundaries (migrants, commercial figures, animals, and non-normative people). Thus, the loss of innocence is more than the end of childhood ignorance; it is a reconfiguration of the moral imagination. The social and emotional legacy of this is a generation of young people with sophisticated compassion that has the emotional impulse to subordinate other compassion to blind obedience, social rank, and consumerism.

Conclusion

Through the lens of Althusser’s interpellation, Bakhtin’s dialogism and heteroglossia, and McKee’s (2003) textual analysis model, this research examined Saunders’ short story collections *Tenth of December* and *In Persuasion Nation*. The study focused on the representation of children and the ideological forces—familial, institutional, technological, and consumerist—that shape and constrain their identities. Drawing upon McKee’s model, the analysis interpreted how meaning is produced and circulated within the texts through the interrelation of representation, discourses, and meaning potentials. This framework revealed that Saunders’ depiction of childhood is neither innocent nor neutral; rather, it is a dynamic site of ideological negotiation, where children’s identities are shaped by power yet capable of resistance.

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