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**CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE SHORT STORY *LIBERATION DAY*****BY GEORGE SAUNDERS<sup>1</sup>****GEORGE SAUNDERS'IN *LIBERATION DAY* ÖYKÜSÜNE ELEŞTİREL SÖYLEM ANALİZİ****Gülçin TAŞDEMİR**

e-mail: gulcinntasdemir@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0002-4110-7934

**Gülşen TORUSDAĞ**Assoc. Prof. Dr., Van Yüzüncü Yıl University, Faculty of Letters, Department of Linguistics,  
e-mail: gtorosdag24@hotmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0002-4323-7097**Abstract**

Discourse, in general terms, refers to the use of language as a form of social practice through which meaning, ideology, and power relations are constructed and maintained. Within the literary domain, discourse functions not merely as an aesthetic device but as a potent medium that exposes, challenges, and reconstructs ideological structures embedded in social life. Literary texts, and particularly short stories, serve as condensed reflections of these dynamics due to their narrative intensity and linguistic precision. Their brevity allows for a heightened focus on how ideology operates through character speech, narration, and stylistic form. From this perspective, the present study examines the short story *Liberation Day* from George Saunders's 2022 collection *Liberation Day* through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The analysis explores how ideological orientations, characterization processes, and power dynamics are encoded in discourse, and how individuals are linguistically and cognitively incorporated into systems of domination. The study aims to uncover the mechanisms through which the story represents voluntary subjection, othering, and social control, revealing the author's critique of neoliberal power structures. By analyzing the story's stylistic strategies, character positions, and narrative design, this article demonstrates how discourse operates as a site of both oppression and resistance. Ultimately, the analysis argues that Saunders's story exposes the subtle processes by which individuals internalize hegemonic ideology, redefine their identities, and legitimize oppressive systems through language itself.

**Keywords:** Literary Discourse, Critical Discourse Analysis, Ideology, *Liberation Day*, George Saunders

**Öz**

Genel anlamda söylem, anlamın, ideolojinin ve güç ilişkilerinin kurulduğu ve sürdürdüğü bir toplumsal pratik olarak dilin kullanımına işaret eder. Edebi alanda söylem, yalnızca estetik bir ifade aracı değil, aynı zamanda toplumsal yaşamda yerlesik ideolojik yapıları açığa çıkarır, sorgulayan ve yeniden kuran güçlü bir araçtır. Özellikle kısa öyküler, anlatısal yoğunlukları ve dilsel ekonomileri sayesinde bu dinamiklerin incelemesi için elverişli bir zemin sunar. Türün kısalığı, ideolojinin karakter söylemleri, anlatıcı sesi ve biçimsel tercihler aracılığıyla nasıl işlediğine odaklanmayı kolaylaştırır. Bu bağlamda, bu çalışma George Saunders'ın *Liberation Day* (2022) adlı derlemesinde yer alan *Liberation Day* öyküsünü Eleştirel Söylem Çözümlemesi (ESÇ) yöntemiyle incelemektedir. Çalışmada ideolojik yönelimlerin, karakter inşa süreçlerinin ve söylem aracılığıyla iletilen güç dinamiklerinin nasıl yapılandırıldığı ve bireylerin bu tahakküm sistemlerine dilsel ve bilişsel düzeyde nasıl dahil edildikleri araştırılmaktadır. Araştırmanın amacı, öyküde gönüllü boyun eğme, ötekileştirme ve toplumsal kontrol gibi süreçlerin nasıl temsil edildiğini ve yazarın bu söylemler aracılığıyla hangi ideolojik eleştiriyi sunduğunu ortaya koymaktır. Öykünün biçimsel stratejileri, karakter konumlandırmaları ve anlatı yapısı incelenerek, söylemin hem baskı hem de direniş alanı olarak nasıl işlediği gösterilmektedir. Sonuç olarak, Saunders'ın öyküsü, bireylerin hegemonik ideolojiyi nasıl içselleştirdiğini, kimliklerini yeniden tanımladığını ve baskıcı sistemlerin dil aracılığıyla nasıl meşrulaştırdığını görünür kılar.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Yazısal Söylem, Eleştirel Söylem Çözümlemesi, İdeoloji, *Liberation Day*, George Saunders

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## Introduction

In contemporary literary studies, Critical Discourse Analysis has become one of the most productive frameworks for examining the intricate relationship between language, ideology, and power. The multi-layered structure of literature makes it a powerful tool for understanding social and ideological power relations. According to Eagleton, literature, in the sense of the word we have inherited, is an ideology and it has very close connections with issues of social power (2022, p.39). In this sense, literary texts not only offer narrative pleasure but at the same present discursive spaces where interpersonal relationships and social order are represented. In contemporary literary studies, Critical Discourse Analysis has become one of the most productive frameworks for examining the intricate relationship between language, ideology, and power. The multi-layered structure of literature makes it a powerful tool for understanding social and ideological power relations. According to Eagleton, literature, in the sense of the word we have inherited, is an ideology and it has very close connections with issues of social power (2022, p.39). In this sense, literary texts not only offer narrative pleasure but at the same present discursive spaces where interpersonal relationships and social order are represented. Some works, in particular, contain counter discourses that reveal inequalities, question power, or expose certain ideologies. Such discourses remove the reader from a passive position and transform them into a questioning and awareness-raising subject. In the words of Torusdağ and Aydin, “Like any work of art, a literary work fulfills its function when it is interpreted by a recipient” (2024, p.66). In this context, literary texts are dynamic discourse spaces that influence social structures open to individual interpretations.

Through its capacity to represent, distort, and resist social realities, literary discourse operates as a powerful tool for uncovering the subtle mechanisms of control embedded in everyday language. In this regard, as Kaplan points out, every text is “like a thick plywood consisting of many thin sheets lying at different angles to each other...” (1990, p.202); such an analogy makes the short story a narrative type with a multi-layered potential for meaning that goes beyond the surface. Building on this perspective, literature ultimately functions as both a mirror and a critique of dominant ideologies. Accordingly, within this context, George Saunders’s *Liberation Day* becomes a compelling site for Critical Discourse Analysis as it exposes how language operates as a medium of ideological control and resistance within contemporary narrative fiction.

George Saunders, one of the most influential voices in contemporary American fiction, has consistently interrogated the intersection of power, morality, and human consciousness. Known for his distinctive blend of satire, empathy, and stylistic experimentation, Saunders exposes the moral contradictions of late capitalism and the ideological systems that sustain them. His narratives often take place in dystopian or hyper-capitalist settings, where characters navigate oppressive social structures that blur the line between freedom and servitude. *Liberation Day* (2022), his most recent short story collection, exemplifies this artistic and philosophical engagement with power and control. The titular story, *Liberation Day*, offers a profound commentary on the manipulation of consciousness and the commodification of human agency.

Set in a world where individuals’ memories and voices are erased and reprogrammed to perform historical reenactments for the entertainment of the privileged, *Liberation Day* dramatizes the transformation of human beings into instruments of ideology. “The speakers”, whose cognitive and linguistic capacities are controlled by their bosses, symbolize the erosion of free-will and the normalization of domination under the guise of entertainment. Through this fictional work, Saunders raises critical questions about obedience, identity, and the internalization of power. The story’s narrative structure and

linguistic patterns expose how systems of authority perpetuate themselves not merely through physical coercion but also through discourse, in other words, through the language that defines what is thinkable, sayable, and ultimately, permissible. Therefore, *Liberation Day* holds particular significance for Critical Discourse Analysis, as it exemplifies how narrative form and linguistic strategies intertwine to reveal the subtle operations of power and ideology in contemporary society.

This study adopts the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). According to Fairclough and Wodak, “discourse [language use in speech and writing] is socially constitutive as well as socially shaped—it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people. It is constitutive both in the sense that it helps to sustain and reproduce the social status quo...” (1997, p.258). In this vein, CDA reveals what the author aims to achieve through the text, the effect of discourse on the reader, and the ideological function of language within a multidisciplinary framework. As symbolic elites with access to public discourse fields such as literature, writers not only produce culture by shaping social beliefs and ideologies through discourse but also contribute to the reproduction of existing power relations through symbolic power (van Dijk, 2010). Building on these theoretical foundations, this study draws upon Teun A. van Dijk’s theories of discourse, ideology, and manipulation, alongside Norman Fairclough’s (1992) notions of language as social practice and power relations, to explore how characters’ utterances and narrative perspectives reproduce or resist dominant ideologies. The focus lies on how Saunders’s characters are positioned within systems of domination through discursive control mechanisms and how linguistic strategies such as labeling, passivation, and polarization affect the extent to which they perceive themselves as free individuals.

From this perspective, the article examines the short story *Liberation Day* from George Saunders’s 2022 collection *Liberation Day* through the lens of CDA. The analysis explores how ideological orientations, characterization processes, and power dynamics are encoded in discourse, and how individuals are linguistically and cognitively incorporated into systems of domination. Accordingly, the study aims to uncover the mechanisms through which the story represents voluntary subjection, othering, and social control, thereby revealing the author’s critique of power structures. By analyzing the story’s stylistic strategies, character positions, and narrative design, this article demonstrates how discourse operates as a site of both oppression and resistance. Ultimately, the analysis argues that Saunders’s story exposes the subtle processes by which individuals internalize hegemonic ideology, redefine their identities, and legitimize oppressive systems through language itself.

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to analyze the titular short story from George Saunders’ collection *Liberation Day* (2022). The methodological framework is grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which examines how discourse reflects and reproduces power relations, ideological orientations, and processes of identity construction (Fairclough 2001; van Dijk 2006a). The analysis focused on dialogues, narrative voices, and linguistic choices of characters, which were evaluated under themes such as mechanism of power and obedience, the boundary of constructing the self, othering, and the effect of capitalism.

The story was analyzed both at the micro-linguistic level and in its wider social and ideological power relations in the narrative. The analytical framework drew mostly on van Dijk's works of ideology and discourse as well as Fairclough's concept of discourse and hegemony. Besides, the works of researchers such as Wodak, Meyer, Bourdieu and Foucault have been also utilized to form a better analysis. Overall, by combining micro-linguistic and macro-social analysis, this methodological approach illuminates how *Liberation Day* functions as a site where power, ideology, and discourse intersect, demonstrating the subtle ways in which individuals are constituted as compliant subjects within oppressive systems.

### **Analysis And Discussion**

#### **Mechanism of Power and Obedience**

*Liberation Day* depicts how a family recognized as elite through their possession of economic capital exploits individuals who may be regarded as ordinary or average for their own entertainment. The story illustrates how non-elite individuals are kept under control through various mechanisms of restriction imposed by the system or by those in power. As cited by van Dijk, Slobin, Miller, and Porter (1972) examined forms of address in corporate settings and observed that individuals in higher positions referred to their subordinates by their first names, while subordinates used titles when addressing their superiors (2008, p.52). Similarly, the use of the titles "Mr. U" and "Mrs. U" in addressing the Untermeyer family subtly signals from the very first paragraph that this family occupies the position of dominance within the discursive structure of the story. The narrator's questions "When next will we be asked to Speak? Of what, in what flavor?" (Saunders, 2022, p.1) and the statement "... if I may say it this way ..." (Saunders, 2022, p.5) reveal that the speaker is under the control of another group. As indicated on the opening page, the subjugated group is shown to be anxious to please those in power, as repeatedly illustrated throughout the story in examples such as "Are the Untermeyers (Mr. U., Mrs. U., adult son Mike) pleased? If so, why? If not, why not?" (Saunders, 2022, p.1) and "[As for Mr. U] Is pleased. So, we are pleased. Who would not be pleased?" (Saunders, 2022, p.4).

The efforts of Jeremy and his companions, whose memories have been eradicated, are to satisfy the Untermeyer family can be interpreted not only as an act of voluntary submission based on class difference, but also as the outcome of an internalized authority maintained through disciplinary mechanisms. Throughout the story, various references emphasize that even seemingly trivial acts—such as expressing one's thoughts without permission—may result in punitive consequences. The narrator explains that after exercising the act of "speaking freely", he is sent to the "Penalty Area" described as a dark space between the paddles where they are unable to deliver "dramatic" speech. As Teun A. van Dijk (1998) asserts, discourse functions as a vehicle for conveying ideas, and forms a site where social power is produced and reproduced. In this regard, the "Penalty Area" serves as a mechanism of control that systematically restricts the discursive visibility of individuals who do not belong to the elite class. Hence, dominant groups shape marginalized groups through representative discourse and, in doing so, they can also control their field of action. The way Jeremy and his peers' speech and behavior are molded according to the expectations of an elite group like the Untermeyers exemplifies this ideological regulation. Consequently, the notion of punishment in the story has two functions, one of which is a means of correcting individual faults, the other is as an instrument of oppression that limits the subordinates' right to discourse, thereby enabling the reproduction of dominant ideology.

Another element that functions as a mechanism of oppression and control in the story is the ideological instrumentalization of technology. The restriction imposed on Jeremy and his companions is not limited to their freedom of speech; their memories have also been erased, depriving them of the capacity to express emotions and thoughts. These individuals can communicate only among themselves when detached from the device, yet remain incapable of performing any discursive act against authority figures such as Mr. and Mrs. U. This condition demonstrates that technology operates both as a surveillance tool and an active mechanism of power that suppresses individual discourse. Van Dijk (2008a; 2008b) expresses that power functions discursively by regulating individuals' access to knowledge, shaping their perception of reality, and constructing their social roles. The memory-erased individuals, in this sense, have lost their personal histories and their capacity to imagine the future. They have been transformed into subjects who can no longer think, feel, or develop alternative discourses to challenge power. This discursive control manifests itself physically as well. The characters' prolonged immobilization—being "Pinioned to the wall"—and even the mechanical provision of food through the "Master Feed Tube" signify the systematic elimination of subjective action. The narrator's statement, "... Jean holds up [the cake] to our mouths on her Proffering Plate, at the end of her Reaching Rod, and on the sponges tonight there is wine ..." (Saunders, 2022, p.11), reveals that the characters are deprived even of the basic act of drinking for themselves. Although such an arrangement seems to restrict bodily movement, in fact, it symbolically limits their very existence. As van Dijk (2008a) notes, dominant groups determine not only the circulation of information through discourse but also individuals' positions within social reality. Accordingly, the technological surveillance and manipulation of memory in the story function as a power technology that enables discourse to be shaped in line with the dominant ideology.

In the story, the dominant group that controls the production and circulation of discourse not only regulates the physical and verbal behaviors of the subordinates but also restricts their access to information, economic resources, and social life. The cognitive, emotional, and social capacities of Jeremy and his companions function solely through the system managed by Mr. U; with their memories erased, they are compelled to construct their world of meaning exclusively through the information provided by external authority. As van Dijk emphasizes in Discourse and Power (2008a), the control of access to information and knowledge sources constitutes one of the most powerful forms of domination. In particular, characters such as Jeremy, Craig, and Lauren—assigned the role of "Speakers"—can receive data only through the "Knowledge Mod" activated by Mr. U, and this data is internalized by them as "reality". Within this framework, the discursive autonomy of the individuals is eliminated, and they are transformed into instruments that merely repeat predetermined patterns.

The "Knowledge Mod" implemented by Mr. U exemplifies a typical power practice that reveals how access to and transmission of knowledge remain monopolized by particular groups, since Jeremy and his peers have no means of obtaining information other than what Mr. U provides. Van Dijk's assertion is particularly relevant here that power is a form of control (2008a, p.30) and this control limits access to knowledge, communication, and representation in favor of specific groups. Thus, while Mr. U represents the dominant group, Jeremy and his companions constitute the controlled, subjugated group. In this sense, the Untermeyer family, especially Mr. U, embodies what Mills (1956) terms the "power elite", who occupy strategic positions in the structure of society, holding authority over decision-making processes and using their power, wealth, and prestige effectively. Likewise, as van Dijk (1998) states that discourse is fundamental in the reproduction of

social representations and the transmission of ideologies. Through the discourse created by the Untermeyer family, the elite segment of society exercises and reproduces its power and resources over the subordinated group. The continuation and control of this social order within the story's discursive framework are maintained through mechanisms such as punishment, prohibition, and verbal manipulation.

As van Dijk (1996) implies in his work "Discourse, power and access", the unequal distribution of access to information and discourse constitutes the foundation of the ideological reproduction of social structures. In the story, not only the characters in the "Speaker" role but also those designated as "Singers" become victims of this unequal distribution. The latter are reduced solely to the act of singing, and any other form of verbal expression is prohibited, as revealed through Jeremy's observation: "The Singers, who cannot Speak, or even talk, just nod, as if to say: Though we, as part of our development, have been rendered mute unless Pulsed and Singing, we agree with all that has just been Spoken by our colleagues." (Saunders, 2022, p.16). This restriction inhibits their individual freedom and their collective social participation. In *Liberation Day*, since the context is entirely constructed by the dominant group, the subordinates' potential to produce discourse is limited from the outset. Consequently, cognitive and discursive domains such as access to information, discourse production, and context formation are all controlled by the dominant group. Through this control, ideological power is reinforced through physical and verbal domination.

In the story, along with punishment, memory erasure, systematic control of basic human functions such as speaking, moving, and eating, and the restriction of access to knowledge, social life, and economic resources, the continuity of elite domination is also sustained through the verbal and emotional manipulation employed by Mr. and Mrs. U. From this perspective, the story demonstrates that hegemony can be maintained not only through overt linguistic constraints but also through seemingly compassionate discourse that operates through emotional engagement. When Mr. U says, "Not your fault ... You did everything I asked of you. I blame myself." (Saunders, 2022, p.11), he delivers a performative speech that refrains from overt criticism of their performance, subtly offering praise instead. By acknowledging their efforts, he reinforces the illusion of empathy and collective understanding. While Mr. U ostensibly takes the blame upon himself, he simultaneously reaffirms his authority by emphasizing that everything was done according to his wishes. His continuation— "We're going to think about this. Then try something new" (Saunders, 2022, p.11) creates the impression that he includes Jeremy and the others in the decision-making process, applying a discursive strategy that presents them as equal interlocutors.

However, this illusion conceals the reality that the characters' personal experiences and agency are determined by external authority. As van Dijk (2008a) explains, a characteristic feature of manipulation is the implicit transmission of beliefs in ways that minimize the possibility of questioning them. Mr. U's discourse also evokes emotions such as forgiveness and hope, which facilitate compliance. This is confirmed by the narrator's comment, "Our hearts go out to him. He works so hard..." (Saunders, 2022, p.11), showing that Mr. U's manipulation achieves its purpose. After this emotionally charged moment, Mr. U's gesture of sending cake to Jeremy, Craig, and Lauren serves to maintain this constructed atmosphere of empathy while also symbolizing that only he possesses the privilege of performing such material gestures. The next day, Mr. U's arrival with a tray of Danishes, interpreted by Jeremy as "...a Danish of apology..." (Saunders, 2022, p.13) initially strengthens this emotional bond, yet the illusion collapses when Jeremy realizes, "... but we are too high on the wall for him to reach." (Saunders,

2022, p.13). Although this appears to describe a physical position, it symbolically underscores the social hierarchy and the inaccessibility of privilege. Jeremy's subsequent remark that the buns will remain untouched on the table implies that such gestures are routine and futile, while his reflection "Because what a day it turns out to be!" (Saunders, 2022, p.13) signals a fleeting moment of discursive awareness of the inequality he faces. Yet his immediate self-persuasion demonstrates how deeply the ideological structure has been internalized, preventing this awareness from evolving into sustained resistance. This moment of discursive rupture exemplifies what van Dijk (2006b) expresses as the most potent form of domination: the cognitive control of actions, particularly when the subjects remain unaware of the manipulation itself. Through such discursive and communicative strategies, power holders reshape the subordinates' consciousness in alignment with their own interests.

Mr. U alternates strategically between authority and familiarity in his relationship with Jeremy to achieve compliance. When he declares, "That's an order, or whatever. A directive," he reinforces his authority, yet when he asks "Would you be willing to help me out with that, pal?" (Saunders, 2022, p.56), he temporarily distances himself from that authority and adopts a friendly tone that suggests equality. These inconsistent role shifts serve to establish emotional dominance over Jeremy. Although Mr. U's manipulation employs politeness strategies, it also involves violations that hinder genuine communication. For example, when Jeremy inquires about the timing of the upcoming performance "When is it now?" (Saunders, 2022, p.21), Mr. U responds with a brief laugh, ignoring the question and thereby denying his interlocutor's right to the information. His closing remark, "I'd say it's time for some sleep." (Saunders, 2022, p.21), implicitly reasserts his prerogative to steer the conversation. Ultimately, Mr. U speaks to his 'puppets', individuals stripped of personhood, granting them speech only when he chooses and answering only the questions he deems appropriate. His control over both turn-taking and form of address exemplifies how, as CDA reveals, the privileged employ linguistic strategies to reinforce and intensify existing social inequalities.

Mrs. U, on the other hand, exercises her power through the technological mechanisms at her disposal, manipulating them as she pleases. At night, she visits Jeremy and alters the settings on the Control Podium, Pulsing him to recite romantic narratives that gratify her desires. During one of these episodes, Mrs. U experiences individual comfort or pleasure by touching herself, while Jeremy, immobilized and deprived of agency, is excluded from participating in or enjoying the moment. Jeremy's question—whether Mrs. U might think to comfort him in return—finds its answer in his realization: "It doesn't seem to occur to her. It never does. Never has yet." (Saunders, 2022, p.6). His subsequent reflection "Which is, I always feel, once my arousal has receded, probably for the best." (Saunders, 2022, p.6) reveals that his feelings, mind, and consequently his perception of reality have been manipulated by Mrs. U, and the dominant discourse itself, in a broader sense. Alongside the erasure of memory, the imposition of punishment, and the restriction of physical movement, this form of manipulation emerges as another strategy through which the capitalist discourse of class inequality and power imbalance reproduces itself.

The desserts in the story also function as tangible reinforcements of verbal expressions, serving as instruments that sustain a semblance of trust between the dominant and the subjugated groups. Though these gestures appear benign on the surface, they operate at a deeper level to consolidate control and stabilize elite power. The individuals whose minds have been erased internalize and normalize this systematic behavior. Jeremy recalls his early days: "... [Jean] used her the Reaching Rod to offer us a series of sweets, which is

when we first started to feel that we were really going to like it here. And we have. We really have liked it here." (Saunders, 2022, p.28). Jeremy's recollection of the sweets illustrates the psychological association between acts of offering and the environment of subjugation, transforming an oppressive setting into one perceived as 'secure' or even 'pleasant'. These lines reveal how the small rewards provided by the elite reshape the subordinates' perception of reality. As van Dijk emphasizes "controlling people's minds through discourse is an indirect but fundamental way of reproducing dominance and hegemony" (2008a, p.91). Consequently, the recurring motif of desserts in the story serves as a strategy of manipulation that influences the subjects' evaluative judgments and consolidates dominance.

Throughout the narrative, Mr. U's treatment of Jeremy, Craig, and Lauren as puppets is paralleled to Mrs. U's behavior. Although the motivations behind Mr. and Mrs. U's exploitation of others differ, their discursive strategies share a common ideological foundation: pleasure belongs to the elite. As Eagleton states, pleasure is for those who can afford it (2021, p.63), the non-elites exist solely to facilitate that pleasure. In this respect, as Wodak explains "ideology is an important aspect of establishing and maintaining unequal power relations" (2001, p.10).

### **The Boundary of Constructing the Self**

In narratives where the boundaries between human and machine become blurred, and where the body or mind is rendered open to intervention, the question "What does it mean to be human?" inevitably comes to the fore. In *Liberation Day*, the characters' minds are erased, and with them, the unique identities they have constructed are either obliterated or suppressed. One of the fundamental components of individuality—personal memory—has been erased from their consciousness. As van Dijk states that mind control involves personal and social knowledge, previous experiences, personal opinions and social attitudes, ideologies and norms or values, and other factors that play a role in changing a person's mind (2008a, p.11). Consequently, these individuals, whose minds are kept under constant control through discourse, shape their existence and sense of purpose based on the information imposed by the dominant group.

During a conversation in which the son, Mike, asks Jeremy and his companions questions about their ages and appearances, it becomes clear that although Jeremy appears to be in his thirties, he and his friends accept this fact that they were "born" only four years and two months earlier. Mike's remarks such as "Pretty big for four-year-olds..." and "[Craig's] hair's starting to thin" (Saunders, 2022, p.27) attempt to awaken Jeremy, Craig, and Lauren from their distorted reality, yet these efforts remain futile. These statements, however, are not mere descriptions; they function as acts of identity invalidation. By denying the authenticity of the identities Jeremy and his companions believe in, Mike momentarily otherizes them. Although he appears to be helping, he perpetuates othering by evaluating their existence as abnormal. When Jeremy claims that he and his peers came "from the sky" before being brought into the Untermeyer household, Mike derisively responds: "Then what? You dropped, fully grown, out of your mom's vagina? Mom's vaginas? Think about it, guys. How big a woman would these ladies have to be for that shit to work out?" (Saunders, 2022, p.29). Mike's mockery and condescension fail to convince Jeremy, Craig, and Lauren that their current reality is artificially constructed. This exchange can be interpreted not only as a conflict among individuals but also as an ideological struggle over reality, knowledge, and belonging. Mike's words do not merely sow personal doubt; they reflect society's collective cognitive schemas about what is possible or meaningful, for social cognition—knowledge, attitudes, ideologies, norms, and values—is collectively shared within social groups (Dijk, 2001, p.113).

The “Speakers” and “Singers”, whose minds have been erased, naturally lack access to any information that might anchor them to a past. Moreover, since they exist under conditions of surveillance and coercion, their access to truth and knowledge in the present is also restricted. This systematic hegemonic discourse eliminates any possibility of constructing new identities. As a result of their instrumentalization for performance, Jeremy and his companions change identities as easily as changing costumes. Yet, this transformation differs fundamentally from a theatrical role change: in the story, role performance is not a conscious artistic choice but a technological imposition. The externally induced command known as the “Pulse” transforms not only their behavior but also their biological and cognitive perception. Jeremy’s statement “Once the Pulse is fully upon you, here will come your words, not intended by, but nevertheless flowing through...” (Saunders, 2022, p.2) shows that this influence is not limited to acting but generates an internal sense of compulsion. As van Dijk emphasizes “manipulation always implies the manipulation of the minds of participants (2006b, p.361)”, so Jeremy and his companions are not only “othered” externally, they are also shaped by an internalized force that permeates their bodies, emotions, and even their words.

In this context, besides being an act enacted by individuals, identity performance functions as a representation designed, imposed, and internalized by power. The narrative thus demonstrates how discourse operates simultaneously as an external struggle and an internal coercion, evolving into a multilayered critique of power that exposes the limits placed upon individuals’ capacity to construct their own narratives.

In this story, where the boundaries between human and machine blur and the manipulation of the mind becomes literalized, the characters, especially the narrator Jeremy, experience an internal conflict over who they are and what the discourse surrounding them signifies as “reality.” After Mike announces that help is coming, Jeremy’s sarcastic line “Wow, thanks, adult son Mike, we did not know, until you just now told us, that we are human beings.” (Saunders, 2022, p.12) gradually gives way to “anxious expressions”, signaling a rupture in the mental programming that has governed his consciousness. Through this subtle shift in narrative tone, readers perceive that the thoughts implanted in Jeremy’s mind begin to fracture. At moments, these instrumentally used individuals, whose sole purpose is to provide pleasure for the elite, begin to question their own existence, selves, and perspectives, as revealed in Jeremy’s line: “On the other hand, if they are happy, how will I ever be?” (Saunders, 2022, p.37).

However, Jeremy’s sense of self, his thoughts, and emotions are continually manipulated by the data fed into the machine. Although he occasionally wishes to perceive these as his own authentic feelings, the reader clearly observes that he remains under the influence of external programming. In one scene, when Mrs. U adjusts the settings for his speech, Jeremy declares, “I am not a captain from Minnesota, I say. I am me, I am Jeremy, one of your Speakers.” (Saunders, 2022, p.23). The repetition of the pronoun “I” not only marks an assertion of individuality and agency but also exposes his simultaneous acceptance of the position assigned to him within discourse. Even as Mrs. U perceives this brief act of defiance, she abruptly ends the conversation by shutting down the system. What appears on the surface to be a romantic moment thus reinforces the discourse of power and control through its sudden termination.

When one member of the “White Cap Consortium” learns that Mrs. U has sexually assaulted Jeremy, she claims that the act was consensual. Another member then asks, “How can it be consensual when your victim’s been brain-wiped and Pinioned to a Wall and has no memories whatsoever of ever having been out of this room?” (Saunders, 2022, p.47). Although Jeremy outwardly agrees with the account, his internal thought remains

as in this line: "... This is just me, myself, speaking from the heart." (Saunders, 2022, p.47). In the following scene, when another member increases Jeremy's settings to their highest level, the boundary between reality and the performance becomes almost imperceptible. For Jeremy, now embodying the role of Harrington within the re-enactment, the distinction between his actual reality and the simulated one collapses, as conveyed in his words: "Why not use it [the weapon]? to save my dear friends the Untermeyers, surrounded back on the Last Stand Hill, at the point of death, over near the Podium?" (Saunders, 2022, p.50). Trapped between reality and simulation, Jeremy loses access to his sense of self and identity. His statements "But I am an officer, the Bravest Man..." (Saunders, 2022, p.50) and "No wife, no kids. And I think I would remember that." (Saunders, 2022, p.51) reveal this oscillation between his fictional role and his real self. The use of the word "think" hints at a subtle moment of discursive resistance, a glimpse of self-awareness that challenges the imposed reality. Indeed, later in the story, Jeremy recalls his former identity, family, and children, reaching the following moment of realization:

Why am I even here, I Speak. On this murderous march? Upon this Speaking Wall? Have my thoughts and deeds ever truly my own? Do I not hang perpetually inert here, until Pulsed? Why must I and Lauren, and Craig, and our Singers, hang here ...? ... Has anyone ever, for my enjoyment Spoken words I have given them to Speak? Has anyone Sung, even once, for my pleasure? (Saunders, 2022, p.52).

This inner monologue marks a discursive rupture, a moment in which the individual strives to reclaim cognitive and linguistic autonomy. Jeremy begins to confront with the external domination but also the internalized mechanisms of power that have shaped him. The names he enumerates—Lauren, Craig, the Singers—refer precisely to those who remain subjugated within the narrative.

Ultimately, the story offers a profound critique not only of how individuals' identities are instrumentalized as spectacle for the elite's pleasure but also of how this instrumentalization is internalized through discourse and power, and how individuals attempt to break free from it. Jeremy's story thus becomes an example of the conflict and resistance that arises between the search for identity and the pervasive hegemony of power.

### **Othering**

The depiction of the Battle of Little Bighorn as the central action of the story embodies a postmodern feature through its narrative-within-a-narrative structure. However, it also holds a significant ideological weight in terms of the messages it conveys. The Battle of Little Bighorn, fought in 1876 between united Native American forces and the U.S. Seventh Cavalry Regiment, ended in a Native victory ([www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov)). When it comes to the performed reenactment, the "Speakers" successively assume the identities of soldiers and civilians who took part in the battle, narrating events from their respective perspectives. Initially, while the "Speakers" embody American soldiers, they describe the local people as 'demons.' Under the influence of the Mode, however, Jeremy and his companions later inhabit the identities of the Native Americans, and through Jeremy's narration, the scene reverses perspective to depict how American soldiers appear from the viewpoint of the Indigenous people:

And then we become those "fiends", those Lakota, Arapaho, and Northern Cheyenne, these sons and husbands and brothers, to whom the white devils on the hill no longer appear frightening (as they did in the early moments of the attack, when the sleepy village was caught by surprise) but, instead, pitiful and disgusting; they have traveled far, to kill

our children, and when we fought back like men, they panicked, threw down their arms, cried, begged, crawled away. (Saunders, 2022, p.20)

The words used in this section—‘fiends,’ ‘white devils,’ ‘pitiful,’ ‘disgusting,’ ‘kill,’ ‘fight back,’ ‘cry,’ ‘beg,’ and ‘crawl’—are ideologically charged terms that exemplify van Dijk’s (1998) conceptualization of othering discourse. Such lexical choices construct a moral and human hierarchy between social groups, establishing a “we” versus “they” dichotomy that devalues the opposing side. As van Dijk (2006a) argues, othering operates not only verbally but also cognitively and socially; here, the act of naming demonizes the other and legitimizes ideology while actually reaffirming the Guests’ ingroup identity because the discourse deployed in the performance functions to shape the audience’s moral and emotional responses, thereby reproduces and reinforces dominant ideology.

The narrator’s subsequent statement “How did we, the mighty Seventh, come to this? We are aghast to have been so reduced by what we had imagined to be a paltry force of feeble savages but turned out to be a swift killing machine perfectly pitched to existing conditions of geography and landscape.” (Saunders, 2022, p.22) constitutes another salient example of ideological and othering discourse. The adjectives ‘aghast,’ ‘savages,’ and ‘paltry force’ sustain the binary opposition between the self and the other through the pejorative representation of the latter. Van Dijk (1998) explains such discursive polarization through the systematic opposition of positive ingroup representations and negative outgroup ones. Here, the dominant group- the Seventh Cavalry- is positioned as rational, strong, and civilized, while the outgroup -the Natives- is depicted as irrational, violent, and primitive. Yet the phrase “a swift killing machine” reveals how the same act of violence is ideologically reframed depending on perspective: the dominant group legitimizes its own violence as “duty”, “defense”, or “heroism” but defines the other’s violence as “moral corruption” or “barbary”. This double standard exposes how power becomes naturalized through discourse. Since the dominant group’s killing aligns with state ideology, it is not perceived as unethical, whereas the same act, when performed by the other, is stigmatized as a threat or atrocity. The narrator’s ensuing horror thus signifies not only physical brutality but also an ideological collapse at the cognitive level. As van Dijk (2008a) observes while discourse describes reality, it also structures individuals’ perception of it. Accordingly, this passage reveals the narrator’s ideological disorientation within the performance, even as he attempts to compensate for it by re-demonizing the other.

The line, “Why must we be perpetually harassed by these literal stupid killers? ... They resemble pigs in their coloration and attitudes. These clothed pigs have come ... into the tender skeleton of the village...” (Saunders, 2022, p.33), exemplifies van Dijk’s model of othering in discourse. Here, the soldiers of the Seventh Cavalry are not only vilified as enemies but also dehumanized through animalistic comparison. According to van Dijk (1995), othering is a systematic process enacted through discourse, in which the target group is typically portrayed with negative definitions, to illustrate, irrational, dangerous, and inferior etc. In the story, expressions such as “clothed pigs”, “stupid killers”, and “with the selfish shortsightedness of animals” position the soldiers as morally and cognitively inferior, generating a discourse of dehumanization. The “positive us – negative them” dichotomy, as described by van Dijk (2005), is clearly observable in this passage: the narrator, originally aligned with white American identity, through the transformative power of discourse adopts the perspective of the oppressed group, depicting himself as a victim under threat while positioning the other as a savage aggressor. In this discourse, although the enemy’s dehumanized portrayal serves as a part of a war narrative, it also functions as a mechanism that perpetuates hate speech within

collective memory. Thus, the language used in the play is not a neutral medium of narration but an ideologically charged act, for as van Dijk (2001) explains language is one of the primary instruments through which social inequalities are reproduced.

Even though performed as a theatrical representation of a historical event, Mr. U's description of the Battle of Little Bighorn as the "The American Iliad" (Saunders, 2022, p.29) serves as a potent example of how dominant ideology is reproduced through discourse. From a CDA perspective, this expression reflects the process by which historical violence is mythologized, legitimized, and aestheticized. The true significance of this discourse, however, lies not merely in its content but in the social position of the speaker, Mr. U., who represents the worldview and ideology of the ruling class within the narrative universe. Within van Dijk's framework of the relationship between discourse and social cognition, the "Speakers", whose memories have been erased and reprogrammed, function as instruments of dominant discourse. Mr. U's statement is thus an internalized reflection of hegemonic ideology. By compelling Jeremy and his companions to perform the play, Mr. U. ensures that they contribute indirectly to the reproduction of hegemonic discourse, reenacting the dominant narrative through their own bodies and voices. This dramatizes how the elite class perpetuates its ideological narrative by appropriating the bodies and voices of the oppressed. Through this narrative construction, Saunders exposes the way discourse functions as a tool in the historical production of hegemony and how this process intertwines with class-based domination. Hence, the passage constructs, through the character's perception of the world, a discursive framework of systematic othering and denigration of the opposing group.

When considered in light of Foucault's (1995) concept of the power-knowledge relation, this dynamic can be read as the deprivation of the oppressed of their right to function as discursive subjects and their coercion into articulating only those narratives that reflect dominant power structures. The "Speakers" are not narrators of their own history but performers of a curated historical fiction chosen by the ruling class.

### The Effect of Capitalism

In *Liberation Day*, the dominant group's possession of economic capital grants it control over power, allowing technology to function as both a mechanism of surveillance and coercion. Their restriction of access to knowledge and pleasure solely to themselves further signals the presence of a capitalist discourse. When the Untermeyer family stages the Battle of Little Bighorn, a group—supported by their son Mike—interrupts the performance. Identified as the "White Cap Consortium", this group constructs a counter-discourse by defending the Speakers' and Singers' rights to be free individuals. For, as van Dijk asserts ideologies are not limited to dominant groups; non-dominant or oppositional groups also share and reproduce ideologies (1995, p.21). The spokesperson of the Consortium delivers the following declaration:

These individuals (he says, indicating we Speakers, we Singers) are not animals, not toys, not playthings. How would Company like it? If they, or their spouse, or one of their children, or one of their parents had his or her memory eradicated via the Morley Procedure (or Morley II for Singers) and thereby lost all awareness of who they were, howw they had lived, what they had valued, whom they had loved, and woke to find themselves mounted on some stranger's Speaking Wall, compelled to perform like a trained beast for the cheap amusement of a bryaing crowd. (Saunders, 2022, p.44)

The White Cap Consortium speaks from a morally indignant, humanist position that openly challenges the apparatus of elite entertainment. Its rhetoric is interrogative and analogical: by asking, "How would Company like it?" and then invoking the image of

awakening bound to a Speaking Wall, it employs a strategy of role reversal that defamiliarizes the performance and re-humanizes the Speakers and Singers. The accumulation of family relational nouns- spouses, children and parents- foregrounds the social bonds effaced by the practice of Morley Procedure, thereby exposing the capitalist logic that commodifies bodies as a form of cheap entertainment. Discursively, the Consortium constructs a positive “in-group” (the exploited) and attributes ethical blame to the Utermeyer family and their spectators, which is a typical instance of the ideological polarization strategy frequently observed in CDA. Yet, the Consortium’s focus on the moral rather than structural critique of the system reflects its limited institutional power: it targets not the political-economic framework enabling such practices, but only its moral consequences.

Mr. U’s response:

No one was coerced. On the contrary, these Speakers, these Singers, they applied. And considered it a great privilege to have been accepted. And are well compensated. Money is sent – believe me, I write the checks every month – to their designees. These folks, honestly? Are like family to us. You people mayb not like it, but everyone here has consented to this arrangement and, if I may say so, as terrible as you may feel me to be, I have, at least, never killed anyone (Saunders, 2022, p.44)

functions as the managerial voice of the performance and exemplifies what Bourdieu (1991) terms symbolic violence: the imposition of a vision of reality that the dominated themselves come to internalize. In this sense, Mr. U’s discourse becomes an instrument in the reproduction of symbolic domination that legitimizes one class’s power over another. Through strategic rhetorical maneuvers such as “They volunteered”, “Money is sent”, and “a privilege to have been accepted”, he rationalizes an ethically problematic system by masking its coercive nature. These statements obscure the material condition of the individuals (whose minds have been erased) and reframe their apparent “consent” as autonomous choice, creating the illusion that the participants are empowered rather than oppressed. The claim that “[they] are well compensated … I write those checks every month” reframes exploitation as fair market exchange: if labor is compensated, it is presumed not to be exploited. Mr. U’s explanation highlights his ideology on economically centered arguments to justify inequality. Here, the elite rationalizes its domination of the powerless through the discourse of remuneration. Similarly, the assertion “They’re like family to us” functions as an effective softener that normalizes asymmetrical power relations by invoking the intimacy and trust associated with the family institution.

The pronoun opposition (“they” vs. “we”) reproduces the classic positive self-presentation/negative other-presentation dichotomy (van Dijk, 2005), while the comparative clause “at least I haven’t killed anyone” minimizes moral responsibility through a less-evil-than rhetoric. Mr. U’s speech thus crystallizes the essence of capitalist discourse: exploitation becomes legitimate, humane, and even honorable when mediated through the language of wage, choice, and care. Jeremy and his companions are consequently guided to believe they occupy the more “human” side of the interaction, which is a manipulation revealed in Jeremy’s reflections:

I feel like applauding. Why are these rude individuals here in our home with their violence? I do not know about ‘compensation’ or the ‘designees or any of that, but feel proud of Mr. U’s courage and confident that his eloquence will save the day. (Saunders, 2022, pp. 44–45)

Jeremy represents the subjectivity of the commodified performer oscillating between submission and emerging resistance. His remark, “I feel like applauding...feel proud of Mr. U’s courage”, is double-voiced: on the surface it signals affirmation of Mr. U and internalization of the dominant ideology, yet beneath it, the evident ignorance “I don’t know about the ‘compensation’...” reveals the gap between what Untermeyer family is actually doing and what Jeremy and his companions are experiencing in reality. Jeremy’s language simultaneously enacts a discursive struggle: the possessive “our home” clashes with his dispossession, while the expression “I feel proud and confident” expresses a fragile faith that freedom can be achieved through self-persuasion. His discourse thus exposes the dual process Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence elucidates—reproduction of domination on the one hand, and, in fleeting moments of reflexive doubt, the latent potential to question and overturn it.

### Conclusion

This study has explored George Saunders’ *Liberation Day* through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to uncover how language functions as a medium of power, ideology, and social control. Within Saunders’ dystopian framework, discourse becomes a tool of cognitive regulation, shaping perception, emotion, and identity. In line with van Dijk’s (2008) concept of “mind control”, the story illustrates how access to language and knowledge determines who is empowered to speak, think, and exist as a subject.

The Untermeyer family embodies the symbolic elite who monopolize both economic and discursive capital. Their use of technology and erasure of memory exemplify symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991), where domination is disguised as consent and autonomy. Through a language of privilege, payment, and belonging, exploitation is reframed as choice, which generates as an ideological mechanism that mirrors capitalist rationalizations of inequality. The re-enactment of the Battle of Little Bighorn serves as a meta-discursive commentary on historical representation. By dramatizing van Dijk’s (1995) us–them polarization, Saunders reveals how hegemonic discourse mythologizes violence and legitimizes power through moral and linguistic inversion.

Saunders’ authorial intention is not merely to depict oppression but to critique the mechanisms that render it acceptable. His fiction aims to expose the fragility of empathy and the moral compromises of modern society where technology, capitalism, and discourse converge to normalize subjugation. Through characters like Jeremy, who experience fleeting discursive ruptures, Saunders reveals both the possibility and the limitation of awakening within systems of control. Ultimately, *Liberation Day* embodies Saunders’ humanist vision: to confront readers with the ethical consequences of indifference and to challenge them to recognize how easily language can sustain domination and manipulation. Analysed within CDA principles, Saunders’ short story merged with postmodern narrative techniques, turns its fictional narrative into a site of moral inquiry and social critique, where the silenced human voice becomes the final frontier of liberation.

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