

Deviance in George Saunders' "Tenth of December"

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Abstract:

Modern narrative powerfully explores characters who deviate from established social expectations, especially regarding personal identity and well-being. Severe personal burdens and societal neglect fundamentally alter how an individual assesses their worth and manages their essential relationships. This often compels them to adopt a private, non-conforming reality, isolating them from the community. This paper analyses George Saunders' pivotal short story, "Tenth of December," using Deviance Theory as a critical lens to examine character construction. The narrative presents Don Eber as a person who plans suicide (a social deviance), and Robin as one who is engaged in escapist fantasy (a social non-conformity). Saunders uses deeply subjective narration to reveal how both the characters' inner worlds are shaped by and react against, the labeling of failure and illness applied by society. By employing Deviance Theory, the analysis investigates how the story's objective is to subvert the label of "deviant." The study will focus on the fact that the characters' most powerful moral and empathetic act emerges from their personal non-conformity, not from a desire to return to social norms. This demonstrates that true ethical action can spring from unexpected, private places, ultimately serving to critique society's narrow definitions of acceptable behaviour.

Keywords: Deviance Theory, Subjectivity, Non-Conformity, Empathy, Humanity.

Introduction:

Contemporary literature refers to literary works produced from the late twentieth century to the present and is marked by its engagement with the complexities of modern life. In contrast to the earlier literary periods that often focussed on grand narratives and stable moral frameworks, contemporary literature reflects uncertainty, fragmentation and rapid

social change. It widely captures the themes of alienation, identity crisis, social inequality, moral ambiguity, psychological conflict and ethical responsibility. Contemporary writers of literature challenge traditional narrative forms by employing fragmented structures, shifting perspectives, satire and dark humour. They also centre marginalised voices, unconventional characters and forms of social deviance. As such, contemporary literature mirrors the political, economic, technological and cultural transformations of modern society and offers critical insight into human behaviour within these changing conditions.

Deviance behaviour that falls outside socially accepted norms has become one of the dominant concerns of contemporary literature. This concern aligns closely with sociological theories that examine how societies define, regulate and respond to non-conformity. Literary texts often portray deviant characters not as inherently immoral but as individuals who are moulded by social pressures, economic inequality, mental illness and emotional isolation. George Saunders' *Tenth of December* exemplifies the concept by presenting characters whose deviant actions arise from systemic injustice and moral struggle rather than individual failure.

Deviance Theory is a sociological approach that examines behaviours, thoughts and actions that violate societal norms and expectations. Deviance is not an inherent quality of an act or individual; rather, it is a social construct that is altered by cultural standards that vary across time and place. The standards of deviance vary across societies and time. Deviance Theory emphasises the role of social norms, labelling, social control and stigma in shaping human behaviour. Individuals who fail to conform to dominant expectations are often labelled as "abnormal" or "deviant" and consequently marginalised or excluded.

The major theorists associated with Deviance Theory include Émile Durkheim, Howard Becker, Robert K. Merton and Edwin Lemert. Émile Durkheim viewed deviance as a normal and essential part of society, arguing that it helps reinforce social norms and promotes social change. Robert K. Merton's Strain Theory links deviance to social structures, suggesting that individuals engage in deviant behaviour when they fail to achieve socially approved goals through legitimate means. Howard Becker's Labelling Theory focusses on how deviance is created through social reactions rather than through the act itself. Becker famously states, "Deviance is not a quality of the act a person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions" (9). Travis Hirschi mentioned that, "The stronger a person's attachment to society, the less likely he is to commit deviant acts" (16). Edwin Lemert further distinguishes between primary deviance, which refers to initial rule-breaking, and secondary deviance, which occurs when individuals internalise the deviant label imposed by society.

George Saunders, a prominent contemporary American writer is known for his satirical, darkly comic and emotionally resonant narratives. His works reflect capitalism, consumer culture, power structures and moral failure through the portrayals of characters who exist on the margins of society. Saunders often blends realism with dystopian and absurd elements to expose social injustice and ethical contradictions. His writings foreground empathy, human vulnerability and moral responsibility, making his work particularly relevant to sociological and ethical analysis. Some of Saunders' notable works include *Civil War Land in Bad Decline*, *Pastoralia*, *In Persuasion Nation*, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, and *Tenth of December*. Among these, *Tenth of December* stands out for its intense psychological depth and social critique. The collection presents characters who are economically insecure, mentally unstable, emotionally isolated or morally conflicted.

Tenth of December is a collection of short stories that highlight ordinary individuals confronting extraordinary moral and psychological struggles. Saunders depicts characters who feel powerless, isolated and trapped by societal expectations. These individuals often deviate from social norms not as an innate urge but due to emotional distress, fear and desperation. The title story, "Tenth of December" centres on themes of mental illness, self-sacrifice and moral redemption. The protagonist, Don Eber, struggles with terminal illness and depression, leading him to plan his own death to spare his family from suffering. His actions, while socially deviant, emerge from compassion and moral concern rather than selfishness. Similarly, other stories in the collection depict characters whose deviance stems from economic hardship, corporate exploitation and emotional alienation. Saunders exposes how institutional systems—corporations, healthcare and social hierarchies—contribute to individual suffering. Through these portrayals, the writer depicts deviance as a response to systemic failure rather than a personal flaw.

Previous studies on George Saunders largely focus on postmodernism, satire, capitalism, dystopia, narrative technique and moral philosophy. Critics have analysed his use of absurdity, fragmented narration and ethical humanism. Some studies also examine mental illness, empathy and moral responsibility in his works. While Deviance Theory has been applied broadly in literary criticism, limited scholarly attention has been given to analysing "Tenth of December" specifically through a deviance-centered theoretical framework. Existing research lacks an emphasised examination of how deviance operates as a central theme in this text.

The primary objective of this study is to apply Deviance Theory as a critical framework to selected stories in George Saunders' "Tenth of December" to understand how deviant behaviour is constructed and represented in contemporary literature. The study seeks

to examine how characters who deviate from societal norms are portrayed not as morally flawed individuals but as products of social, psychological and economic pressures. By closely analysing character behaviour, internal conflicts and narrative outcomes, the research aims to reveal the complex relationship between individual agency and social structure. The study also aims to explore how society labels and marginalises individuals. It investigates the role of social norms, institutional authority and power structures in defining what is considered normal and deviant. It also examines how labelling leads to stigma, exclusion and emotional alienation, thereby reinforcing deviant identities, as proposed by theorists such as Howard Becker and Edwin Lemert.

This research adopts a qualitative and textual analysis methodology in George Saunders's "Tenth of December". Qualitative analysis is appropriate because the research interprets characters' behaviours, thoughts and social interactions rather than measuring numerical data. Through close textual reading, the study examines how deviant actions such as Don Eber's suicidal intentions and Robin's socially unconventional fantasies challenge societal norms and expectations. Library research complements this approach by drawing on existing scholarly articles, literary criticism and theoretical texts related to deviance theory, particularly concepts of norm violation, social control and moral judgment.

Social construction means that deviance is created by society and not naturally present in individuals. Every society forms its own rules, values and expectations about proper behaviour. These rules are shaped through culture, traditions, education, religion and law. As societies are different, the meaning of deviance also changes. Berger and Luckmann state that, "Reality is socially constructed and sociology is the study of that construction" (15). Peter McLaren argues that, "Knowledge is not neutral; it is constructed within power relations and social contexts that define what is considered legitimate" (12). An action seen as wrong in one community may be accepted in another. This shows that deviance is not fixed but socially produced. It depends on how society defines and controls behaviour.

Don Eber's actions in "Tenth of December" are influenced by society's expectations about strength, responsibility, and productivity. His illness and inability to earn money make him feel that he no longer fits the social image of a successful man. This social pressure causes him to view himself as a burden. His decision is shaped by these social values rather than personal weakness. Saunders shows how society itself creates conditions for deviance. The story highlights how social norms can compel individuals to act against their own interests or well-being. It also emphasises that deviance often emerges not from moral failure but from the constraints imposed by societal expectations.

Labelling refers to the process through which society identifies certain individuals as different or unacceptable. Once a person is labelled, it strongly influences how others treat them. Over time, the individual may accept this label and begin to see themselves through it. Erving Goffman argues that, “The stigmatized individual tends to hold the same beliefs about identity that we do; this can lead to self-hate and self-derogation” (7). The label becomes more powerful than the actual behaviour. This process often pushes individuals toward isolation and emotional suffering. In this way, deviance is created by social reaction.

Labelling operates as a quiet yet powerful social force that shapes how characters perceive themselves and others in “Tenth of December”. The characters are often reduced to categories such as ‘failure,’ ‘burden’ or ‘misfit’ and these unspoken labels influence their sense of worth and their behaviour. Although Don Eber is not openly called deviant, he feels silently labelled as weak and useless because of his illness. He begins to believe that he no longer has any value in the roles he once performed. This emotional labelling affects his confidence and decisions. Other characters also experience similar silent judgments based on their social and economic conditions. Saunders shows how labelling shapes identity and behaviour.

Power dynamics explain how those who control social institutions decide what behavior is acceptable. People with authority shape rules that others must follow. Those with less power suffer when they fail to meet these expectations. Michel Foucault notes that, “Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (93). Similarly, Steven Lukes argues that, “Is it not the supreme exercise of power to get another or others to have the desires you want them to have — that is, to secure their compliance by controlling their thoughts and desires?” (27). Often, individuals are blamed for problems created by larger systems. This unequal distribution of power strongly influences who is considered deviant. Deviance therefore reflects social inequality.

George Saunders’ “Tenth of December” presents characters trapped by economic systems and institutional pressures. Don Eber’s fear of becoming a financial burden comes from the larger social structure. He feels powerless against medical costs and social expectations. His choices reflect his lack of control over the forces that shape his life. The story shows how power structures influence personal suffering. Saunders suggests that these systems quietly condition individuals to measure their worth through productivity and financial usefulness. As a result, power operates not through direct coercion but through internalised pressure that shapes thought, emotion and action.

The relative and subjective nature of deviance means that deviance changes according to social context and perspective. Moral values differ across cultures and time periods. The norm that is unacceptable in one society may be normal in another. This shows that deviance is not universal. It depends on social judgment rather than absolute truth. For example, behaviors like dress codes, gender roles or substance use can be condemned in one culture but accepted in another. Even within the same society, perceptions of deviance can shift over time as social attitudes evolve. This relativity highlights that deviance is a social construct shaped by collective beliefs and power relations.

Don Eber's decision is judged differently depending on perspective. While society may see it as wrong, the story presents it as an act of love and responsibility. Saunders invites readers to understand his action within his emotional and social situation. This highlights how deviance is shaped by perspective. This suggests that actions are not inherently deviant but are judged according to social values, context, and viewpoints. By showing the tension between societal expectations and personal morality, Saunders emphasises the complexity of ethical judgment. The story encourages readers to question rigid definitions of right and wrong imposed by social norms. Ultimately, it illustrates that deviance cannot be understood without considering the individual's circumstances and the societal lens through which their actions are viewed.

Stigma and consequences describe the negative effects faced by individuals labeled as deviant. Erving Goffman explains that, "By definition, of course, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human" (5). Such individuals often experience shame, rejection and emotional isolation. Society's judgment damages their self-esteem and sense of belonging. These emotional consequences can be more painful than the original act. Over time, stigma deeply affects mental and emotional health. As Bruce Link states, "Stigma is a social process that marks individuals as unworthy of full social acceptance" (14). This shows that the harm of deviance extends beyond actions to the social and emotional suffering caused by societal rejection.

Don Eber in "Tenth of December" suffers from deep shame because of his illness and dependency. He believes that he has become a burden. This stigma increases his loneliness and hopelessness. Saunders shows how social judgment leads to emotional suffering. Don internalises this judgment, allowing shame to define his sense of self-worth rather than his humanity. This demonstrates that stigma isolates individuals and intensifies their mental and emotional pain. Saunders reveals how societal attitudes, not just personal circumstances, shape the inner lives of those deemed deviant.

Deviance amplification happens when society's reaction intensifies the problem. Instead of receiving understanding and support, individuals face neglect and judgment. Edwin M. Lemert argues that, "Secondary deviation is deviant behavior that results from societal reaction to the individual" (75). This increases their isolation and emotional pain. As a result, their behavior becomes more extreme. Society's response plays a major role in worsening deviance.

Don Eber's suffering grows because he lacks emotional support and understanding. His problems remain unspoken and unresolved. This silence increases his despair. Saunders shows how society's failure to respond with care amplifies deviant behaviour. Without compassion, Don is pushed further into isolation and self-blame. This neglect reinforces his belief that his existence is a burden to others. Ultimately, the lack of supportive social response intensifies his emotional crisis and actions.

The analysis reveals that characters in "Tenth of December" exhibit deviance not due to inherent immorality but because of social pressure, emotional isolation, and systemic inequality. Deviant behaviour emerges as a survival strategy or moral response to overwhelming circumstances. Saunders challenges conventional moral judgments by presenting deviant characters with empathy and complexity. Society's lack of compassion and rigid norms contribute significantly to the marginalisation of these individuals.

Saunders' work when analysed through the lens of Deviance Theory, demonstrates that deviance is socially constructed and often reflects institutional failure. His portrayal aligns with Durkheim's view of deviance as a necessary social phenomenon and Becker's emphasis on labelling. By humanising deviant characters, Saunders critiques the social systems that create and sustain inequality. In summing up, "Tenth of December" effectively aligns with Deviance Theory as it explores non-conforming behaviour shaped by social forces rather than individual moral weakness. George Saunders presents deviance as a reflection of societal flaws, emphasizing empathy, ethical responsibility, and human vulnerability. This study contributes to existing scholarship by offering a deviance-centred reading of the text.

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