



Humanism in Crisis: Ironizing Panopticism and Biopower in W. H. Auden's "The Unknown Citizen"

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Abstract— This article examines as to how humanism is in crisis in modern times caused by the growing individualism, materialism, conformism, manipulation and the primacy of technology in human life. Invoking the Agambenian idea of "biopower", Foucauldian concept of "panopticon" and the critical concept, "modernist irony", this paper argues that the mentioned poem uses irony to expose and criticize the modern states' panoptical surveillance and biopolitical control of their own citizens. When the citizens are alive they are used as functional bodies to operate in accordance with the requirement to the bureaucratic institutions but after their death, they are simply reduced into numbers disregarding their specific human character traits such as love, self-awareness, consideration, creativity, reliability, spirituality, etc. It is in this sense, the claims and commitments of modern states doing things for social, political, economic, intellectual, emotional and spiritual well-being of citizens are mere illusion and deception.

Keywords— Bureaucracy, Modern States, Panopticon, Biopower, Humanism, State Mechanisms, Disjunctive Irony.

W. H. Auden's poem "The Unknown Citizen" (1940) unravels the modernist crisis of humanism caused by the growing individualism, materialism, conformism, manipulation, and primacy of technology in human life. Written at the backdrop of a series of historical events in the decade of 1930s that saw the clouds gathering for the Second World War, this poem places spotlight on the growing dehumanization of humans due to uncertain and unfavorable situation. The poem also veers around the panoptic snooping of the bureaucratic governments of modern states over the private life of the citizens to drive them to conform to existing norms and make them pliable cogs in the state-machine. The modern states, then, claimed that they were not only safeguarding the fundamental rights of their citizens but they were also striving for the well-being of their citizens. The claim has been getting a consistent boost since then. However, Auden dismisses the claim by disclosing that the so-called modern states are doing nothing but merely treating their

citizens in terms of their utility value. This paper argues that "The Unknown Citizen" uses irony to expose and criticize the modern states' panoptical surveillance and biopolitical control of their own citizens.

The modern states, through multiple bureaucratic mechanisms, delve deeply into people's lives and collect information just to render them into statistical data disregarding their specific human character traits such as love, self-awareness, consideration, creativity, reliability, spirituality, etc. When they are alive they are used as functional bodies to operate in accordance with the requirement to the bureaucratic institutions but after their death, they are simply reduced into numbers. The people cannot act as per their desires and expectations; they act but only as puppets to the authorities.

Literature review shows that the biopolitical dimension of the poem has received only sketchy and oblique attention from the critics. Biswarup Das, for

example, interprets this poem as "the expression of the predicament of modern humanity, which foregrounds the futility of mundane enterprise" (44). He, however, does not look at the role of enterprises in bringing about the anonymity of modern existence. Similarly, K. Thangaraj asserts that the poem "is a portrayal of a conflict between the rights of an individual and the control of the government over the individual" (2), but a biopolitical line of analysis goes missing. Christina Wati and Moses Glorino Rumambo Pandin also promise to focus on the treatment, in the poem, of "the relationship between the alienated modern life and the loss of personal identity affected by modern technology" (2). Their line of analysis, however, falls short of the critical approach of biopolitics. So is the situation with Arvind Vasantrao Deshmukh, according to whom, "The Unknown Citizen" attacks "the concept of a human being who is not anything more than the product of all the economic, commercial and ideological pressure groups, which force him to conform to a standard pattern of life and thought" (4). Likewise, James Persoon and Robert R. Watson, focusing on the status of anonymity of the protagonist, make the point that he is "a [mere] statistic to be used in graphs and flowcharts by various governmental agencies and social bodies" (488). Here again the focus on the use of the elusive personality of the protagonist does not take the line of biopolitics. Also, the line of modernist disjunctive irony is a far cry in the above critical studies which do not analyze the poem from the perspective of disjunctive irony and the crisis of humanism amidst panoptic gaze and biopower of modern states. This paper, hence, makes an attempt to bridge this critical gap.

"The Unknown Citizen" unpacks the plight of a modern person due to his biopolitical control by the state. As a result, his identity is eclipsed by bureaucratic institutions that have invaded his individuality, privacy and freedom. The protagonist, the unknown citizen of this poem, is a true representative of modern people, whose rights to do things with free will and agencies are suspended due to the government's intervention through different organizations. Even his real identity is confiscated and reduced into a numerical one. The government has erected a marble monument in his memory and he is identified as "TO JS/07/M/378". This identity marker of the unknown citizen exposes the attitude of the government towards the citizens. The citizens are valued as long as their biological body is functional and instrumental to operate the system otherwise they are simply turned into numerical figures, which is a prime example of biopolitical control of the citizens by the states.

Biopolitics is understood as a system of persistent surveillance and discipline by which the

government strives and aspires to control the physical existence of citizens. It also relates to how politics and government policy influence the biological aspects of people's lives. In his most celebrated book, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Italian Political thinker and philosopher, Giorgio Agamben claims that "the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power" (6). He means to say that biopower and sovereignty are essentially integrated and that of the production of a biopolitical body is the target of sovereign power/ modern states. The protagonist and his reduction into a bundle of information by the sovereignty after his death can be seen in the following lines:

He was found by the Bureau of Statistics
to be

One against whom there was no official
complaint,

All the reports on his conduct agree

That, in the modern sense of an old-
fashioned word, he was a saint

For in everything he did he served the
Greater Community. (Line 1-5)

The terms "Bureau of Statistics" and "reports" are very significant here. The Bureau of Statistics simply reports and collects information and identifies its citizens on the basis of facts and figures disregarding their distinct identities as humans. These lines also hint that the man was perfect without any official complaint. No reports were against his conduct as he lived as per the expectation of the government. The word "saint" is very evocative here. In the old-fashioned sense of the word, a saint is someone who is a non-conformist sticking to his own convictions and belief systems. The irony; however is that in the modern sense of the word, saint is someone whose convictions and belief systems are guided not by his own conscience but by the existing social, political and economic institutions that expect people to conform to their norms.

Except for the War till the day he retired
He worked in a factory and never got
fired,

But satisfied his employers, Fudge
Motors Inc. (6-8)

The unknown protagonist never got fired from the job as he fully satisfied his employers with his utmost professional devotion and dedication. The reference to Fudge Motors Inc. suggests that it is a huge company that can influence people's minds through its products and offers. It is also capable of shaping the society at large by

manipulating people to buy its products. In modern states, people do not have agency even in their consumption of goods. In modern organizations, the employees are mere cogs of the machines (the company\ the sovereign/the organization\ bureaucracy). This also implicitly reflects as to how they valorize only the biological aspects of their life. The human ideals such as freedom, individuality, love, integrity, social relationship, etc. do not have any meaning when everything is mechanized and manipulated by constant and continuous scrutiny of the states. The following lines bring as to how different organizations collect information related to the protagonist's personal matters to the surface thus:

Yet he wasn't a scab or odd in his views,
For his Union reports that he paid his
dues,
(Our report on his Union shows it was
sound)
And our Social Psychology workers
found
That he was popular with his mates and
liked a drink. (9-13)

As the above lines show, the protagonist's ideology had been crystallized by the policy of the government. He had paid dues/tax to the government so he deserved appreciation. Social Psychology workers spied on him and found that he was not only popular among the company of his friends but was also fond of drinks. Ironically, modern institutions like Social Psychology, instead of serving the citizens, are invading their private affairs.

The Press are convinced that he bought a
paper every day
And that his reactions to advertisements
were normal in every way.
Policies taken out in his name prove that
he was fully insured,
And his Health-card shows he was once
in hospital but left it cured. (14-17)

The act of garnering diversified information about the protagonist through the panoptic gaze of the state by means of multiple agencies mystifies the true personality of the protagonist here. Michel Foucault, in his book, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* uses the term "panopticon" as an architectural design referring to prison house from where each and every activity of prisoners can be detected by the authorities. The chief motive of the prison house, according to Foucault, is to "establish presences and absences, to know where and how to locate individuals, to set up useful communications, to

interrupt others, to be able at each moment to supervise the conduct of each individual" (143). Foucault further clarifies the term by saying that the historical practices of panopticon have changed in modern times into host of institutions as corporations, hospitals, schools, asylums, prisons, etc. The panopticism, in this sense, is the act of holistically scrutinizing people and their activities. The unknown citizen was known through the kind of newspaper he bought and his reaction to advertisements. His identity was also attached with the insurance policies he had chosen and the health card that reflected his clinical status. In other words, he was known through the consumption of different items and services provided by diverse corporations not through his distinct personalities. The modern corporations/ states have panoptic gaze over the people through different goods, services and policies hence, they are not enjoying freedom, rather, are silently under their control. In this connection, Gregory Frantz argues:

Gone is Ralph Waldo Emerson's vision of democracy. Democracy as freedom. Freedom to invent oneself. Freedom to create oneself. Freedom to be an individual, to be different, to discover one's own values. Slowly eroded in part by the awesome powers of corporate advertising, the Emersonian dream has faded quietly from our conscience. In its place has come the culture of consumption and its close companion, the culture of conformity. (4)

Frantz hints that even in so-called modern democratic countries; there is no freedom as such. People cannot do things as per their desires, expectations and conscience. It is because they are confined by the culture of consumption and have to conform as per the norms of the time. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their article, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" also argue that "the triumph of advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them" (qtd. in Pandey 14). What the critics want to say here is that in modern states, people are under the control of corporations and their advertisement of goods and services in such a way that they are forced to consume them being the passive victims of their deceitful enterprises. In the following lines also, the protagonist's identity is marked not by humanistic traits but by the things he consumed:

Both Producers Research and High-
Grade Living declare

He was fully sensible to the advantages
of the Instalment Plan

And had everything necessary to the
Modern Man,

A phonograph, a radio, a car and a
frigidaire.

Our researchers into Public Opinion are
content (18-22)

The unknown protagonist and his family status and other aspects of life are disclosed through the modern items he used at home such as a phonograph, a radio, a car and a refrigerator, etc. As Connor Sheridan asserts, "the rise of the modern security state allows governments and powerful corporations to observe behaviors and trends in citizens and consumers to more easily control them and to enforce checks on transgressive behavior" (44). The act of buying things by installment plan implicitly shows that modern people are forced to buy things through installment plans not through their free will. As Agamben observes, "in modern society political sovereignty, by dint of the institutional forms and effects of civilization, is directed against the human being's natural existence and his or her biological and animal functions [...] these functions are maintained in existence, but closely controlled by the juridical, administrative, and executive power of the state" (qtd. in Finlayson 100). The modern states' biopolitical intervention against the citizens through host of institutions is so pervasive that they cannot enjoy absolute freedom and hence are under their stronghold. They are also dehumanized due to the suspension of their natural existence, biological and instinctual functions of the bodies through the imposition of institutional and administrative mechanisms by the states. The disclosure of the protagonist's personal and familial life only with utilitarian motive of agencies can be traced to the following lines:

That he held the proper opinions for the
time of year;

When there was peace, he was for peace:
when there was war, he went.

He was married and added five children
to the population,

Which our Eugenist says was the right
number for a parent of his generation.
(23-26)

The reference of the protagonist's participation in the time of peace and war implicitly indicates the state's prime concern over his functional body to operate the entire system either in favorable or in hostile situation. He was a married man with five children, which according to

Eugenist, was the ideal number of his generation. Eugenist, an advocate of improving the human race with desirable character traits in humans, even knew that his five children had desirable character traits for improving the quality of the human race. The reference of eugenist also indicates that scientific institutions have primary focus on biological aspects of people at the cost of their human characteristics. The protagonist's other aspects of life are further exposed in the following lines:

And our teachers report that he never
interfered with their education.

Was he free? Was he happy? The
question is absurd:

Had anything been wrong, we should
certainly have heard. (27-29)

He had provided a good education to his children. As per the demand of the age, he had invested a good amount for his children's education. He never interfered in their pursuit of education. On the whole, he had everything required for a modern person. Now, the question arises: was he happy and free? The question is meaningless. Had there been anything wrong, things would have been known to all. Had he been enjoying his rights being happy and free, things would have been known. Ironically, he was happy amidst the wide-spread organizational and bureaucratic interventions that marred his distinguishing qualities as a human being.

Irony, generally speaking, is a disagreement between manifestation and motive of the writers in literary texts. When disparities and incongruities occur between action and assertion, irony just comes to the fore. Here, Auden uses modernist irony in order to dramatize the effect of the crisis of regimentation in the modern mechanized era. According to Alan Wilde, modernism is "ironic consciousness of disjunction and disruption" (qtd. in Paul Bové 245). Since modern society is full of disparities, contradictions and absurdities, a person can be ironically consciousness about such realities; however s/he can do nothing to overcome them. Bové affirms that "the ironic poem not only supersedes the limitations of a logical order of perception but also goes beyond a vision of actuality defined solely by causal science" (731). The point which the critic makes here is that an ironic poem can be understood not only by surface logic but by the virtue of its underlying meaning/ close reading which sees irony neither as "the resolution of apparent oppositions in verbal paradox nor the topological aporia of the sign itself but rather "a mode of consciousness" . . . essentially [as] "the modern attitude of mind, the "vision" of the twentieth century's industrial world" (Bové 245). This non-resolution makes the irony disjunctive which simply makes

a person aware of the contradictions in the surrounding but can do nothing to transcend and hence has to give in, conform and compromise. As Beerendra Pandey observes, the "locus of [modernist] irony is the aesthetic consciousness which is unable to resolve the dilemma it posits;" it, however, leads to a sharp awareness of the things gone wrong, but without the inducement towards a definite redemption (117). Irony in "The Unknown Citizen" does generate a trenchant awareness of an end to the bureaucratic control over human individuality, but it does not envision emancipation from the biopolitical stranglehold. In the poem, the bureaucracy, that has prepared the obituary of the citizen, has obviously acted on behalf of the state, fully knowing that each and every member of the bureaucracy is being subjected to the predicament as that of the unfortunate protagonist. However, there is no room for an escape from the biopolitical regimentation by the state.

The poem starts with the findings of the unknown citizens by the Bureau of Statistics, which are nothing but the numbers on a spreadsheet. As the poem proceeds, the unknown citizen turns out to be facts and figures at the cost of his distinct characteristics as a human being. The frequent use of third person pronoun "he" refers to the unworthiness of the citizen in the modern industrial world. The use of first person pronoun "our" in line 11 and 27 shows that the speaker of the poem is a bureaucrat which ironically gives the idea that his plight is same as that of the unknown citizen. The poet has also made use of capitalization: Bureau of Statistics, Greater Community, War, Fudge Motors, Union, Social Psychology, Producers Research, High-Grade Living, Installment Plan, Public Opinion and Eugenist. These are the state-machines of which the unknown citizen is only a part to be replaced and disposed off.

"The Unknown Citizen", thus, is an utterly ironical poem which critiques the panoptic gaze of modern states over the citizens by executing biopower and bureaucratic institutions. The act of panoptic gaze and execution of biopower of the states shows their real face that treat citizens just as disposable objects. It is in this sense, the claims and commitments of modern states doing things for social, political, economic, intellectual, emotional and spiritual well-being of citizens are mere illusion and deception. The modern states seem to be only concerned with biological aspects of people. Their functional bodies are valorized until they can consume goods, services and policies following the norms of the existing authorities. But the moment their biological bodies cease to function, they are regarded as data, facts, figures or flow charts to exhibit others. Under the pretext of scientific and technological revolution, modern states

are striving and aspiring to dehumanize their citizens. Humanistic values that incorporate happiness, freedom, desires, expectations, co-operations and other fundamental characteristics, are far cry in modern world consequently humanism is in crisis. The (disjunctive) irony, however, is that the citizens in modern times are made to conform to the norms of the states in such a way that they are not in position to assert their individuality, and hence are 'unhappily' happy.

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