

The Lost Identity as the Predicament of Modern Man in W.H. Auden's 'The Unknown Citizen'

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ABSTRACT:- The most precious possession of man is his identity. One toils for the greater part of his life to found and sustain it. But in the modern era of machines and technological development man is on the verge of losing it. Unconsciously a person takes for granted the teachings of the society and devotes his energy to build his identity in the socially directed way. What all his effort brings is his 'social identity.' But in the process, his 'self' is lost. Though he remains blissfully unaware of the fact, he becomes an object of the society by losing his subjective entity. He loses himself amidst the crowd, and becomes one among the many. He loses his ability to think, and with that his freedom. He is reduced to a follower of the system. In this way, he becomes a non-entity.

In his famous poem, 'The Unknown Citizen,' the celebrated English-American poet W. H. Auden has dealt with this predicament of modern humanity. The only remedy to this plight is to become aware of and try to know about the 'individual self.'

Keywords:- Identity, Freedom, Self, Society, Consciousness, Existence, External object.

INTRODUCTION

The greatest tragedy of humanity is the lack of identity. Though seemingly against human reality, the statement is at bottom true. When a person is born, he is already defined by the society. The society acts like God, something having the qualities of both the inert 'being -in-itself' (Spade, 'Jean-Paul Sartre's Being and Nothingness,' 73) and the consciousness projecting meaning on it, the 'being-for-itself' (Spade, 80). The all powerful society almost already knows what the new born infant is going to be in future, for it is determined to mould him according to its own principle. Being the victim of social 'interpellation' (The term 'interpellation' was an idea introduced by Louis Althusser (1918-1990) to explain the way in which ideas get into our heads and have an effect on our lives, so much so that cultural ideas have such a hold on us that we believe they are our own. Interpellation is a process, a process in which we encounter our culture's values and internalize them. Even one's own family brings him up in the socially-determined way. With time he grows up, piling up in his heart one experience upon the other. He starts adapting himself to the system. The more he does that, the more the 'glory from the earth' is faded away, and all his enterprise 'fade into the light of common day' (Wordsworth, 'Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood,' lines, 18, 76). He devotes all his energy in acquiring an identity of his own. But the identity he acquires by his assiduous enterprise and dedicated engagement is his social identity, a determinant of his significance within a particular structural

system. He is either a businessman or a service holder, a labour or a director, a dictator or a follower, a politically biased or a politically neutral person, a family man or a confirmed bachelor. Whatever he is, he is ultimately a product of the system, a 'becoming' rather than a 'being.' Therefore in him 'essence – that is, the ensemble of both the production routine and the properties which enable it to be both produced and defined – precedes existence' (Sartre, 'Existentialism and Human Emotions,' 13). Gradually in this way he becomes a unit of the society lacking in real identity, his being as a 'self.' Even though he might become socially successful and even a responsible citizen, he is incomplete as an existent. He gains worldly reputation to lose himself. The cycle of his life is somewhat like this—he is born, he grows up studying or labouring, he comes to his youth and selects a profession, he gets married (usually) and begets children, devotes himself in earning money and maintaining his family, grows old and one day passes away from earth. His whole life is thus spent in role-playing, the role assigned to him by the society. Probably that is why Shakespeare's Jaques made the utterance – 'All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players.' (*As You Like It*, Act – II, Scene– 7, lines 61-62, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, p- 336). Only within a few years after his death he is completely forgotten. The whole significance of his existence is eroded in this way. His offspring repeats the same act of role-playing. The human history is founded primarily upon such insignificant repetitive act of common man.

The insignificance of human life unaware of 'self' and lost in the chaos of worldly affairs has been dealt with in the poem 'The Unknown Citizen' (1939) by the great English-American poet W. H. Auden (1907-1973) with irony and detachment and a tone possessing implied pathos. The unknown citizen is an Everyman, his life the reflected image of the futility of mundane enterprise.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

The technique used to analyze the poem is close reading. At first, the insignificance of human effort aimed at adaptation with the prevalent system is shown. Then, in that light the life of the unknown citizen, the protagonist, is assessed. The reader sees how the life of the man gets wasted in following the norms of the society unconditionally. Finally, the reader discovers his own life mirrored in the life of the unknown citizen. The unknown citizen becomes a symbol of existence or rather non-existence of the 'common herd' in the world.

Finally, the article suggests that the remedy to this plight lies in the attempt of self-exploration.

III. DISCUSSION

W. H. Auden composed 'The Unknown Citizen' in 1939, the year of the outbreak of World War II, shortly after he shifted to the United States from England. At that time he had already lost faith in the concept that poetry could bring any positive change in the world. The whole world appeared to him chaotic, moving rapidly ahead to its own destruction. His only concern was the human condition. He said, 'poetry is not connected with telling people what to do, but with extending our knowledge of good and evil . . .' ('Owlcation, Analysis of Poem The Unknown Citizen by W. H.

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Auden'). The poem got published the next year in the collection of poems, 'Another Time.' 'The Unknown Citizen' is presented in the form of the epitaph of a man whose identification is merely a sequence of letters and numbers, 'JS/07/M/387' – 'To JS/07 M 378 / This Marble Monument / Is Erected by the State.' The anonymity of the man is sticking. Through his anonymity Auden shows the plight of modern humanity lacking in individual identity. He is merely a unit of the system having no name of his own, he is one among the many. This 'anonymity makes our age even more insane' (Kierkegaard, 'The Crowd is Untruth,' 14). In the semi-robotic age of machine and technology, the society always makes an effort to reduce its inhabitants into identical monads. The common people, unaware of the possibility of having an 'individual self,' perform the activities prearranged by the society, taking all those undertakings to be something natural. Thus he is robbed of his freedom, and the possibility of ever acquiring the meaning of life becomes impossible for him.

The poem is named after the protagonist, who is a prototype of anyone and everyone. He is a victim of war, and the state has erected a monument in his memory. He is a favourite of the state, for he had no ability to think when he was alive. Unconditionally he followed all the norms of the society. His achievement can very easily be interpreted. Before the war he was a worker in a factory. There he never was admonished or terminated from his job. As he was sincere in his work, his employees always eulogized him.

"He worked in a factory and never got fired,

But satisfied his employers, Fudge Motors Inc."

('The Unknown Citizen,' Lines 7-8)

No unusual behaviour was ever noticed in him. He was a regular payer of his dues. The report of the union he was a member of reveals that he was dedicated to it and never became troublesome to the other workers. He was popular in his friend-circle and not quite infrequently, preferred a drink.

Like any other 'responsible' citizen of the modern era he used to read newspapers regularly, responded to the advertisements in the usual manner and even got influenced by those in making decisions of purchase. Like so many other persons he had an insurance policy, and 'his Health-card shows he was once in hospital but left it cured' (17). Following the modern trend he availed fully the opportunity of purchasing costly commodities on insurance. He 'had everything necessary to the Modern Man, / A phonograph, a radio, a car and a frigidaire' (20-21).

He liked, as expected from a man of sensibility, opinion polls, so much popular in modern times. These polls are intended to shape public opinion in the socially determined way. Indisputably he assimilated the opinion of the elite class of the society within himself and thought accordingly. The trend of thought set by the newspaper and other media of propaganda guided him. During the time of peace 'he was for peace,' and at the time of war 'he went' (24) to the front like the other commoners. The family life he used to lead was like millions of others, something considered to be

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‘normal.’ He was married and added five children to the population’ (25), a number deemed proper for a parent of the contemporary generation. We also come to know that when he was a student, he was too obedient to interfere ‘with their education’ (27).

The poem thus depicts the picture of a man who was all consumed by the system, ‘For in everything he did he served the Greater Community’ (5). Such a man can have no existence of his own, for existence demands from a person at least an awareness that there can be within him the presence of a ‘self’ distinct from his social entity. When he was alive, he never made a movement forward. Like Arsat in Conrad’s ‘The Lagoon’ (1897) his life was stagnant. It revolved around monotonous and repetitive activities. We become reminiscent of the absurd undertakings of Pozzo and Lucky in Beckett’s timeless classic ‘Waiting for Godot’ (1952). As Pozzo’s playing the role of a ringmaster and Lucky’s that of a circus animal is full of absurdity, the involvements of the unknown citizen during his lifetime is equally absurd. Again, as the absurd circus in Beckett is a metaphor of human life itself, similarly the enterprises of Auden’s anonymous protagonist symbolize the futile efforts of the common lot. That during his lifetime the unknown citizen’s way of thinking was fully shaped by popular opinion makes us aware that he was completely devoid of the ability either of thinking or of decision making. However, for this inability the society reckoned him a model citizen. The society always wants a person like him. It is so easy to delude such a person and forge him according to the system.

Man dreams of the golden millennium of peace and fraternity, as Shelley did in ‘Ode to the West Wind’ (1919) – ‘If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?’ (Line 86) But almost none knows how that era can come. One remains passionately busy, like the anonymous citizen of Auden, in worldly affairs, and scarcely get opportunity to discover the ‘self’ within. Whatever is perceptible to the senses has no inherent meaning. It is culture and tradition which impose meaning on something. Because of his romantic attachment to the community and the fear to lose its proximity, one remains unconscious of this truth. In this state he feels secured in one sense. He is free from the responsibility of taking decision. He can easily thrust that on the system as a whole. When he does something, he can say that every one of his acquaintance has done the same. He is lost in the midst of the crowd, and feels that he is doing everything right. He thinks, ‘where the crowd is, the truth is also, that it is a need in truth itself, that it must have the crowd on its side.’ But in reality ‘the very concept of the crowd is untruth, since a crowd either renders the single individual wholly unimportant and irresponsible, or weakens his responsibility by making it a fraction of the decision . . . a crowd is an abstraction which does not have hands’ (Kierkegaard, ‘The Crowd is Untruth,’ 8, 10). His identification with the mob seizes his personal identity. He loses his freedom completely, for the meaning of freedom can be understood only with the realization of the inherent meaninglessness of the world. It is only this awareness that makes one free to choose and endow his life with something meaningful, for meaning is always subjectively founded. The freedom a person thinks he enjoys as a dutiful citizen is only a romantic illusion created and sustained by the nation. The nation does that to perpetuate the system of denying the status of an individual. The nation is

the whole body, and every person in it is a cell contributing to constitute it and carry on its workings.

When the society in this way becomes all powerful, a person within it, having lost both his freedom and his identity, suffers from despair, the despair which Kierkegaard calls 'despair of finitude . . . due to the lack of infinitude' ('The Sickness unto Death,' 32). He becomes narrow-minded, all his thoughts and concerns get confined within the limited sphere of his external perception. He is 'emasculated . . . in a spiritual sense' (Kierkegaard, 33). The unconsciousness of his being 'emasculated' worsens the situation. His sense of security amidst the senselessness of the mob is petrifying, for unconsciously he is 'secured in the power of despair' (Kierkegaard, 47). He becomes an inhabitant of the spiritual wasteland, completely devoid of any possibility of endowing his life with significance. Like Vladimir and Estragon of Beckett, he is a victim of what Sartre calls 'bad faith' (Spade, 'Jean-Paul Sartre's Being and Nothingness,' 133). The meaning of life of the two tramps pivots round the absurd notion of 'Godot.' In the same way, the futile existence of the unknown citizen acquires meaning from the meaningless actions directed by the society.

From the psychological point of view the consciousness of the anonymous man forever remained in the 'unreflective' (Sartre, 'The Transcendence of the Ego,' 8) level. That means, his thoughts and feelings were always directed to an external object. There was never the 'self,' the abode of identity, as the object of consciousness. If the 'self' is not the object of consciousness, it means a person has become an object himself, an object of the society. The unknown citizen was commoditised to a non-human entity by the system. The story of his existence reveals that he was lost; he became soaked up in the external object. The object of his consciousness had changed time and again, but always remained outside the 'self.' 'In his relation with that object, the relation was 'the third term as a negative unity.' The two (the 'self' and the 'external object') tied in a relation had always 'related themselves to the relation, and in the relation to the relation' (Kierkegaard, 'The Sickness unto Death,' 9). Such negative relation negated his 'being' (positive) into 'becoming' (negative). In this way, his whole existence became negative. Negativity of existence means non-existence. That is why throughout life the anonymous citizen had only lived, but never existed. For the same reason he could have no name. We clearly understand why at the end of the poem the poet says, 'Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd: / Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard.'

IV. CONCLUSION

The way the unknown citizen is depicted in the poem relates him to every modern man. When one reads the poem, he sees himself reflected in the anonymous protagonist. So, his loss of identity and thinking ability is the loss of those two precious abstractions of humanity in general. The loss is really terrifying, for one would shudder to question himself, 'Have I got no real identity?' There is, of course, a remedy to this situation. One needs to realize that the external world in itself is absurd. There is no meaning which is already present in it. The meaning one needs to construct himself. But for that one needs to free himself from the practice of taking for granted whatever is taught by the

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society. When one succeeds in an attempt like this, one tastes real freedom. He is then ready to construct the meaning of the world, though that meaning is purely subjective. To construct the meaning of the world is to create the meaning of life itself. The readiness of the person makes us realize that he has reverted the direction of his quest for meaning. His consciousness is no longer 'unreflective,' that is, projected outside the 'self.' It is rather 'reflective' ('The Transcendence of the Ego,' 9), something posited inside, to the 'self.' He becomes conscious of the 'I' of the psyche. In this context we can quote lines from Spade: 'Suppose I stop running after the streetcar (an external object), and say "Oh, I'm not going to catch it." At that moment, I am no longer aware of just the streetcar-having-to-be-caught; the "I" (the 'self') makes its appearance. At that moment, I move to the reflective level.' ('Jean-Paul Sartre's Being and Nothingness,' 88) When the consciousness is concentrated primarily on the 'self,' the story of 'relation' changes. The relation then 'relates itself to its own self, the relation is then the positive third term' ('The Sickness unto Death,' 9). The positive 'relation' constructs one's real identity, the 'individual identity.' One is then truly saved, existing and experiencing meaning and wholeness.

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