

Literary Representation of Social Death: Perspective of a poem written by Rudra Mohammad Shahidullah and W. H. Auden.

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Abstract:

This paper explores the literary representation of *social death* through the poetic works of Rudra Mohammad Shahidullah and W. H. Auden. Literature has a long history of reflecting social consciousness and a medium for expressing the evolving conditions of human identity. In the modern era—marked by materialism, individualism, and existential anxiety—both poets reflect a profound crisis of social existence. Through a close, qualitative analysis supported by critical reviews, scholarly articles, newspapers, and books, this study examines how abstract ideas such as success, identity, alienation, and modern values are encoded in their poetry. The paper traces the progression from the image of the modern self to themes of psychological estrangement, voluntary exile, and systemic marginalization. These recurring motifs collectively point to the sociological phenomenon of *social death*—a condition where individuals, though biologically alive, are rendered socially invisible or irrelevant. While “social death” originates as a sociological construct, this paper argues that Shahidullah and Auden articulate its essence metaphorically, revealing the disintegration of human connection in modern society. Their poetic representations serve not only as artistic expressions but as cultural critiques of dehumanization in contemporary life.

Keywords: modern identity, alienation, social death, voluntary exile, modern slavery

Introduction:

Rudra Mohammad Shahidullah and W.H. Auden are the most remarkable poets in their country. The poem ‘The Unknown Citizen’ by W.H.Auden and ‘Ashroy’ by

Rudra Mohammad Shaidullah deals with the different perspectives of modern existence of human beings. Both poems talk about the numbness and the inner vacuum of modern people's existence but not in a parallel way. The conclusion, or the ultimate image of these poems, metaphorically indicates the moral decline of human existence and the essence of alienation from society. And that position of alienation or self-exile triggers the concept of social death. Modern society and its practice are the center point of these poems and the poets followed their own style, use of symbols and tone, to express the journey of a socially dead person.

Rudra Mohammad Shahidullah and W.H. Auden represent different culture and society, yet they have some similarity, because in their poems, some common emotions regarding human existence were portrayed in a similar way. And that is the reason that the term social death, metaphorically yet strongly present in their poems. W.H. Auden's poem "The Unknown Citizen" and Rudra Mohammad Sahidulla's poem "Ashroy", have comparably shared the concept of social death, following the path of alienation, voluntary exile, self-identity and social slavery.

"The Unknown Citizen" is a satirical elegy, written to find the real personality of a person who has recently died. Mustafa Talib Jawad says in his article " This life, the poem implicitly critiques the standardization of modern life, suggesting that people risk losing sight of what it means to be an individual when they focus exclusively on the same status symbols and markers of achievement (like having the right job, the right number of kids, the right car and so forth)."

On the other hand, the poem "Ashroy" deals with more abstract aspects of human emotion. This poem tells the tale of a lover, who is tired of so-called success and achievement, now he/she wants to be his/her own self by keeping aside all the artificial glory, success and identity of modern life. In this poem, through dramatic monolog, a person is searching a place or a person, where he/she will be able to show and confront his/ her own emotional identity as human being.

Literature Review:

Several English studies have been accomplished about the poem 'The Unknown Citizen'. The critics and researchers have been writing about the poem from different perspectives. For instance, Das evaluated human identity in Auden's poem. 'identity is quite important for individuals, to avoid losing identity, one needs to free himself from the practice of taking for granted whatever is taught by the 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.' (Das 47)

MARX & FREDERICK claims that, ‘Auden has condemned the huge social discrepancy between the high class and the lower class society, which also led to the dark conditions of the modern man during the first half of the 20th century’ (41).

Poudel explains the role of modern citizens. ‘‘The Unknown Citizen’ plays on the panoptic gaze and the use of biopower of modern states over their citizens, showing what their true faces are.’(Poudel 254).

In the analysis of the theme entitled *Thematic Analysis of W.H. Auden's "The Unknown Citizen"* by Mulage, Chanabasappa Sidramappa, the writer found that modern humans are valued according to the commercial, economic, and ideological interests of groups that have strong influence on society. The identity of the unknown citizen was determined by those aspects, he was denied; his freedom and his life for others. And at the end, he lost everything and became nobody. (Mulage 4)

Researchers and critics wrote studies about ‘The Unknown Citizen’, considering various aspects, but it is difficult to find critics who have written about this particular poem of Rudra Mohammad Shahidullah .

The main aim of the study is to compare between the images of alienation, the concept of modern people, modern slavery, voluntary exile and the concept of social death. Both poems conclude with a thought that whether life is a mere living or being alive is the main essence of life?

Modern Life and its Dilemma:

The Human race has witnessed the rising of capitalistic society and the gradual change of some basic observations of life. Human being’s evaluation about life as a whole is really important for their ideology, behavior, and most importantly, their social existence as a human.

Searching for meaning and authenticity of life is another part of modern existence of human. It has been noticed that, capitalism as a system has a vast influence on human’s social existence and literary thoughts. The system revolves around the thought that money (a materialistic thing) can do anything, it can buy happiness. The emphasis on materialistic achievements and the concept that happiness (though it is an abstract term) is connected with the amount of money have changed the outlook of life’s ideology as a whole.

So the ultimate goal of a person of the modern era is to achieve all the elements of happiness, and those elements are connected with the fulfillment of concrete or

materialistic urges. The irony here is that, modern man invests materialistic things like money, to achieve abstract things like peace, happiness and success. The modern concept of happiness is also connected with the concept of success. Modern century is revolving around the strong but never satisfying urge to become happy and successful through materialistic investments. But this Capitalistic system will never allow someone to become satisfied because to continue the system of Capitalism, it needs to maintain the loop of making someone unsatisfied and intrigue them to go towards a process where they can never end the journey of achieving peace and happiness in a satisfactory way.

In modern times, the concept of social identity and self-identity automatically follows the capitalistic loop of thought that a human's existence and identity depend on his 'success' and that success is materialistic achievement. Modern money-oriented society observes the length of a person's success on the scale of materialistic achievement but not a human's real existence. The real identity or existence of human is connected with their flows, limitations and emotional connection with another person.

The article "Modern Dilemma in the Literary Works of T.S. Eliot." deals with the term modern dilemma. '(..)' themes exploring the nature of nothingness, the certainty of death, and the lack of fulfillment in life, are what could be coined as the "modern dilemma". Eliot explores these themes and ideas extensively in his work, specifically in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "The Waste Land". Eliot's fascination with the modern dilemma—searching for meaning and authenticity in a hellish existence—is evident in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and *The Waste Land.*' (**"Modern Dilemma in the Literary Works of T.S. Eliot."**)

Here comes the dilemma between the self-identity of a person as an emotional being and materialistic or robotic human existence. Rudra Mohammad Shahidullah and W.H. Auden in their poems 'Ashroy' and 'The Unknown Citizen' have portrayed the image of this kind of human being and the very tragedy of modern existence. Their social existence has become kind of an exile for them; they cannot deny living the systematic social life like a robot but in reality, silently scream for the life of ultimate freedom as a human being. They exist like slaves in society and want to have freedom but are unable to break the shackle of modern existence.

They exist like aliens. And here comes the concept of self-exile or voluntary exile or alienation. 'Karl Marx reinvigorated it in his Paris Manuscripts in 1844; by raising his theory that alienation is a byproduct of capitalism, 'concerning both social estrangement and depersonalization' (Seeman 291).

The article “A history of alienation” tells that, “in the twentieth century, the word alienation has been broadly studied and used in social sciences and literature. The term was taken to define the fundamental pathology of modern life”.(Jay)

Rudra Muhammad Shahidullah, his poetry and representation of modern society:

Rudra Muhammad Shahidullah is one of the leading poets of Bangladesh. His poetry was remarkable for its lyrical beauty and revolutionary thought. He was also one of the major romantic, rebellious and modern poets of Bengali Literature. His voice was a strong protest against oppression and injustice. Romanticism and modernity equally dominated his poem. After Bangladesh won its independence, Rudra became one of the luminary poets of Bengali literature. He was almost a cult figure at that time. He was born on October 16 of 1956 in Barishal and died at the age of only 34 on June 21 in 1991. Criticism about the poetry of Rudra Mohammad Shahidulla is rarely found.

In his poem ‘Ashroy’, Rudra portrays a person’s concept of an ultimate place for peaceful existence. The poem deals with the thoughts regarding human freedom and the reality of the modern era. The title of the poem is "Ashroy", and the meaning of this Bengali word cannot be clearly translated and expressed with just one English word "shelter". The exact meaning of this word can be vastly explained through the images expressed in this poem. The poem subjectively shows the process of alienation, losing real identity and becoming a part of social slavery.

The poem dwells on the thought of the ultimate human struggle for peace, real love, sympathy and home. The poem also indicates the idea of the psychological concept of home. This poem is about just another nameless face in the modern world who is talking to his beloved, expressing his desire of keeping aside his success, so-called happiness and achievements.

These lines are from Rudra Mohammad Shahidulla’s poem, ‘Ashroy’

"তোমার করতলের পরে ক্লান্তিটুকু রাখি

রাখি আমার অক্ষমতাগুলো”

"Let me keep my tiredness on your palm,

And my precious depressions”

(Translated by the author)

Society expects him to be successful and achieve materialistic goals, but he is tired of all the materialistic achievements and now he wants to reveal his reality. This person wants to explore, share and accept his identity as a person who has his own failures, depression and imperfections. He wants to be an emotional and sensitive kind of person. He wants people around him to accept not just his success but his failures also. The poet says,

‘তুমি আমার ক্লান্তিমাখা ব্যর্থতাটুক রাখো,

‘Please keep my failure which is folded with mere tiredness’

(Translated by the author)

This one-sided acceptance of modern society makes him incomplete and he feels like a caged bird who is not allowed to have his weakness and emotions. This emotion is closer to the very feeling of being a slave of a society.

‘ওরা সবাই শস্যকনা নেবে,
তুমি আমার লাঙল-চেরা মৃত্তিকাকে রেখো,

‘World wants the grain

You please adore my soil that is ploughed and bruised’

(Translated by the author)

Modern time only focuses on the ultimate achievements, the market price of everything, but it never admires the brutal and painful path of emotions, disappointments, brutality and failure to achieve the goal. To realize the value of light a person needs to go through the ultimate darkness and that journey towards darkness is also a part of his identity. So, if someone just asks for the poet’s enlightened part and is unable to accept his darkness then that person is not actually considering the poet’s real identity as a human being. Humans become humans with negative and positive sides.

‘আমার গৌরবের সাথি নিখিল জুড়ে আছে,
ব্যর্থ রাতে গ্লানির সাথি তুমি —
তোমার প্রিয় ছায়ার তলে ক্লান্তিটুক রাখি, রাখি আমার বিষন্নতাগুলো,

‘I can have mates when I am successful.

You are my precious companion who knows my darkest night,
my exhaustion after failure.

Let me keep my weariness and pain under your peaceful shadow’

(Translated by the author)

Here Rudra is using the powerful juxtaposition of light and darkness as the whole dimension of a person. His poem acts as the spectacle, through which the reader can have the image of the human's dilemma of self-existence. It is not similar to Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of "nothingness". But it is a kind of detachment from the so-called modern life and the urge to attach with the real emotional human life. Materialistic achievement and the rat race for being successful is the key concept of modern slavery. This poem shows how a person is striving for self-identity in a modern society and how human's social existence has become absolutely materialistic and unsympathetic in modern life. This person in this poem is an example of self-exile and the alienation of a person. This distraction from society and the people will gradually make him a person who is emotionally and socially dead.

W. H. Auden's poem , the complex relation of a person and society:

W.H. Auden's poem 'The Unknown Citizen' is one of the most influential compositions considered an artifact of history. The piece is a satire on capitalism. It was written in 1939 and covers the influence of industrial and the modern era.

The title of the poem actually tells the whole story. The person, who doesn't have any name, is known as Unknown Citizen. This title reveals the crisis of self-identity, the pattern of alienation and the state of self-exile in the modern era. This Unknown Citizen is just another nameless face in the modern world.

The poem reveals the fact that this Unknown Citizen is just another number, and not a breathing human being. Auden shows that such careful dehumanization is a process where a person gradually departs from his/her real self. Lack of individuality makes a person an unthinking robot. Auden, with his poetic skill made this poem a satiric irony with biting sarcasm.

Article "Irony in W. H. Auden's Poem "The Unknown Citizen" discusses that, 'it contains such twisted layers of meaning in a single expression: the denotation (what is actually said) and the connotation (what is meant) are different. Masterful in his use of such irony, Auden loads his poem "The Unknown Citizen" with biting, bitter, sarcastic, and accusatory double meaning—to poke fun at the automaton-like modern existence of human beings without any sense of freedom or individuality. The poem is a satire on the "programmed" existence of a modern factory worker.' (Kim 5)

'The poem ends on a final, rhyming couplet that takes a big detour from the conventional topics that have occupied the speaker so far. Now he asks two questions

saying "Was he free? Was he happy?" that really do seem interesting.' (Jawad 2444-2447)

This concluding line is the ultimate ironic and at the same time satirical line of this poem. The modern era has forced us to be perfect, to be successful, to be ideal citizens but it has not raised the most important question; whether we are free or having our true self or not. And that creates a situation of self-isolation and socially detached human beings. These lines are powerfully ironic.

In the article 'Absurd Perspectives in W. H. Auden's *The Unknown Citizen* and Salah Abdel Sabour's *Winter Song: Comparative study*' Jawad tells that, 'The poet shows sharply the total regimentation of the lifestyle and the viewpoint in an urban, artificial community. The individual man is found to have lost here his personal entity and inclination and become a mere number in the all-pervasive social existence. He is to conform to the set patterns, whatever those may be, for any deviation from the same is liable to be discredited as abnormally and eccentricity this is a situation, highly ironical yet tinged with pathos.'

This poem has some aspects which must be understood as organic parts of a complex totality. A person deprived of his Self-identity will go towards the path of alienation and self-exile. Auden indirectly mentioned the difference between alive and dead people. Being dead is not always connected with physical death. Indirectly but in a bold way, Auden mentioned the idea of social death in his poem.

Social death as the conclusion of Auden and Rudra's poetry:

Modern thought, capitalism, globalization-- all these facts trigger master-slave relation in society. Prominent philosopher Hegel mentioned this term. Master-slave relation indicates the condition of modern slavery and this is the fact that connects social death with modern slavery.

Orlando Patterson, in his book *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, discussed the term Social Death. Heinz Heinen wrote a review of this book and he mentioned that 'Patterson's research is about slavery as a social fact and about freedom'. Social death is the condition of people not accepted as fully human by wider society. It refers to the situation, where someone is treated as if he/she is dead or non-existent. (Heinen 263-268)

“Patterson's most famous contribution concerns the argument that the concept of property is insufficient to define slavery; he has instead proposed the concept of social

death, defined as a composite of violence, natal alienation and dishonor.’’(Vlassopoulos 319)

This paper shows that Rudra Muhammad Shahidullah and W.H.Auden, in their poems, portrayed this kind of situation of modern human beings. They are living a systematic and so-called modern life but the reality is something different. They are the victims of a new type of slavery and social death.

The poem “The Unknown Citizen” and “Ashroy”, shows that modern humans do not live the life; they just pretend to live. Real human life will be full of emotions, errors, imperfections, love, sympathy, happiness and drawbacks. And that is the real essence of being human.

Humans want to live and they want to avoid death. This is a common phenomenon of mankind. But here, in modern era, life has become extremely artificial, that we can call it a mere exercise of living. It is not life, which is full of emotion, errors and joy for small things. In this modern life, humans become socially dead and they live life like a shadow.

Here is the connection between the poems “The Unknown Citizen” and “Ashroy”. Both of these poems deal with the pessimistic tone of the central character, the journey of alienation, principles of being a social slave, living the life in a voluntary exile and ultimately losing the real identity as human. These poems track the whole journey of a modern human that ends in social death.

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