

UTOPIAN DESIRE AND HUMAN PASSIVITY IN W.H. AUDEN'S "PAYSAGE MORALISÉ"

Amit Mondal
Junior Research Fellow
Department of English and Culture Studies
The University of Burdwan, Burdwan, India

Abstract: *In modern literature the life and status of human beings are associated with perception and activities. These determine the fate of modern men whether blissful or devastating. It is because of the two world wars that affect human perception and their attitudes to lives. This is a time when human mind is occupied with the idea of negligence so far the question of survival is concerned. Modern man can dream of his own ideal world but he is not ready to perform a single action to achieve it. He thinks a lot but does nothing. He even wants to subjugate himself before man-made disasters while adhering to fantasies. Here I will make an analysis of W.H. Auden's poem "Paysage Moralisé" for its better understanding. This paper is an attempt to examine man's desires for utopia and extreme passivity with reference to this poem. Along with this I will also discuss the possible solutions to problems people are facing in modern era in the visionary approach of the poet.*

Keywords: *degeneration, passivity, paysage moralisé, utopia.*

An Oxford undergraduate W.H. Auden was a devoted reader of the works of T.S. Eliot that had immediate and lasting influence on him. His experiences with Eliot's world inspired him to analyse and perceive his own "Waste Land" in a "heap of broken images". Auden witnessed the reality of devastating decrease of industrial economy and psychological malaise and as a consequence of it he never considered England to be a good place. In his personal vision and psyche he saw the fear, sterility and death leading the entire world to a catastrophic destruction. This era of moral perplexity and uncertainty with its scientific belief and rationalism challenged the traditional, conventional and social norms. In such conditions human psyche is no longer solely dominated by intellect, rather it is prioritised for feeling and intuition. A kind of awkward modern mentality existed in people's lives. He exposes the inward subjectivity in his poetic universe while at the same time he takes the outside world into consideration. Modern English literature is occupied with the clash between old and the new generation. This world of hollow men has been rapidly pushing the men to a condition of being rootless. The heaps of corpses were making the soil metaphorically infertile. Again scientific inventions and automobile weakened the authority of the old over the new. The First World War further brought tensions and frustrations in the authoritarian pattern of family relationships. The human psyche affected by political and religious scepticism, disillusionment, cynicism, cursed identity etc. has become the

order of the day. The first half of the twentieth century was the time of mental abnormality and the people of that time symbolically stand for inactivity. But that does not mean that the post-war poetry is merely the poetry of gloom and despair. Modern poetry takes life as a whole and the poet does not have any intention to escape into the world of dream. The poets simply miss the romantic vision. Like Eliot Auden also observes the time and gets the sense of it. But he steps forward and experiments the response of the heart of his contemporary people. Auden is unique in his experimentation that leads to the level of thoughts and desires of the people. Evolution of his art and genius gives him a remarkable place in literature. He combines political consciousness with personal concern to the context of modern societal scenario. Having said that he also notices their motionless, passionless actions and extreme level of passivity. The poet is here composing his own poetic universe to feel the breath of dead spirituality. Considering himself to be the part of them the poet finds the desires– the desire to escaping this world and having their ideal dream world. When Eliot's “waste land” talks about passivity and inaction it does not recognise their wishes and what they want. It barely provides any solution. Auden thinks of possibilities and provides expected solutions in his poetry, especially in his poem “Paysage Moralisé”. Taking into account this particular poem discusses modern dilemma, psychological barrenness and on other side the passivity in terms of imaginary utopian world.

As Thomas More talked on the concept of utopia in his socio-political satire *Utopia* (1516) that it is a nowhere place existing only in public imagination. More brought this concept against the 16th century Catholic corruption and wished to have a best republic state for his country people. He talked on humanitarian ground and felt that true commonwealth is not possible on the basis of anything private issues. It must be free and a balanced form of society where people shall have best way of life; they will have their freedom to live accordingly without any upper-hand on them. Since then the world is seeking for a utopia in hope of making their own places utopian. But today's scientific progress, atomic bombs, and cursed mentality of the people leave no clue to get that. Living in the twentieth century Auden has the vision of the degrading conditions of humanity and its failure to retain it. His men only can think of that ideal world but are silent in performing any action to get that. The poet penetrates into the inside of modern people and reads their wishes of escaping into their own ideal world. And this vision of the poet is realized in his poem “Paysage Moralisé”. By using landscapes and other natural elements Auden presents emotional and spiritual states of modern men and in this aspect the title goes to mean “landscape moralised”. The poet takes the landscapes as a means of making his vision relevant in the modern context of life. His use of landscapes and other geographical references is implemented in different levels of interpretations because they do not give any particular suggestion, rather they are used in a concrete form to present men's emotional and spiritual states. The reality and the utopian world seem to move around with the image of valleys and islands and at the same time Auden prefers mountains to understand men's desires and failures. The poet has the exceptional vision of seeing the world and feeling people's emotions. But the importance of this poem lies in the fact that the poet in his *paysage moralisé* relates the landscapes to the thoughts of utopia. Valleys are projected to describe the reality;

reference to island is the escape motif or desire to escape their deaden existence and men's effort of riding the mountain as a way of getting the sight of the imaginary world is very difficult as well as quite impossible to them. These landscapes draw a line between these two worlds one to be faced and other to be expected. Auden's world is a world of passivity, callousness and holds female principle as well. Here one can see "harvests rotting" and "barren mountains" which convey spiritual as well as psychological states of human condition. It is because of the human desire for escape and because of their consequent lack of effort the "harvests" are rotting. They do not care about how to recover the loss, rather they imagine to hold the male principle in the image of mountains. They spend their times on romantic ideals and ideas such as love and religion which are the safest ways for escape the real world. Auden's looking back to the past and referring to the founders of our civilization create contradiction between now and then in terms of human desires and activities. Those founders came crossing the mountains, settled down in the valleys and found our cities. This metaphorical journey clearly suggests their struggle and active participation in achieving nobility in their mission of making the world beautiful and good for living. They had nothing to deal with romantic dreams which weakened men to perform actions. In stead of following their steps today's psychology leads men to be lost in false dreams like love and religion and have a desire of getting a utopia. They are lost in vision of islands which are symbols of escapism through romantic ideas. They seek for salvation through religion while they are spiritually dead inside. Their ancestors also lived on the barren mountains where life was very difficult for survival. They also got desperate, but they were not plunged in the thoughts of escape, rather they did utmost effort for making their lives better and greater. They were determined to defend reality and not to follow romantic illusions like love and religion. But Auden as a spectator sees the modern man lost in the dreams of romantic love or vision of paradise which is led by religious fantasy or his own romantic ambitions. These are nothing but different forms of escape. But modern man's wishes and dreams are tightly associated with the extreme level of passivity because instead of facing life and reality he has been "Dreaming of evening walks through learned cities"(9). The poet has the sense to feel that men of these "starving cities" are not pursuing their founding fathers. They are now walking on the same green fields or valleys only to reach the islands, i.e. fantasy world. Those aspirations do not encourage them to effort, but to passiveness. And that ultimately becomes destructive for them like the "ships to castaways on islands". Their attitude to looking at the world got changed with the passage of time. They become dull, bored, and passionless as well. They do not long for regeneration for the establishment of a new world. They lack the sources of creative efforts. Unlike their founding fathers they deny the reality while they welcome a world never to access. Interestingly modern attitude to escape is slightly different from nineteen century escapism in the fact that romantic poets such as Shelley, Keats and others also did hold the wings of imagination and often tried to escape into other world but ultimately they had the strength to face the reality. They chose the lives in between reality and fantasy. But Auden's generation only accepts the non-existing materials while completely denying the factual matters. They dare to dream of a utopia but they are not ready to do a single action to approach it. The same

valleys, same mountains, same islands which once used to be the sources of inspiration for the founding fathers now have become a subject to rejection. Men's perception has changed, they can only live on imagination. It is the result of dehumanisation as well as rapid mechanisation. For this purpose Auden colours his landscapes to feel the emotions and keep it in eyes of modern men. Thomas More brought his concept of utopia to recover the present conditions of the state and for having peace and prosperity in lives. And that state could be the model of ideal human inhabitancy all over the world. His ideas were prevalent to the real lives. He talked about religion, love, society, humanism which go within a system on the basis of practical experiences. Auden is also trying to get a state like that but he only finds the seed of passivity inside and outside. In addition to this, Eliot's "waste land" presents a picture of this outside world and explains the reason behind this. In More we find what ought to be in the history of human civilisation. And Auden in hope of getting the best of it only finds men lying passively in spiritual ignorance and apathy. They only have one weapon with which they nourish their own utopian desires and that is 'escape'. The poem exposes various forms of 'escape' which all lead to destruction. In their world of imagination they dream of "marvellous creature" like sea mermaids rising up from the water and making love to them. People want to be rich but they are ignorant of the worth of valleys or green fields. They do not even grow crops in the fields. Instead they have dreams of collecting gold and silver buried in the mountains; they do not take a single act to achieve this for they lack the will and passion which are already dead inside. As a result of it they suffer from hunger. Modern society lives in hope of achieving everything they wish without being responsive to do it. When they fail in practical life they surrender themselves in religious activities. And then "some waving pilgrims" console them by telling the stories of islands, i.e. the metaphorical representation of other world:

'the gods,' they promise, 'visit us from islands,
 Are stalking, heads-up, lovely, through our cities;
 Now is the time to leave your wretched valleys
 And sail with them across the lime-green water,
 Sitting at their white sides, forget your sorrow,
 The shadow cast across your lives by mountains.'(25-30)

The religious dreams of escape into the other world are also the cause of their suffering. Even if they want to ride the mountains and have a look on the islands, they must struggle and face adversities. Despite being the men of no work they become conscious of the useless romantic imagination but they are too lazy to refuse it. There are some similarities and dissimilarities between modern men and their ancestors so far utopian vision is concerned. The ancestors built their cities by rivers and the water of the rivers "Running past windows comforted their sorrow"(14). They had made their own dreamlands with their will power and spirit that had the existence in real life. On other side modern men have the same dream but they do nothing to achieve that. They simply dream of the islands where everyday they will be dancing; "all the green trees blossomed on the

mountains”(17); their love will be innocence; they would go far from the cities; they will enjoy dancing, singing, merrymaking and so on. They want their romantic vision being realized in actual life. Here we find the degenerate men mocking the spirit of their ancestors.

For Auden's generation life is too hard to live and as a result of it their dreaming nature cannot keep them in a state of positivity. The destructive nature of the escape motif puts the modern man into a situation which is known as modern society. This particular poem witnesses pathetic daily drama of modern men and this pathos endured by them is the only impact of their passiveness. The landscapes which were formerly considered to be mirror of vibrant life by the ancestors have now become the reflection of dead morality. There are some people of “doubtful” nature who are thinking of being on the top of the mountains in hope to reach the islands. The mountains are moralised and seen as a symbol of effort and struggle which modern men lack and for that they cannot get the sight of the paradisiacal world; they fall down and perish. Their “climbing up crags to get a view of islands” ironically suggests their negation to life and spiritual decay. They are not only men of no potentiality but also they are the people with “fearful” nature who remain in the “unhappy cities” with their sorrow and fantasy. Auden here seems to going back to the ancestors who made the cities beautiful. Their sorrow was comforted by the water of the running river. But the same river in modern era brings the message of moral degradation. There are also some men who have noble thoughts and ideals and who think that they could change their lives but they are also destroyed for their careless attitude towards life. They get drowned in water. The symbolic significance of water changes in Auden’s world. It is destructive for modern men. Even though people of “starving cities” are living “wretched”, they are not ready to give up their passivity, rather they continue to suffer without making any effort to change it. Auden’s hands are unique to describe the emotions of men in use of landscapes that play double role revolving around past and present. Although Auden tells the stories of modern men in allegorical presentation of human condition, “Paysage Moralisé” is not about pessimism, rather it deals with a new hope, especially in the concluding section of the poem. As for clarification he takes ice metaphor in hope of making a life better and happier. Cowardly attitude towards life and reality and complete submission to imaginary world cause sorrow and suffering in their lives. He calls modern life “our sorrow” because men’s spirit is frozen like ice; they have lost their courage and strength of mind. They do not even show sympathy, fellow-feeling or kindness to each other. In Auden’s eyes this is a world of complete silence produced by extreme passivity. But “Shall it melt?”. With hope if it melts, Auden says, the water of degradation will become water of creativity and it “Would gush, flush, green these mountains and these valleys”(38). People will no longer live in romantic vision; they will rebuild their own cities with efforts. Auden’s vision towards life is constructive and he manipulates all his emotions, feeling, thoughts in hope of a better constructive world where human consciousness is operated in the process of making a real estate. And spiritual regeneration is the only thing to serve this purpose. For that modern men need to generate in themselves a creative and purposive effort. Rebuilding “our cities” does

not simply mean an escape from utopian related desire, it is also an attempt of purifying our souls through work, determination and great thoughts.

However, the variety and abundance of the poem shows Auden's genius in creating his own poetic universe in which he analyses the space the modern men live in. The poet's vision towards this space is justified with his philosophy of reconstructing human psychology. He wants to erase the in-between space where the modern psychology has been trapped, rather he considers man to build up his own world which is realistic and free from all kinds of idealistic desires. Instead of fixing some things to be utopian he would have his best thing available in his own space. The traditional concept of utopia sets some norms or rules on the demand of a balanced state of stability and security as well, but such norms and rules are not relevant to the present context of human society. Auden's philosophy deals with the urge of dissipating romantic dreams and re-establishing their own utopia which must be formed by men's active participation. Another aspect of it is the men's utilisation of nature because such mission cannot be accomplished without it and credit goes to the founding-fathers who had that perception towards nature which modern men fail to understand. It could be the rapid development of machinery world that reduces human effort and makes them see everything in terms of passivity even though they still nourish idealistic desires in their hearts. Auden's "Paysage Moralise" is a passage to further understand the modern men's stories from literary as well as social point of view.

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