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Biopolitics: Regulating Human Bodies and Controlling Lives in Neal Shusterman's *Unwind*

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Abstract

Neal Shusterman's dystopian novel Unwind depicts a society where human life is compromised by a legal and medical system that permits organ harvesting from adolescents. Set in a future where unwanted teenagers are unwound and their body parts distributed to those in need. This policy reflects the extreme consequences of biopolitical governance, where human bodies are treated as state-controlled resources. By employing Michel Foucault's theory of biopolitics, this study examines how Unwind critiques the systemic regulation of life and death through organ harvesting. It aims to analyse the ways in which political and medical governance justify the exploitation of human bodies under the guise of societal welfare. This study explores how biopolitical mechanisms in the novel enforce organ harvesting and reshape societal norms and normalise the treatment of individuals as biological commodities. This research also highlights the ethical risks of biopolitical control over human bodies, emphasizing how Unwind serves as a cautionary tale against a future where organ harvesting may become an accepted social practice. Through this analysis, the paper underscores the broader implications of biopolitical power in shaping human existence and medical ethics.

Keywords: Organ Harvesting, Biopolitics, Unwind, Ethics, Survival.

Introduction

Biopolitics means how government or authorities' control and manage people lives, especially their bodies and health. This idea was explained by the philosopher Michel Foucault. Earlier, rulers had the power to take someone's life or spare it. But in modern times, power works differently. It tries to improve people's lives, but also controls them in many ways. Through hospitals, schools and other systems, the government watches over things like health, birth, ageing and death. Biopolitics uses science, rules and technology to manage people, some times saying it is for their good, but it can also cause problems for those who are different or do not fit into society's rules.

Biopolitics implies regularization of population according to the perceived insistence of norms . . . Unlike the diffuse, microscopic, governmental mechanisms of surveillance that identify the need for disciplinary interventions, biopolitics concern itself with the regularization of societies in a large scale, notably through demography. (Griffiths 20)

Foucault says that by studying the biological aspects of people as a group like birth rates, death rates and health conditions. Government can create rules and systems to control and improve public life. This is the main ideas of biopolitics which he calls a technology of power that manages life. The word itself comes from ‘bios’ (meaning life) and ‘politics’ showing that this kind of power is not meant to destroy life but to organise, protect and sometimes improve it. Biopolitics focuses on how life is governed by using knowledge, rules and planning.

In literature, this idea helps to understand how characters are affected by these systems. For example, in Jodi Picoult’s *My Sister’s Keeper*, Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Neal Shusterman’s *Unwind Series* shows how people’s bodies especially women and children are controlled by society which raising questions about freedom, health and ethics. Neal Shusterman’s *Unwind* presents a thought-provoking exploration of ethical dilemmas through its depiction of a dystopian society where unwanted teenagers are ‘Unwound’ and their organs are harvested for transplantation. In the novel unwinding is justified on the grounds of societal benefits, including population control and organ donation to save lives. This practice raised serious ethical concerns particularly regarding bodily autonomy. It deprives teenagers of their fundamental right to make decision about their own bodies. In the novel, The Bill of Life is a legislation enacted to resolve the conflict between two opposing perspectives: pro-life and pro-choice. Pro-life advocates oppose abortion that believing every child has an equal right to decide about her own body. This ideological divide escalates into the Heartland War, where violence and division spread even in the military. To restore peace the Bill of Life is introduced, banning abortion but permitting unwinding a process where parents can legally ‘abort’ their child between thirteen and eighteen years of age. “The Process by which a child is both terminated and yet kept alive is called ‘Unwinding’” (Shusterman 1). This scenario shows scientific advancement have enabled the complete harvesting and transplantation of every part of the human body. This raises serious ethical concerns about whether sacrificing individuals for utilitarian purposes can ever morally justified.

The normalisation of unwinding in the novel reflects real world issues where bioethical limits are tested by new technologies such as genetic engineering and organ donation. Shusterman imagines a future where the state controls individuals’ bodies turning them into commodities. This reflects Foucault’s idea of biopolitics, where the body becomes a site of political and economic control. The practice of unwinding not only raises moral and ethical concerns but also worsens socio-economic inequalities, as it disproportionately affects marginalised groups, especially orphans, the poor and those without social or political power. “Wars are no longer waged in the name of a sovereign who must be defended theate waged on behalf of the existence of everyone, entire populations are mobilised for the purpose massacres have become vital” (as cited in Vitales169). Shusterman explores the social exploitation, where the powerless are turned into the resources for the privileged, reflecting real-world ethical concerns about organ markets, health care access and the unequal distribution of life saving technologies.

Regulating Human Bodies and Controlling Lives in *Unwind*

The novel presents a society that solves multiple issues with one solution. When the society faces an organ shortage, the unwinding provides a steady supply while also eliminating unwanted or troublesome children, “the novels present organ transplantation as a means of suffering young adults...it converts troublemakers into ‘useful’ and valuable members of society” (Wohlmann and Steinbergh 27).

The terrible actions are justifying because they serve to help the rest of their society. It provides a clear rationale for why society accepts unwinding. It is justified by the belief that unwound children remain technically alive since their body parts continue to function through advance technology.

The ideas of sacrifice presented in *Unwind* share similarities to Giorgio Agamben's concept of Homo Sacer, detailed in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* is referenced to explain this state of outcasts. In this context, "a society's threshold of biological modernity is situated at the point at which the species and the individual as a simple living body become what is at stake in a society's political strategies" (Agamben10).

Unwind questions whether something accepted by society as lawful and right can still be morally wrong. The novel does not provide simple answers but instead highlights the ethical complexity of unwinding. While the main characters escape, the practice continues that showing the problem remains unresolved. The open-ended conclusion offers hope but also encourages readers to reflect on sacrifice, morality and societal values. The novel presents strong protagonists who resist the system that offering hope such a dark future would never become reality. This struggle highlights the fight for agency, emphasising the importance of individual autonomy against oppressive societal control. When Risa one of the main characters learns about her fate, a state appointed lawyer tries to reassure her, reinforcing the idea that existence is defined by biological continuity rather than individual autonomy. "It's not dying, and I'm sure everyone here would more comfortable if you didn't suggest something so blatantly inflammatory. The fact is 100 percent of you will still be alive, just in a divided state" (24).

Lev Calder one of the main protagonists in *unwind* belongs to a religious group that practices 'tithing', where a child is willingly given up for unwinding as a religious sacrifice. As the tenth child in his family, Lev chosen for this purpose not like Connor or Risa but believes his fate is holy and necessary. Throughout the novel, he sees unwinding as a selfless act, meant to benefit of others. His role reflects a traditional religious sacrifice which is similar to those found in biblical stories that raising ethical question about faith, autonomy and the morality of voluntary sacrifice. "This donation of organs aligns perfectly with concepts of religious sacrifice as Christians have long drawn connections between organ donation and the teachings of sacrifice in the bible" (Mongoven 90).

At the beginning of the novel, Pater Dan, the leader of Lev's church initially appears to supporting tithing, just like Lev's family and community. However, when Lev's journey to the harvest camp is interrupted by an accident, Paster Dan urges him to run away. This unexpected advice shakes Lev's faith that leading him to question the beliefs he raised with a struggle that continues throughout the novel. Lev's religious background as a restrictive or controlling force. It portrays the evolution of the faith by influencing Lev's moral transformation and ultimate rejection of blind obedience. Paster Dan's action make Lev question his faith and personal autonomy. Shusterman presents a complex view of faith and choice rather portraying religion as entirely negative. At the end of the novel, Lev asks Pastor Dan whether he has completely lost his faith, Dan responds, No. Lev comes to realise that he wants to believe in god, but not the god that he has been raised to believe in. He tells his mentor and friend, "I never knew that was a choice" (329).

This *unwinds* society resolves the contradiction between "gift and waste" through the belief that consciousness persists even after unwinding. This rationale justifies the harvest process, claiming that since *unwinds* remain aware, the procedure does not cause true death. *Unwind* are kept conscious during dismemberment under local anaesthesia and after transplantation, they are described as "Living in a individual state" (263). Characters marked for unwinding struggle with the horrifying idea of being dismantled and repurposed as one envisions himself being "Shredded and recycled" (142). The novel both mocks and critiques the idea of "living in a divided state" after unwinding. The absurdity of this concept is highlighted when a harvest camp counsellor tells a character that she will not be 100% alive but 99.44 % accounting for insignificant body parts like the appendix (269). This satirical approach underscores the ethical contradictions in justifying unwinding as a way to preserve life while violating individual autonomy.

At the same time, *Unwind* suggest that transplanted tissue can influence the recipient in unexpected ways. A trucker who receives a new arm experiences muscle memory, stating “the fingers her knew things the rest of me didn’t” (14). Similarly, when another character receives unwind tissue, a nurse warns, “parts often come with their own personalities” (319). These moments raising ethical questions about whether a person remains themselves after being physically altered by another’s existence. The most unsettling example of this ongoing consciousness is seen CyFi, a teenager who has received brain tissue from an Unwind. His experience suggests that the donor’s memories, thoughts and behaviours persist within him, influencing his action in ways beyond his control. Cyfi explains, “It’s like those ghosts who don’t know they are dead. He keeps trying to be him and can’t understand why the rest of him ain’t there” (139-140). These moments reinforce the idea of living in a divided state while also exposing the horror of treating human body parts as commodities. In this fictional world, separating tissue from identity is not as simple as it seems, making the concept of tissue alienation deeply complex and ethically troubling.

Conclusion

The study finds that *Unwind* clearly reflects Michel Foucault’s idea of biopolitics, where the state takes control over people’s lives and bodies, especially through laws like the Bill of Life and the practice of unwinding. This shows how governments can use political power to manage populations, treating individuals more like resources than human beings. The novel shows how human bodies are valued only for their usefulness. This represents Foucault’s concept of biopower, where the body is no longer sacred but something to controlled and used. The characters in the novel are denied their basic right to choose their own future. Their autonomy is taken away, reflecting the dangers of a society where personal freedom is replaced by rules that serve the state. The story shows how power structures can hide behind laws and appear moral, even when they are harmful. The study also finds that *Unwind* raises important ethical questions about the future of biotechnology and medical advancement. When science is not guided by strong ethical values, it can lead to the exploitation of the weak, especially children and the poor. It warns about a future where people are judged not by their humanity but by their usefulness to society. It highlights the dangers of losing autonomy, human dignity and ethical responsibility in the name of order and progress.

Shusterman’s work encourages readers to reflect on how biotechnological power should always be balanced with respect for individual rights and ethical values. In a world of fast-growing technology, the narrative reminds the laws and science must always protect life not just manage it. The novel thus acts as a cautionary tale, showing that without ethical checks, biopolitical systems can turn human life into something mechanical and disposable.

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