INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF NOVEL RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT (IJNRD)
© 2026 IJNRD | Volume 11, Issue 10, October 2026 | ISSN: 2456-4184 | IJNRD.ORG

Shattering the Bureaucratic Panopticon: Linus Baker as Whistleblower against State Normalisation in TJ Klune's *The House in the Cerulean Sea*

Ms. Ann Mary Reilly A,

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Nirmala College for Women, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India.

Abstract : This paper offers a Foucauldian reading of marginalisation in TJ Klune's *The House in the Cerulean Sea.* This whimsical, cosy narrative examines the sharp critique of bureaucratic rules and regulations. It examines the marginalisation practised and enforced by DICOMY, which conditions the villagers to accept it as normal. While Klune's story covers the themes of optimism, acceptance and found family, this study provides a deep study of Power Dynamics structured by DICOMY. Linus Baker, a staunch objective case worker, summoned by the Extremely Upper Management, is to observe and report the same. As a Panopticon, Linus steps onto the island of Marsyas. Considering his observations, Linus, a Panopticon representative, takes a turn to be a whistleblower for the marginalised magical children. Using Michel Foucault's theories of Panopticism, Disciplinary power, and Biopolitics, the paper studies Linus' arguments against the Department in Charge of Magical Youth (DICOMY), a bureaucratic panopticon that normalises the magical children as 'docile bodies'. Linus' panoptic gaze shifts to confront the strict rules and regulations of DICOMY. This ultimately provides the shattering of bureaucratic normalisation and portrays Linus' whistleblowing as the voice of reclaiming marginalised lives.

Keywords : DICOMY, state normalisation, Foucault's Panopticism, Docile Bodies, Biopolitics, Marginalised magical youth, whistleblowing.

Introduction

TJ Klune's *The House in the Cerulean Sea* is a whimsical, cosy narrative about optimism, acceptance and found family. Revolving around the magical youth - Lucy, Talia, Sal, Phee, Chauncey, and Theodore and the magical master, Arthur Parnassus, Klune brings in a bureaucratic panopticon – the Department in Charge of the Magical Youth (DICOMY), which frames certain rules and regulations to be followed by the magical children. This department acts as an example of state normalisation as it manipulates the villagers of Marsyas to treat the magical children as 'the others'. The former panopticon representative and the later voice of the marginalised magical children, Linus Baker, whistleblow isolation, marginalisation, alienation, and submissiveness. A Foucauldian study of these, featured in the novel by implementing the theories of Panopticism, Disciplinary Power, and Biopolitics, brings out a clear outline of systemic marginalisation devised by DICOMY, thereby revealing the transformation of Linus' fear into radical empathy.

Bureaucratic Panopticon – An Internalised Surveillance

A Panoptic surveillance is said to have a closed circular building, comprising individual rooms where the accused is shut in and watched constantly. Foucault, in his *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison,* rightly describes it as:

Bentham's *Panopticon* is the architectural figure of this composition. We know the principle on which it was based: at the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; . . . . All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy. . . . Visibility is a trap. (200)

Klune's DICOMY serves the same purpose. Beginning with the panopticon surveillance of the caseworkers, "A caseworker must maintain a degree of separation", (Klune 43) replies Linus Baker on being summoned by Extremely Upper Management from the Department in Charge of Magical Youth (DICOMY). One crucial rule that Linus had been following in his seventeen years of experience as a meticulous Senior Caseworker earned him the grace to observe and report on the last and the most important children (in fact, dangerous children as marginalised by DICOMY) brought under a Classified Level Four case.

DICOMY, a bureaucratic machine, is described as sterile, grey and completely mechanical in all its work, starting from the caseworker's office till the Extremely Upper Management. The mechanical life containing lots of codes and rules can be seen in Linus' description of his office and the way his supervisor would treat him simply because he accidentally stained his white shirt.

The place where Linus works also seems to be a Panopticon prison where he and his colleagues are constantly monitored by Ms. Jenkins and her assistant Gunther, who records the black marks (at his wish). Klune describes Linus' workplace: "His small wooden desk was almost at the center of the room: Row L, Desk Seven in a room comprising twenty-six rows with fourteen desks in each row. There was barely any space between the desks" (21). Likewise, Klune narrates the Panoptic infrastructure of Extremely Upper Management as:

. . . the elevator opened to a long, cold hallway, the floor made of stone tile, the gold sconces on the wall casting low light. At one end of the hall was the bank of elevators where he stood. At the other end was a shuttered pane of glass next to a pair of large wooden doors. Above them was a metal sign:

EXTREMELY UPPER MANAGEMENT

BY APPOINTMENT ONLY (36)

This management classifies the magical children into four major groups starting from their level of monstrosity. Stage 1 magical children are categorised under Classified level one, followed by Stages 2 and 3. The children (dangerous monsters, 'the others') with the highest level of magic in them are categorised as Classified level four. Klune narrates that "Linus took in a stuttering breath. Classified level four was the highest classification. He'd known it existed in theory, but was unaware that it was actually in use" (45).

On his appointment as a caseworker to the orphanage in Marsyas, Linus turns to become a Panopticon representative who is to observe the six magical children, namely Lucy, Talia, Sal, Phee, Chauncey, and Theodore and report the same. Linus' staunch belief towards the following *RULES AND REGULATIONS* and his constant attachment towards rereading it is clearly narrated by Klune, "Instead of allowing his thoughts to wander, he lifted the copy he kept at home of *RULES AND REGULATIONS* (all 947 pages work, but it seemed right to have one for his house as well), and began to read the tiny print" (34).

DICOMY's Disciplinary Power – The Creation of 'Docile Bodies'

"The classical age discovered the body as object and target of power" (136), quotes Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Though Klune portrays Linus as a case worker in a secret operation, DICOMY also treats him as an object. He is under the power of DICOMY and thus is the first 'docile body' in Klune's novel. A 'docile body' is a body brought under one supreme control where it is observed, rules are imposed, it is structured, tamed and brought under certain power. Foucault rightly puts forth, "The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A 'political anatomy', which was also a 'mechanics of power', was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies," (136). DICOMY has a hold over Linus' body, the bodies of the magical children and the villagers' bodies.

The Panopticon Representative, a docile body, began his surveillance as soon as he set foot in the village of Marsyas. He observed the alienation of the orphanage set on a faraway island. The villagers were not happy with the presence of those magical children on their lands. They hung warning notes everywhere around the village against the state-marginalised manipulations. The villagers, in fact, were another set of docile bodies, as they were under the manipulation of the DICOMY. They never gave a second thought to understanding the real reason behind their abnormality. They were merely bound by the words of the Panopticon, DICOMY.

The orphanage was completely aloof, guarded by the woods yet was monitored by DICOMY. The magical children were supposed to stay in the orphanage and not wander. Though Arthur, the Master of the orphanage, allowed it, the manipulated villagers were not ready to accept it, merely out of fear. DICOMY always expected

its members, its workers, and the orphanage children under it to be disciplined and to follow the rules. Thus, Foucault's line: ". . .discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, 'docile' bodies" (136), suits best for DICOMY's creation of 'docile bodies'. DICOMY's ultimate goal to isolate the docile bodies seems to be not a measure to nurture them, but rather an action to suppress their magic.

DICOMY's Registration – An example of Biopower

Biopower, a more dominating and overpowering tool, concentrates on controlling the masses by segregating them under certain fixed conditions, practising them under such circumstances and labelling them based on their differences. This is, in fact, grouping the masses under one community based on their features. Foucault quotes in *The History of Sexuality,* ". . . there was an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations, marking the beginning of an era of "bio-power" (140).

DICOMY turns out to be the driving force in the novel, which acts as the lead in imposing bio-power upon the magical children. It finds all magical children in the State and considers registration under DICOMY mandatory. On being registered, the children are expected to follow the rules imposed on them. The government constantly tracks their biology, takes control over their living conditions, and takes the opportunity to shut down any orphanages to classify the children further.

The very title of the novel, *The House in the Cerulean Sea,* reveals DICOMY's biopower acting upon the orphanage. The house is not somewhere 'within' the State, but rather on an empty island, 'far away' from the village of Marsyas, rightly named by Klune as "End of the line" (52). The classification of the children into different cases is yet another example of Biopower. The manipulation of the villagers to treat the children differently proves the point. The ultimate goal of DICOMY was the complete erasure of the children whose powers were uncontrollable even after scrutiny, discipline and training.

The Revelation of Truth – Rupturing the Panoptic Gaze

Linus' weekly Case Report projects his evolution from being a staunch devotee of DICOMY, a Panopticon representative, to turning rebellious in whistleblowing the alienation of the magical children. Though the first report seemed to be problematic, Linus' Case Report #2 provided a varied understanding of the children. It's evident when he records, "My second week at Marsyas Orphanage has brought new insights into its habitants. Where once seemed to be chaos, I now see a strange yet definite order" (Klune 201).

Gradually, Linus tries to shift away from the Panoptic gaze. He tries hard to focus on the reason behind every action of the magical children as well as the villagers. He tries to justify the so-called 'monstrosity' of the magical, dangerous children as marginalised by DICOMY. He tries to prove that their actions were accidental and they were trying their best to avoid harming the normal beings. The building which initially haunted Linus is later described by him in Case Report #3 as, "This isn't simply an orphanage. It is a house of healing. . ." (Klune 240).

Right after the third report, Linus gathered his courage, shooing away his fear in voicing against the manipulated villagers who rose against the orphanage. Linus debated hard to break the State Normalisation. Klune beautifully narrates, "Linus stepped forward. . . . he'd never been the intimidating sort, much to his consternation, but he wasn't about to allow these people to do whatever had gotten stuck in their heads. What is the meaning of this?" (321). The final report holds a suspense and is left unrecorded in the novel until he appears in front of the members of Extremely Upper Management to defend the Bureaucratic Panopticon.

Baker's Realisation – A Path towards Radical Whistleblowing

On returning, Linus buckled up to encounter the Bureaucratic Panopticon (the members of Extremely Upper Management). The years of system planning and framing are completely shattered by the questions he shoots at the act of State Normalisation. Linus exclaims, ""Change starts with the voices of the few. I will be one of those few because they taught me how. And I know I'm not alone"" (362). He begins his defence starting with Talia and continues with Sal, Phee, Chauncey, Theodore and finally Lucy. The management, in fact, remembered only Lucy, considering his identity to be the son of the devil, the Antichrist. Whereas all the other kids were forgotten. But Linus had remembered all the children he had observed from day one.

This shows that Linus truly works for the welfare of the magical children. But DICOMY stands to erase away all the magical children 'who stand to be more powerful than them'. The Panopticon is selfish. Linus perfectly points out, ""... It may not have been by your hand that he suffered, but it was by your ideals. The ideals of DICOMY. Of registration. Of prejudice against them. You allow it to fester, you and all the people before you who sat where you do now"" (361 - 362).

Conclusion

The climax of the novel is essentially the perfect response against the Bureaucratic Normalisation. By opting to throw away his rulebook, voice against the Extremely Upper Management, stand up to DICOMY, and plan to stay on Marsyas island, Linus breaks the norms paved by the Bureaucratic Panopticon. He courageously refuses to be the eye of the State. He rejects the Panopticon idea of power and discipline and chooses to live according to resistance, where power is loving and cooperative. Thus, the final Case Report recorded with a single, yet impactful line, ""It is my recommendation that the Marsyas Orphanage remain open, and that the children therein continue under the tutelage of Arthur Parnassus" (357), reveals Linus Baker's tremendous transition from being a Panopticon Representative to having evolved as a Marsyas Whistleblower, fearful caseworker turned into a radical empath.

Works Cited

1. Foucault, Michel. "The Subject and Power." Critical Inquiry, vol. 8, no. 4 (Summer, 1982), pp. 777-795. *JSTOR,* https://www2.kobe-u.ac.jp/~alexroni/IPD2018 readings/IPD1 2018 No.8/Foucault Subject and Power.pdf
2. Foucault, Michel. *DISCIPLINE AND PUNISH: The Birth of the Prison.* Translated by Alan Sheridan, Vintage Books, New York, May 1995. https://monoskop.org/images/5/5d/Foucault_Michel_Power_Knowledge_Selected_Interviews_and_Other_Writings_1972-1977.pdf
3. Foucault, Michel. *POWER/KNOWLEDGE: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977.* Edited by Colin Gordon, translated by Colin Gordon et al., Pantheon Books, New York, 1980. Foucault_Michel_Power_Knowledge_Selected_Interviews_and_Other_Writings_1972-1977.pdf
4. Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction.* Translated by Robert Hurley, Pantheon Books, New York, 1978. https://monoskop.org/images/4/40/Foucault_Michel_The_History_of_Sexuality_1_An_Introduction.pdf
5. Klune, TJ. *The House in the Cerulean Sea.* Tor, 2020.

Copyright & License:
© Authors retain the copyright of this article. This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), permitting unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.