

REARTICULATING FOUCAULT'S PANOPTICON: A STUDY ON *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* AND *TWELVE YEARS A SLAVE*

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Abstract

The work of Michel Foucault has been influential in Humanities and Social Sciences. Of all the twentieth century thinkers, the legacy of Foucault is greater. Andrew W. Neal in his article on Foucault titled "Michel Foucault" (2009) comments, "The works of Foucault disrupts some of the central concepts of discipline, particularly its notions of power, sovereignty, structure and history" (161). Foucault's notion of power is a radical departure from all the other notions put forward by different philosophers. It is difficult to begin any kind of discourse on disciplinary power achieved through surveillance without addressing Foucault's seminal work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prisons* (1975).

Keywords : *Panopticon, male gaze, surveillance, racialising surveillance, dark sousveillance, surveillance capitalism*

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Introduction

Michel Foucault discusses the idea of panopticon at length in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prisons*. The physical tower of the panopticon developed by Bentham transformed itself into an abstract concept of power relations between people and different institutions in society. For the French philosopher Foucault, "...this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers" (201). The prison thus becomes an example for disciplinary society for him. The metaphor of panopticon prison borrowed by Michel Foucault from Jeremy Bentham has been employed in the dissertation to analyse the enslavement of bodies, especially with reference to the conditions of female characters in Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* and plight of slaves in Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*. The challenges panopticon poses in the age of digital surveillance is also analysed.

Surveillance as a Feminist Issue in Margaret Atwood's Novel *The Handmaid's Tale*

Surveillance is one among the many tools of patriarchy. One problem with constant monitoring is that the knowledge of being watched make a person to change the behaviour. The panopticon subordinates all persons to the need of the State. Women and men should enjoy the same opportunities, agency and power and have access to the same choices to live in dignity, manage their autonomy and establish their identity. Many women experience male gaze when they enter a space which is traditionally male dominated.

Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* describes the invisible technology of power, the surveillance and the domination of women by men. The plot discusses on military dictatorship of the Republic of Gilead. In Gilead, most women are sterile. To solve the sterility problem Handmaids are trained. After the Handmaids have gone through the training they will be distributed to Commanders and used for reproduction. The Handmaids are the only fertile women who were captured from their previous lives by the Eyes. The Eyes in the novel are actually secret agents and are appointed to keep constant watch over the Handmaids by creating paranoia and to crush the dissenters. According to Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prisons*, "The fear of punishment diverts the mind from the road along which the prospect of an advantageous crime was leading in" (104). It is the fear of punishment which restrict themselves from breaking the chains set by the regime. The Handmaids cannot resist or disobey the Gilead regime because they are closely monitored and when found guilty, they will be punished. Therefore, the panoptic regime and its punishments control them. The Eye is a recurring symbol

throughout the novel, it is even tattooed on the ankles of Handmaids to remind them they are always under surveillance. Handmaids are trained to internalize the rules through rehabilitation in the Red Centre. The Red Centre resembles Bentham's panoptic model. The Handmaids are always under the watch of Aunts. Aunts are a class of strict disciplinary women in Gilead. They are responsible for overseeing the training and indoctrination of Handmaids. During Handmaids time in Commanders house, the Eyes ensure that the hierarchical structure is properly maintained by exerting their power of watching over the Handmaids.

The novel constantly presents the omnipresence of the scrutinizing gaze. The word 'Eye' is presented everywhere in the novel. Eyes in the novel are secret police agents who work for Republic of Gilead. They monitor the activities of Handmaids and maintain law and order. Gilead puts some laws over female bodies to make them docile. Patriarchal society makes a woman miserable, renders her powerless and forces her to follow subordination as a norm. Women are not admired for their wisdom but men only need them to fulfil their desires. According to Torin Manohan in his article "Dreams of Control at a Distance: Gender, Surveillance and Social Control", "A society marked by sexist relation get worsened by the use of surveillance technologies because these technologies can make the existing inequalities much deepen" (288). Surveillance technologies worsen the gender discrimination. Patriarchal world monitor the actions of women and they assure that the female section is always under control. Women are exposed to Panoptic gaze. Sandra Lee Bartky in "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power" observes, "In contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgement" (140). Patriarchy makes females to be always under male gaze and they cannot question. Handmaids are aware of the fact that they are constantly watched by the Eyes, they are powerless and so they cannot respond at the judgements made by the Commander.

Katarina Gregersdotter in *Watching Women, Falling Women: Power and Dialogue in Three Novels by Margaret Atwood* claims,

There is an emphasis on watching, which I regard as the major component in construing femininity. Watching equals a form of power exercise in these novels. The watcher has, in the novels, internalized a patriarchal value system. It is an intricate surveillance system, but with a simple result: the watcher constructs and the watched is constructed. (11)

Gregersdotter through her work talk about surveillance as a feminist issue. According to her, surveillance itself is a form of power exercised by men over women. The male constructs femininity. Surveillance give the masculine section power to control and construct women. The Handmaids are only for breeding purposes and

are described in the novel as mere “two-legged wombs” (142) and nothing more. The Commanders restrict communication and movements of Handmaids and thus control the souls of the women. The panoptic regime makes them exercise their power over the female and made the Handmaids silenced and subservient in the Republic of Gilead. Thus, the novel portrays how surveillance gets to be gendered. The panoptic regime is taken as a tool by the males to make their counterpart weak, subjugated and silenced.

Panoptic Slavery and Dark Sousveillance by the Enslaved: In Solomon Northup’s *Twelve Years a Slave*

Slavery, forced labour, dispossession and imprisonment have moved hand in hand with forces of surveillance. Communities of colour have been under constant surveillance. Blackness is the marker for being a commodity. Slavery can be considered as the darkest chapter in human history. Black bodies were disciplined by surveillance to maintain racial hierarchies and extract maximum wealth. *Twelve Years a Slave* is a slave narrative by Solomon Northup. The protagonist, Solomon Northup is a free negro but is trapped to go to Washington and is later drugged, kidnapped, beaten and sold into slavery in the Deep South. It is about the darkest periods in American history. There are no fictional elements or exaggeration but it is all about a real man’s story of fight for survival and freedom from twelve years of captivity.

One of the surveillance systems developed by the plantation owners is the slave pass system. The slave pass notes are written by the owners to enable the black people to travel off the plantation. Apart from being watched by their own masters, the enslaved blacks were constantly monitored wherever they go because of the note they carried which marked them as slaves. Christian Parenti in his work *The Soft Cage: Surveillance in America From Slave Passes to the War on Terror* claims that racializing surveillance in plantations system lays out, “...information technologies: the written slave pass, organized slave patrols and wanted posters for runaways” (15). Slave pass system is crucial in plantation surveillance system. The slave pass system carries complete information of individual which make it difficult for them to escape from slavery.

Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin in their work *Postcolonial Studies: The Key Concepts* have provided an overview of the issues which characterize post-colonialism. They consider surveillance as an important powerful strategy of imperial dominance. “For the observer, sight confers power; for the observed, visibility is powerlessness. Clearly, the discipline instilled by Panopticon, and its imposition of ‘constant’ surveillance, provides a powerful metaphor for the ‘disciplinary’ operation

of dominant discourse of all kinds” (207-8). Slavery cultivates the habit of observation and objectification

of blackness. The masters constantly watch their slaves. The complete visibility of the plantation was becoming an important aspect. The place where the enslaved worked was a kind of panoptic plantation which enforced the master’s control over the slaves. Northup is aware of Master Epps eye on the slaves. “If one of us had been backward or idle through the day, we were apt to be told all about it on returning to the quarters, and as it was matter of principle with him to reprove every offence of that kind that came within his knowledge” (145). The owner always watches their movement and working skills and the slaves could not lie to their masters. The master has complete report of the day in his hands. Foucault in his work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prisons* claims that the panopticon “...among workers; it makes it possible to note the aptitude of each worker, compare the time he takes to perform a task, and if they are paid by the day, to calculate their wages” (203). Surveillance here becomes a tool to measure the efficiency of workers so as to calculate their wages. They are punished brutally if they did not work to achieve the profit calculated by the masters.

Solomon Northup gives a detailed account of the overseers appointed by Master Epps. According to Northup, overseers are gentlemen who ride into the plantation field “...armed with pistols, bowie knife, whip, accompanied by several dogs. They follow, equipped in this fashion, in rear of slaves, keeping sharp look upon them all. The requisite qualifications in an overseer are utter heartlessness, brutality and cruelty” (143). Overseers watch the slaves much closer than planters themselves. They discipline the slaves who try to break the rules. The novel talks how surveillance is getting racialised. According to Simone Brown in *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, “Racialising surveillance is a technology of social control where surveillance practices, policies, and performances concern the production of norms pertaining to race and exercise a “...power to define what is in or out of place” (16). Surveillance system in plantation setting is employed to deepen the marginalisation. In *Twelve Years a Slave* surveillance is done on bodies along their racial lines. On Edwin Epps plantation there is a kind of symbiosis of surveillance and forced labour.

Creative acts done to overcome slavery and its brutalities are termed as dark sousveillance. It is not only about monitoring the authority, masters, patrollers or overseers but also to be aware of the plantation surveillance in order to resist it. Browne in her work *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* explicates the term dark sousveillance.

I use the term “dark sousveillance” as a way to situate the tactics employed to render one’s self out of sight, and strategies used in the flight to freedom from slavery as necessarily ones of oversight [...] I plot dark sousveillance as an imaginative place from which to mobilize a critique of racializing surveillance, a critique that takes form in antisurveillance, countersurveillance, and other freedom practices. (21)

Simone Brown uses the word dark sousveillance to refer to the ways the enslaved black people used techniques for survival and escape from their tyranny. She wants to see them as not dolls in the hands of their master but as angels fighting against the indictment and inequities of society. Solomon Northup’s first strategy of dark sousveillance was to write a letter to his friend in his homeland to rescue him. The slaves were not given pen or papers but he used his creative intelligence “After various experiments I succeeded in making ink, by boiling white maple bark, and with a feather plucked from the wing of a duck, manufactured a pen. When all were asleep in the cabin, by the light of the coals, lying upon my plank couch, I managed to complete a somewhat lengthy epistle” (148). His final escape from twelve years of hardship was made through such a letter which was posted by the faithful carpenter Bass.

The first attempt of posting the letter was a failure. Armsby whom Solomon Northup considers a true friend spies to master that one of his slaves can read and write which poses a great threat seeking his or her own freedom. When Epps enquires about it, Solomon Northup, makes a strategy to throw out Armsby. Solomon Northup makes the master believe that it was indeed a wrong information given by Armsby as he is very much greedy about getting the position of an overseer. Thus, the protagonist here tries to escape from the very panoptic system which would have otherwise taken his life.

Solomon Northup knows the fact that he is constantly monitored. Sometimes he could see the watcher but sometimes he could not but he works as if someone is watching and policing him all the time. Another example of dark sousveillance was his appointment as black driver. A slave could be sometimes promoted to the position of a black driver. They are appointed by masters to punish other slaves for misbehaving. Northup states.

If Epps was observed at a distance, or we had reason to apprehend he was as sneaking somewhere in the vicinity, I would commence plying the lash vigorously, when, according to arrangement, they would squirm and screech as if in agony, although not one of them had in fact been even grazed. (145)

Solomon Northup’s slave memoir *Twelve Years a Slave* depicts what John Fiske mentions in his article “Surveilling the City: Whiteness, the Black Man and Democratic Totalitarianism” (1998) that black looks have the power to trouble surveillance as it is a “Technology of whiteness” (69). Black people have the ability

to overcome the surveillance practises of masters. Dark sousveillance practices can be employed to destroy the technology of whiteness. Northup's slave narrative is a perfect mixture surveillance and dark sousveillance. Along with drawing the darkest pages of history Solomon Northup through his biographical notes showcases the strict racialized panoptic regime. It portrays the plantation system and slavery as not merely a mercantile enterprise which oppressed the slave subject but shows how it was used to exercise disciplinary power to exploit the slave bodies.

Is Panopticon a Saviour or a Devastator –Surveillance in Contemporary Society

Surveillance is about the exercise of power and the performance of power relationships, most of which are evident in the society. The concept of panopticon is one of the most significant matters in modern age surveillance studies. The modern society is more transparent and visible. According to Christian Laval in "Discipline and Prevent: The New Panopticon Society" (2012), "Today, surveillance is characterized by dedicated technologies and the agents and services operating them. It is rationalised by technical system" (63). The digital world capture and alter the behaviour of its users through the panoptic surveillance. Our contemporary society is a giant panopticon that ranges from simple surveillance cameras like Closed Circuit Television cameras fixed in public places to more extreme cases of online suicidal games such as the Blue Whale Challenges, Momo challenge and so on. In all these cases panopticon is at work.

The social media platform is basically panoptical. The perfect example will be the Facebook. It bears great resemblance with panopticon. As soon as one creates an account, the user's activity is found chronologically ordered in the timeline. The record of the activities is also found in the activity log of the user's account. The reports of the user's activity are also sent to the newsfeed of other Facebook users. Thus, the newsfeed can be the guard tower from where the information can be collected and monitored. The surveillance power the other users enjoy is not real. In fact, they are watched by the real authority. Apart from all these pseudo panoptic agents, the real panoptic master is the Facebook corporation who is having access to all accounts. The only fact is that the Facebook's gaze remains unnoticed among its users. This is not just the case of Facebook. Every social media work on surveillance method.

The concept of surveillance capitalism emerged in recent years is greatly connected with the concept of watching, which is actually a surveillance economy and their economic logic. The digital world that has formed around and the road to a digital future that the society is on right now is something that has been hijacked by a economic logic. Surveillance capitalism, according to Shoshana Zuboff in her work *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* is, "A new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practises of extraction,

prediction, and sales” (9). According to Zuboff, surveillance capitalism is pioneered at Google and later in Facebook.

The most shocking news that came recently was death of many teenagers due their participation in the Blue Whale Challenge. Access to such games was made through secretive social media networks. This game works on the concept of panopticon. All games have rules and regulations. The Blue Whale game too works on such rules. The game has to be completed within five days and the last task given to the gamer is to commit suicide. Blue whale challenge works on the theory of panopticon because the administrator warns during the conversation between the gamer and himself about the concept of being watched. The blog report “Discipline and Punish(1975), Panopticism-Suicide(1897),Blue Whale Online Suicide Game(2017)” claims that during the conversation before joining the game the administrator warns that “If you join, you cannot go back because we are watching and following you everywhere you go and do”. The first rule of Blue Whale Game thus follows the panoptic notion. Thus, by accepting the challenge one accepts to be controlled and being watched and therefore it is a kind of voluntary servitude. Once the players are in to the challenges they could never go back or quit the game. They have to complete the fifty tasks provided by the admin. Thus, the game engulfs the life of the adventure seeking innocent teenagers.

Internet can be thus viewed as a structure for social control. It is capable of altering the behaviour according to the need of surveillant. The virtual world itself works in through this giant concept. Thus, through the popularisation of Bentham’s panopticon by Foucault, the world makes use of surveillance to gain power and the concept still has greater significance even in present society. In modern societies, the possibilities of monitoring people with the purpose of changing behaviour is growing. Thus, in an effective or in a destructive manner, the concept of panopticon still exist in the contemporary society.

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