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Foucault's Panopticon: Rule by Fear and Power in Mohsin Hamid Novel's *Exit West*

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the researcher analyzes Mohsin Hamid's Novel, Exit West through Foucault's Panopticon. It qualitatively explo[res] the text for the representation of humans as commodities. This paper also explores the issues of surveillance and fear of t[he] masses in Exit West through the application of Foucault's Panopticon. It is about how the state uses power in society to cont[rol] others. Foucault emphasizes how outside forces might exert control over the lives of individuals. According to Foucault, [a] group of individuals is called "carceral culture" (Foucault, 1975, p.201). They are individuals in society who encoun[ter] consequences and control that restrict their autonomy. The study finds that in modern technology, social media functions as a [form] of surveillance. The result of this paper shows the role of the Panopticon and Surveillance to unveil the realities that how s[ociety] oppresses and exploits human beings in the society. This study will help to create a society free of violence and oppression.

KEY WORDS: Foucault's Panopticon, Rule by Fear and Power, Surveillance, Ideological State Apparatus, Repressive St[ate] Apparatus and Foucault's Studies

1. Introduction

Mohsin Hamid, a Pakistani writer, penned his fourth novel, *Exit West* in 2017. It portrayed challenges related to migration and exile. Many researchers examine the novel from the perspective of global politics and technological usage. The novel's primary themes consist of diaspora concerns, monitoring, and exile. The main story of the novel centers on Saeed and Nadia, a couple who run away from their home town amidst a civil war by using a network of mysterious doors that can transport these individuals anywhere in the world. They move from one city to another because of Surveillance and Violence which are eventually used as powerful weapons in the hands of the state through which they can control the common masses. The militants take the city, imposing strict rules and surveillance, especially in Saeed's neighborhood. Meanwhile, in the city of London, surveillance drones and informants lurk everywhere. They follow Saeed and Nadia, beaming their location to a group of informed men. Therefore, the constant surveillance under the militant regimes erodes all sense of privacy, creating an atmosphere of fear and paranoia.

The "Panopticon" is a term that derives from Greek *opticon* for

"observe" and *pan* for "all". Michael Foucault (1977) in his studies used Panopticon as a symbol of social power and surveillance.

The idea of the Panopticon was first given by Jeremy Bentham in the 17th Century. He viewed it as a modern prison, which was meant to assist culprits in correcting instead of just keeping them locked up before they were punished. One feature of the Bentham plan was a 360-degree view of the prison cells from a tower. The design was built so that it enabled the guards to see all the prisoners, but the prisoners could not see the guards. It was about eyes that enabled them to see without being seen.

The Panopticon is essentially a place where people can be watched all the time to control their behavior. Its goal is to make people obedient.

Michel Foucault (1975) describes a shift in the strategies that how society tries to mold people, including using punishment as a way to maintain discipline and control. He introduces the concept of Panopticon by comparing measures with a plague to Jeremy Bentham's design of the Panopticon. According to him, Panopticon leads to a strategy which makes individuals to discipline themselves

and monitor their behavior.

However, we should point out that the idea of Panopticon is not totally the same as Bentham‟s Panopticon. Foucault (1979) explains that Panopticon is more than just an architectural structure (p.215). Here, we are comparing the Panopticon to a modern idea that subtly controls our behavior without realizing it. It also serves as a comparison for understanding the dynamics of power within society. The Panopticon, once a towering structure at the center of a circular, has evolved into something else entirely. It has transformed into security cameras and modern technology.

Foucault explains that the Panopticon is a building, structure or tool that is designed to exert control and hold power over individuals, regardless of the current authority. In the contemporary world, mass surveillance is common in the society. Modern technology is utilized to obtain information about people and manage their behavior.

1.1 Surveillance

In the whole novel, *Exit West*, the use of surveillance tools by the government demonstrates their authority over their citizens. The militants maintain their authority by instilling fear in the population. In the novel, surveillance occurs as a result of people spying on each other and authorities carrying out unplanned searches. The same is the case with the characters, Saeed and Nadia, while living in London are tired from the everyday searches. They also feel scariness from the flying drones over London. In the shape of drones, they are not only robotic but they can drop bombs over the citizens. This indicates that the drones serve as the government‟s surveillance tool, observing and judging the characters. Unlike other cities, Saeed and Nadia in the city of the Marin, experience a high level of freedom. In contrast to the prominent surveillance drones and patrols in their city and London, Marin‟s drone is small in size, resembling a hummingbird, and is designed to not disturb them in their day-to-day activities. This helps Saeed and Nadia believe that Marin City cares about keeping their safety and freedom. In *Exit West*, Mohsin Hamid (2017) highlights the theme of surveillance which is present throughout the novel. The characters live in a world where government surveillance is prevalent and citizens are monitored closely. It leads them towards a lack of privacy and freedom. The characters are forced to be cautious in their actions and movements and this leads them toward a sense of oppression and paranoia. The theme highlights the dangers of unchecked surveillance and the effects it can have on individual freedoms and autonomy.

2. Literature Review

Many critics have analyzed the concept of the Panopticon in their academic studies. They have made the vital contributions in dissecting it differently.

Lyon (1994) has written extensively on the Panopticon and its relationship to modern surveillance practices. He argues that the Panopticon serves as a metaphor for the way that modern surveillance technologies, such as cameras and algorithms, are used to monitor and control individuals.

Bauman (2001) has used the Panopticon to analyze the way that modern society creates and reinforces the idea of a "surveillance society." He argues that the Panopticon represents a new form of social control, where individuals are subject to continuous surveillance and must continually adjust their behavior in response.

Dice (2011) explains the psychological effects of Big Brother on the characters of *1984*. Big Brother, by using its brute power, horrifies the masses and tries to get into their minds. According to the author, Big Brother uses all sorts of available resources: the cameras, the

telescreen, and the printing press to control the common masses. Furthermore, he believes that Big Brother has propagated a modern form of surveillance and it has shown itself as a complete authority. It is so severe a force itself that it has become a synonym for continuous watching and controlling authority.

Angus and Winslade (2015) in their research interpret how the federal Government governs the masses and controls them through a Panopticon. In this research, they show government policy. He calls it, „governmentality‟; the government controls the mentality of the masses through the use of education by giving a policy of surveillance that they are being watched.

Benstead (2016) highlights how the party in Orwell‟s novel *1984* uses propaganda and surveillance as a means of control. Propaganda molds public opinion and surveillance ensures conformity and restricts dissent. The study focuses on how these tactics dehumanize people by taking away their autonomy and promoting a state of psychological slavery. Together, propaganda and surveillance generate and sustain the totalitarian system of the party, forming collective consciousness and controlling the individual agency.

Wendy Brown (2016) has written about the Panopticon and its relationship to neoliberalism. She argues that the Panopticon represents a new form of control, where individuals are subject to constant monitoring and evaluation, and must continually strive for self-improvement.

Popescu and Lahamah (2019) argue that *Exit West* counters the dominant discourse on sovereign power and authority. By exposing London as a dark and cruel space for marginalized people such as refugees, the novel challenges the dominant representation of London as a progressive and cosmopolitan space and reveals the insidious ways in which sovereign power is exercised in London.

However, the novel has not been interpreted from Foucault‟s perspective. This study will try to explore *Exit West* from Foucault‟s perspective of Surveillance.

3. Discussion

The history portrays universal degradation of human beings. Throughout history, the state has considered human beings as puppets. They have been under surveillance in political, social, financial and legal spheres of life. Consequently, the state has become more and more dominant. The twentieth century witnessed the rise of strong technology which further enhanced the dominance of the state over human beings. Foucault‟s Panopticon (1975) is a tool in the hands of a state that focuses on the subjugation of human beings in every domain.

Human beings are supposed to remain subjugated at the hands of state. As George Orwell (1949: 07) says in his novel 1984: "Big Brother is watching you". This line shows how a constant threat of state hangs over the heads of people in every walk of life. It depicts the subordination of human beings and how they are just like Caged birds. They are treated like puppets, and deprived of their essential humanness. The state‟s control over the economy gives it the upper hand in every aspect of life. That is why Foucault‟s Panopticon (1975) vehemently speaks about surveillance through which human beings are controlled by modern means.

The Exit West novel (Hamid: 2007) is also an example of a state apparatus in which the characters are directed through different tools. In this novel, Hamid highlights the harsh, cruel and ferocious treatment of his characters by the state. He shows the state‟s position in the modern society and tries to unveil the hidden realities regarding human beings and finds out what sort of oppression

characters face in the novel, specifically Saeed and Nadia.

Foucault"s Panopticon analyzes the ways how the state exploits the characters through different tools. One of the most important of them is the imposition of strict societal rules and regulations. For example, women are expected to dress modestly and are prohibited from going out alone at night. Nadia, the novel"s female protagonist, annoyed under these restrictions, resists by wearing a full black robe that allows her to roam around the city more freely. In the novel, Nadia knows how to dress to protect herself "She learned how to dress for self-protection, how best to deal with aggressive men who were the police" (p.07)[1]. The novel depicts authorities controlling the characters "The authorities perhaps wishing to signal that they were in such complete control that none was needed, both Nadia and Saeed found themselves unsettled. "The country had been blanketed in surveillance for years, the government watching its citizens as if they were dangerous birds" (p.45).

The government"s violence is so much that people do not know where are their loved ones whether alive or dead. In order to escape this brutality, people flee the city "people vanished in those days and for the most part one never knew, at least not for a while, if they were alive or dead" (p.66). And those who cannot escape, face the government"s brutality, even when they are the educated ones. We see in the novel that the government controls the student of Saeed"s mother. "Saeed"s mother thought she saw a former student of hers firing with much determination and focus a machine gun on her" (p.65).

Both Nadia and Saeed witness brutal acts of violence performed by the government"s security forces, which serve to reinforce the state"s power and make it clear to the characters that any resistance will be met with an instant and brutal retaliation. The novel speaks about the brutality of the state "The government employed a network of spies and informants to keep tabs in the activities of its citizens and also for intimidation" (p.40)

Despite the state"s attempt to control them, Nadia and Saeed find ways to resist and assert their individuality. They form a relationship that challenges societal expectations, and they eventually escape the city through a series of magical doors. These doors transport them to different anywhere in the world. But through magical doors, modern technology captures their movements. For example, "The entrance and exit points were heavily surveilled, with documents checked rechecked, and a growing number of facial recognition cameras at all the crossing" (p.66).

Another way through which the state controls the characters is its control of accurate information about almost all walks of life. The government imposes strict censorship laws, and news of the civil war is filtered through state-run media channels. Nadia and Saeed rely on rumors and word-of-mouth information to keep in touch with the situation, and their lack of access to accurate information creates a sense of uncertainty and paranoia. The state"s use of violence is also a major source of control over the characters. In the novel, the characters are so afraid that they even talk in a low voice about how to escape from the city. Hamid refers to this precarious situation "They were silent, but often they spoke in low voices, about how to escape from the city, or about the endless rumors of doors" (p.76-77). The security forces are shown to be brutal, using torture and execution to maintain order. The characters are

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[1] This and all other textual references to the edition of Mohsin Hamid"s Exit West (The US, Riverhead, 2017). Indicated by line numbers in parenthesis unless otherwise indicated.

constantly aware of the threat of violence and are forced to be cautious in their interaction with others. This pervasive sense of fear and danger creates a sense of helplessness and resignation among the characters.

Despite these ways, the state controls the masses through modern technology. Firstly, the government installs cameras and sensors throughout the city to monitor the movements of its citizens through a "massive surveillance apparatus" (p.67), that covers every street, building, and public space in the city. The cameras are connected to a central monitoring system that allows government agents to track the movements of the individual in real time. "The surveillance was so pervasive that even the most harmless of activities could be monitored" (p.67). Secondly, the government uses facial recognition software to identify individuals and track their movements. This is shown when government agents track Saeed and Nadia while they are going toward Mykonos. Agents use facial recognition software to identify the two and then track their movements to the refugee camp "And the government knew of Nadia and Saeed"s plan" (p.85). Thirdly, the government uses data mining techniques to analyze the information collected through surveillance. This is shown when Saeed and Nadia are asked to fill out a form of personal information, including their religion and political connection when they arrive in the refugee camp. The government then uses this information to identify potential threats and monitor individuals who are seen as a risk to national security. Here are a few examples of state control through surveillance in the novel.

3.1 Biometric ID (identity cards):
The state requires all citizens to carry biometric ID cards that can be used to track their movements and activities. The cards include fingerprint and retina scans, making it nearly impossible for people to move around undetected "Passports were checked, of course, and surveillance cameras monitored the queues" (p.88).

3.2 Checkpoints:
The state sets up checkpoints throughout the city where citizens are required to show their ID cards and submit to searches. Armed soldiers staff the checkpoints and use force if necessary.

3.3 Surveillance cameras:
The state installs surveillance cameras throughout the city to monitor the population. The cameras are used to identify dissidents and other people who are considered a threat to the state. "Passports were checked, of course, and surveillance cameras monitored the queues (p.92).

3.4 Informants:
The state uses informants to gather information on the population. These informants are often recruited from among the citizenry and are paid to report on the activities of their neighbors. Similarly, in *Exit West*, the characters are checked and have a suspicious eye. "For a while, they lived in a world of surveillance and suspicion, and the government employed a network of spies and informants to keep tabs on the activities of its citizens" (p.92).

The state exercises its authority to oppress the common masses. They use force to dominate the masses. According to Marx and Engels (1848), law is considered to be the tool of the ruling class to maintain its power over the ruling classes. It means that the ruling classes use the law in order to maintain their authority and power dynamics. The law is made to control society as Michael Foucault (1979) explains that the Penal law was created by the rich people, not the poor people, as an important tool in their plan to divide society. According to Foucault (1979), law is a means for those in authority to manipulate and dominate others. We see in the novel, that in order to control society, they create a situation of chaos in

which the masses are checked and controlled through various technologies. We see that the government uses drones in order to create fear in the mind of the people and it is made and applied based on the ideal condition of society. "Because of flying robots high above in the darkening sky, unseen but never far from people"s mind in those days" (p.83).

However, a small drone flies above a Tamil-speaking family. It is watching them. The drone is like the form of a Panopticon. It is always watching, even when it is not seen. Foucault (1979) says, "The Panopticon represents the permanent visibility- a state where individuals are constantly aware that they might be observed" (p.83). These lines illustrate the constant fear. In the novel, *Exit West*, the security vehicles are like the guards of the Panopticon. They are there to enforce the rules and to keep people in line. "A small quadcopter drone was hovering fifty meters above them now, too quiet to be heard" (p.87)

People are so afraid of being watched that they are afraid of those persons who are near and dear ones and also of those who look at them. "The family was also visible in the camera, each behaving in a different way, the mother making eye contact with the women she passed and then immediately glancing down" (p.88).

In Foucault"s philosophy, violence and fear are tools of control. When people are afraid, they are more likely to obey the rules and be cautious. This is why the state often uses violence and fear to control its population. The state is trying to identify and capture the militants responsible for the massacres, and it is also trying to prevent future attacks. The militants create violence and fear as tools of control over the working class. People are now more cautious and aware of the state's power. This makes it easier for the state to control its population. "Militants from Saeed and Nadia's country had crossed over to Vienna the previous week, and the city had witnessed massacres in the streets, the militants shooting unarmed people and then disappearing" (p.104).

3.5 Impacts of Surveillance on the Characters

The effects of surveillance and Panopticon on the characters in *Exit West* are significant which shape their experiences throughout the novel. Here are some specific impacts on the characters.

3.6 Loss of Freedom and Individuality

The constant surveillance restricts the characters' freedom and limits their ability to express themselves authentically. They are aware that their actions and conversations are being monitored, which leads to self-censorship and conformity. Through this, they suppress their individuality as they conform to the expectations set by the regime, resulting in a loss of personal agency. As Foucault (1979) says, "while being free means not being subject to someone"s power, to have power is to constrain someone"s freedom"(p.89). In the *Exit West* (2017), Hamid highlights, "The authorities perhaps wishing to signal that they were in such complete control that none was needed, both Nadia and Saeed found themselves unsettled" (p.40). The mechanism of surveillance has put them under constant repressions. The citizens cannot go anywhere by themselves. The authorities look them with suspicion and doubt. "The country had been blanketed in surveillance for years, the government watching its citizens as if they were dangerous birds that had to be kept in check" (p.45). It shows that human freedom is limited, and they are bound in their own actions.

3.7 Fear and Paranoia

The characters live in constant fear and paranoia due to surveillance. They are aware that any deviation from the regime's expectations could lead to punishment or retribution. This fear permeates their lives, influencing their choices and interactions. As

Foucault says, "Paranoia is the delusion that other people are watching you and are out to get you" (p.89). It creates a sense of unease and contributes to a general atmosphere of anxiety and mistrust. The citizens of the novel are the product of fear. The fear was so much that even the levels of voices were maintained to an extent. "They were silent, but often they spoke in a low voice, about how to escape from the city, or about the endless rumours of doors" (p.76-77).

3.8 The Self-Policing and Internalized Surveillance

The Panopticon system leads the characters to internalize the surveillance and self-police their behavior. They regulate themselves, constantly aware of the potential consequences of their actions. Foucault (1979) says, "He who is subject to the field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power---he becomes the principal of his own subjection" (p.07). This self-discipline becomes ingrained, shaping their thoughts and actions as they strive to conform and avoid attracting attention. "And the government knew of Nadia and Saeed"s plan" (p.85).

3.9 Loss of Trust and Social Fragmentation

The presence of surveillance undermines trust among the characters and fragments social relationships. They become suspicious of one another, unsure if someone may be an informant or if their conversations are being overheard. Foucault (1979), "Our society is not one of spectacle but of surveillance" (p.78). This loss of trust hinders genuine connections and contributes to a sense of isolation and alienation. Characters do not want to reveal their secret because the authority has an eye on everything. "Any attempt to use one or keep one secret had been proclaimed by militants to be punishable, as usual and somewhat unimaginatively, by death" (p. 82). One of the reasons, people do not raise their voice before the authority, since it was synonymous with death.

4. Conclusion

The overall discussion investigates the concept of surveillance, rule by power and fear, and their impacts on the people. It also discusses the effect on the masses. The human world has converted into a dystopian society where powerful authorities steer everyone, of which Nadia and Saeed are exponents. The supreme being is a state in which human beings are puppets in the hands of powerful authority. It suppresses and subjugates the main characters through the use of modern technology; camera drones and robots. It puts technological shackles everywhere and restricts their freedom and liberty. They are misrepresented as terrorists through technological media. Hamid (2017) guides us through *Exit West* that the state is the agency which restricts the autonomy of the characters. Saeed and Nadia formed as subjects, monopolized and controlled by media, surveillance, technology and military action.

This work sheds light on the detrimental effects of state dominance and the subjugation of individuals through various means, including violence, fear, strict regulations, censorship, and the use of surveillance technologies. The paper also illustrates how the state's control over individuals extends to every aspect of their lives, creating a sense of fear, helplessness, and loss of privacy. The constant surveillance and monitoring make it difficult for individuals to assert their autonomy.

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