



PANOPTICISM AND CULTURAL RESISTANCE: A FOUCAULDIAN CRITIQUE OF SURVEILLANCE IN *HELL'S GATE* AND *MEMOIRS FROM THE WOMEN'S PRISON*

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Abstract

The panoptic influence of surveillance and authoritarian control, as theorized by Michel Foucault, has been pervasive in shaping cultural identity and resistance. Employing Michel Foucault's understanding of the Panopticon as the theoretical framework, this paper analyzes the *Hell's Gate* by Hussein Hamid Hussein and *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* by Nawal El Saadawi to examine what they reflect and critique within mechanisms of power and repression under given socio-political contexts. *Hell's Gate* evokes, on an instinctive level, the experience of a protagonist under Saddam Hussein's regime: a regime through which he is constantly monitored, tortured, and psychologically troubled to break autonomy and selfhood for the purpose of keeping fear instilled. In contrast, *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* is a story of resistance and strength that is drawn from one person's life inside a women's prison in Egypt. Nawal El Saadawi's act of resistance to patriarchal and political marginalization shows how even inside the panoptic vision people and their societies may resist and be able to uphold their cultural identity. This paper will argue, with a Foucauldian reading, that these two texts do not only represent the devastating impact of surveillance on cultural growth but also suggest possible sites of resistance and reassertion of cultural identities within repressive regimes. This research further contributes to discussions in power, control, and cultural dynamics on how literature can represent and criticize life's realities under an authoritarian government.

Keywords: surveillance, authoritarian control, Michel Foucault, cultural identity, resistance, Panopticon, Dehumanizing, cultural growth

Introduction

“The Panopticon must not be understood as a dream building: it is the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form; its functioning, abstracted from any obstacle, resistance or friction, must be represented as a pure architectural and optical system: it is in fact a figure of political technology that may and must be detached from any specific use.” (Foucault 205)

Modern surveillance systems echo the profound influence of the Panopticon, a visionary concept developed by the English philosopher and jurist Jeremy Bentham between 1786 and 1787. The term "Panopticon" is derived from the Greek words "Pan," meaning "all," and "Opticon," meaning "seeing," encapsulating the essence of an all-seeing mechanism designed to monitor every facet of human behavior. Bentham's design for a prison allowed a single observer to watch all inmates without their knowledge of when they were being observed, creating a state of conscious and permanent visibility. This was intended to ensure discipline not through physical harm but through psychological control, with an emphasis on non-corporal punishment as a more "humane" approach. However, Michel Foucault, in his seminal work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), critiques this idea, arguing that the Panopticon symbolizes the pervasive and insidious forms of power that operate within modern disciplinary societies. Foucault contends that the transition from physical torture to organized incarceration does not make the system more humane but rather more sophisticated in its methods of control. He traces the evolution of punitive techniques, showing how the shift from corporal punishment to mental coercion has led to the internalization of control and the normalization of surveillance on individuals.

The power of the Panopticon lies not in its physical structure but in the psychological fear it instills—fear rooted in the possibility of being observed at any time and the unpredictable consequences that could follow. This pervasive psychological control leaves individuals in a state of constant self-regulation, where the possibility of being caught and disciplined leads to strict adherence to established norms and regulations. Dobson and Fisher, in their study *The Panopticon's Changing Geography* (2007), contend that the "Panopticon should be taken not literally but as a metaphor for surveillance of all types, with emphasis on power relationships" (Dobson, Fisher 307). This panoptic principle extends beyond punishment to pervade various institutions like hospitals, factories, schools, and prisons, making the Panopticon a symbol of modern power, grounded in discipline and pervasive across different levels of society.

This panoptic model of surveillance and control is strongly emphasized in the narratives of *Hell's Gate* by Hussein Hamid Hussein and *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* by Nawal El Saadawi. Both texts explore the complex dynamics of authoritarian regimes, particularly within the confines of imprisonment, where the psychological and physical implications of constant surveillance are laid bare. Although these stories emerge from distinct cultural and geopolitical contexts, they converge on a shared inquiry into how power is exercised, how control is maintained and how resistance is enacted. *Hell's Gate* recounts Hussein's harrowing experience under Saddam Hussein's regime, depicting torture, harsh interrogation and psychological torment, alongside a constant fear of death. The narrative not only reflects Hussein's struggle to survive the system's brutality but also serves as a broader commentary on the collective trauma experienced within Iraqi prisons, illuminating the dehumanizing effects of authoritarian power.

Similarly, Nawal El Saadawi's *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* is a powerful critique of Egypt's political and patriarchal oppression. Drawing from her experiences as a political prisoner, El Saadawi reveals how gender and state oppression are intertwined, with women's lives being constantly monitored, not only in the physical sense but also through social institutions that regulate their behavior. Her memoir transcends personal narrative to function as a feminist manifesto, challenging the structures of authority that seek to silence and subjugate women. Within the confines of the women's prison, El Saadawi highlights the resilience and solidarity among female prisoners who, despite their dire circumstances, find ways to resist the dehumanizing forces imposed upon them. Themes of solidarity and collective resistance are deeply embedded in the narrative, demonstrating that even when women are deprived of their liberties, they can still find ways to express and resist the mechanisms of oppression designed to subdue them.

Surveillance, a central theme in both *Hell's Gate* and *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*, is depicted as an instrument of control within these authoritarian regimes. In *Hell's Gate*, surveillance is pervasive, with psychological methods employed to enforce conformity and prevent reprisals. The text brilliantly illustrates how such omnipresent surveillance strips individuals of autonomy, reducing them to mere objects under the state's gaze. In contrast, in *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*, surveillance is deeply ingrained in patriarchal norms, allowing political and gender subjugation to be exercised simultaneously. This theme of surveillance pervades the narrative, showing how the authoritarian regime maintains control over individuals by making them feel

constantly visible, thereby generating compliance. As Saadawi vividly describes, “I saw a dark passage ending in a black shape, head wrapped in a white kerchief. Above the head was an electric light, like a single, open, red eye. The shape raised its hand in greeting. Its rifle butt hit the cement floor, and one metallic heel struck against the other. A hole opened in the wall; the earth swallowed me” (Saadawi 23).

This imagery encapsulates the psychological impact of constant surveillance under an authoritarian regime, with the “electric light” resembling a “single, open, red eye” symbolizing the omnipresent gaze of power. The oppressive atmosphere, further emphasized by the sound of the rifle butt and metallic heels, signifies the rigid and militaristic nature of the regime. The final image, where the earth “swallows” her, reflects the overwhelming sense of entrapment and erasure of individual identity in such a controlled environment. This aligns with the broader theme of surveillance, highlighting how it creates a pervasive sense of visibility and fear, ultimately leading to compliance and submission.

Through these thematic lenses, the two texts offer valuable insights into the interplay between power, control and resistance within authoritarian settings. *Hell's Gate* subtly portrays Hussein's mental resilience as an act of resistance against the regime's attempts to break his spirit, while *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* emphasizes collective resistance, where women prisoners support each other against both political and patriarchal oppression. Together, these narratives reveal how individuals and communities navigate the complexities of power and control in authoritarian societies, demonstrating the various forms of resistance that can emerge even under the most oppressive conditions.

Foucault's Influence on Cultural Studies: A Review of the Panopticon Concept

Michel Foucault's concept of the Panopticon, originally derived from Jeremy Bentham's architectural design, has significantly influenced cultural and literary studies. In *Discipline and Punish* (1975), Foucault uses the Panopticon as a metaphor to explore the mechanisms of power, surveillance and discipline in modern societies. This metaphor, transcending its original context, has become central in various fields, especially in cultural studies. Foucault posits that the Panopticon represents a form of disciplinary power operating through the constant possibility of surveillance, compelling individuals to self-regulate and internalize norms imposed by those in power. Scholars like Mark Poster have extended this idea to digital media, arguing that modern technologies create new forms of Panopticism. Poster asserts, “The innocuous spread of credit card transactions... feeds the databases at ever-increasing rates, stuffing ubiquitous computers with a language of surveillance and control.” (Poster, 98). Similarly, literary scholars like D.A. Miller have applied Foucault's theories to Victorian literature, showing how narratives of the time reflect social practices of surveillance and discipline. Miller contends that Victorian novels participate in social control, reinforcing societal norms. This framework has been further extended to analyze race, gender and sexuality, with scholars like Judith Butler exploring how norms regarding gender and sexuality are internalized, creating self-policing subjectivity that aligns with hegemonic power structures. Butler opines, “The presence of these norms... become the site of parodic contest and display that robs compulsory heterosexuality of its claims to naturalness and originality.” (Butler, 158).

Foucault's Panopticon has become a vital conceptual tool in cultural and literary studies, offering a framework for analyzing power within various social and cultural contexts. Although *Hell's Gate* by Hussein Hamid Hussein and *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* by Nawal El Saadawi have garnered substantial attention for their examinations of power, resistance and the resilience of the human spirit under oppressive regimes, a comprehensive Foucauldian analysis is still lacking. These texts are often explored for their stark depictions of physical and psychological torment, with *Hell's Gate* viewed as a powerful affirmation of human endurance and political defiance, while *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* is analyzed through a feminist lens, focusing on collective resistance against both authoritarian control and gender norms. This paper seeks to address gaps in current scholarship by applying Foucault's concepts of panopticism and biopower to these texts, highlighting not only the explicit violence and repression but also the more subtle mechanisms of control. By extending Foucault's ideas to these narratives, the paper will deepen our understanding of how power operates within these

texts, revealing the pervasive influence of surveillance on personal identity and offering insights into strategies for resistance within oppressive systems.

Analysis of *Hell's Gate* and *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* Using the Panopticon Framework

Surveillance and Control in Hussein's Iraq

In *Hell's Gate*, the Panopticon framework is vividly illustrated through the mechanisms of surveillance and control that permeate the lives of the characters, particularly Hussein. The Panopticon, introduced by philosopher Jeremy Bentham and later analyzed by Michel Foucault, represents a system where individuals are constantly monitored, leading to self-regulation and conformity out of fear of punishment. Saddam Hussein's regime powerfully embodies this concept, with every action scrutinized and loyalty enforced through fear and intimidation. Initially, Hussein joins the Ba'ath Party with the belief that he can contribute to Iraq's prosperity, but the Party, promising democracy and unity, gradually reveals itself as a tool of surveillance and control. This control is especially apparent when Hussein is pressured into taking on significant responsibilities within the Party in the United States, despite his desire to focus on learning English and distancing himself from Party activities. The psychological impact of this surveillance on Hussein is profound, as his initial enthusiasm gives way to frustration and disillusionment, deepened by the Party's betrayal and the execution of popular leaders. Hussein reflects, "With time, my life inside the Ba'ath Party began to be one of frustration and sadness... Saddam Hussein executed the best and most popular leaders among them, accusing them of conspiring against him." (Hussein 22) This illustrates the Party's grip on its members, even those abroad, leading to a sense of entrapment and despair.

This Panopticon-like control extends beyond physical spaces into the psychological domain, as seen in Hussein's interrogation. The authorities, represented by two interrogators, embody the all-seeing, ever-present power of the state, with detailed knowledge of Hussein's life. Their scrutiny of Hussein's decisions, particularly his choice to marry an American woman and remain in the United States, exemplifies the state's effort to enforce conformity and obedience. Hussein is subjected to aggressive questioning and physical violence, instilling fear and maintaining control over him. The psychological toll is immense, as Hussein realizes his fate is dictated by those who control the narrative. This atmosphere of fear extends to broader Iraqi society, where the state's ability to exert control over its citizens creates a climate of suspicion. Hussein notes, "He slapped me in the face and spat on the floor... My fears had been increased that the Ba'ath Party was behind all of this." (Hussein 36) The insistence that Hussein's marriage to a foreign woman is a betrayal underscores the cultural expectations placed on Iraqis to remain loyal to the state, illustrating how deeply the state permeates every aspect of life.

Hussein's experience is emblematic of the broader societal struggle under Saddam Hussein's regime, where even high-ranking officials like Hekmat and Sammy, once powerful within the government, fall victim to the regime's unforgiving gaze. Their punishment, not for significant crimes but for minor mistakes, reflects the regime's strategy of maintaining control by instilling fear and enforcing absolute conformity. Hussein recalls, "I realized from their stories that I was not the only person who had been beaten, but every one of them had also been sent to what they described as 'Disciplinary Camp' before being thrown in prison." (Hussein 85) This realization that even those who once wielded power are not exempt from the state's control deepens Hussein's sense of despair. The Panopticon-like surveillance infiltrates even the most personal and democratic processes, such as the so-called "election." The presence of security men at the polling station, the guard's attempt to inspect Hussein's vote and the subsequent hostile scrutiny reflect the regime's desire to monitor and control every action.

The psychological burden of constant surveillance is deeply unsettling. The act of marking "no" on his ballot offers Hussein a fleeting sense of victory, but this empowerment is quickly eclipsed by a wave of fear and anxiety. The possibility that his dissenting vote might be discovered exacerbates his paranoia. Hussein's meticulous efforts to conceal his vote and his cautious behavior around colleagues aligned with the regime demonstrate the psychological strain of living under perpetual watch. The manipulated election results, showing a 99.9% approval rate for Saddam, reflect a societal atmosphere where dissent is not merely discouraged but severely punished. The regime's reliance on intimidation and coercion to enforce compliance undermines any

semblance of true democratic participation, stifling political discourse and fostering a culture where conformity is mandatory and independent thought is effectively silenced.

Defiance Amid Surveillance: Saadawi's Resistance to State Oppression

Nawal El Saadawi's *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* offers a striking portrayal of state surveillance and repression, vividly illustrated through her non-warrant arrest and the forceful entry of officers into her home. This episode exposes the extent of state control and its invasive reach, particularly towards individuals like Saadawi, who are seen as political threats. While deeply engrossed in writing, Saadawi is interrupted by aggressive knocking, escalating into a violent intrusion that symbolizes the oppressive surveillance inherent in authoritarian regimes. The officers' warrantless entry blatantly violates legal and personal boundaries, underscoring the state's disregard for individual rights in its quest for control. Saadawi's firm response, "Absolutely out of the question for me to open the door to you without seeing a warrant from the office of the Chief Prosecutor. That's the law" (Saadawi 117), demonstrates her resilience and determination to uphold the law, even in the face of state power.

The violent intrusion into Saadawi's home further highlights her resistance against the state's oppressive mechanisms. Despite the overwhelming force and implied threat of violence, Saadawi demands a proper legal warrant before allowing entry, asserting her agency and standing her ground. Her challenge, articulated in her declaration, "You're not wearing police uniforms... I want to see this order before I open the door" (Saadawi 5), underscores her refusal to be easily subdued. The forceful entry, described vividly as the door "breaking...like an explosion," emphasizes the destructive impact of state surveillance. Saadawi recalls the scene with chilling detail, "The sound – like an explosion – of the door breaking. Their metallic boots pounded the floor in quick rhythm like army troops bursting forth in the direction of battle" (Saadawi 7). Despite her vulnerability, Saadawi turns the gaze back on her oppressors, asserting her intellectual dominance even as she faces the full force of state power.

This episode also delves into the psychological impact of surveillance, particularly with regard to gender. Saadawi's home, intended to be a sanctuary for creativity, becomes a battleground where her rights and dignity are under siege. Her calm, assertive demeanor and refusal to capitulate define her response to this invasion. As the police ransack her house and seize her possessions, including her novel, she condemns these actions as "crimes," defending her intellectual property by asserting, "How dare you snatch my novel from me? You have no business with it" (Saadawi 8). Her declaration that she is "prepared to face them to death" is a powerful testament to her defiance against state repression. This confrontation with the police, who try to impose fear through intimidation, becomes a microcosm of the broader struggle between the individual and the state, with Saadawi's defiance serving as a reminder of the possibility of resistance even in the most oppressive systems.

In the women's prison, power is exercised not only through overt acts of control but also through more subtle mechanisms of surveillance. This combination of visible and invisible power is manifest in the continual monitoring of prisoners' conduct, leaving no space for privacy. The omnipresence of surveillance compels individuals to regulate their behavior, echoing Foucault's idea that the mere possibility of being watched forces self-regulation. Saadawi records, "One of our group claps her hand over her mouth to suppress her laughter, saying, 'Don't laugh out loud, the Internal Security policeman is making his rounds in the cells, plastering his ear against the wall and listening to us'" (Saadawi 93). This quote encapsulates the oppressive nature of surveillance within the prison, where even laughter must be suppressed out of fear of punishment. Yet, within this oppressive atmosphere, there is also a whisper of rebellion. The women's conscious efforts to control their expressions, even in small acts of defiance like muted laughter, reveal their resistance to state control. This duality—where surveillance constrains yet provokes subtle resistance—captures the complex interplay between power and agency in authoritarian settings, as poignantly conveyed in *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*.

Comparative Lens: Surveillance and Defiance in *Hell's Gate* and *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*

The themes of state surveillance and control are universal, but *Hell's Gate* by Hussein Hamid Hussein and *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* by Nawal El Saadawi, written within different cultural settings, depict them in distinct ways. *Hell's Gate* illustrates the Panopticon through the authoritarian mechanisms of Saddam Hussein's regime, where surveillance is used to instill fear and maintain control. The story emphasizes the mental toll of constant monitoring, showing how it leads to self-regulation and a profound sense of entrapment. The state's power infiltrates every aspect of life, making even personal decisions subject to scrutiny and punishment, aligning closely with Foucault's concept of disciplinary power. Conversely, *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* explores the intersection of state and patriarchal power in Egypt, highlighting how surveillance is used not only to suppress individuals but also to maintain societal hierarchies. Saadawi's narrative begins with her illegal kidnapping and detainment without explanation, signaling to other dissenters the consequences of challenging state authority. While *Hell's Gate* focuses on the solitary internal battle against a tyrannical state, Saadawi's memoir expands this confrontation to include collective resistance among women prisoners living under conditions designed to break them. Despite the constant surveillance, they manage to assert their autonomy in small ways, showcasing how power dynamics are contested even in the most controlled environments. This collective resistance offers a different perspective on how authoritarian control can be challenged through solidarity.

By comparing these two texts, it becomes clear that while both stories depict the violence of a surveillance state, they reveal much about power and resistance, tightly connected to their specific cultural and political contexts. *Hell's Gate* offers a dark exploration of how totalitarianism intrudes upon and controls our thoughts, where constant surveillance leads individuals down a dangerous path of compliance, ultimately eroding personal agency. The narrative sharply illustrates how the fear of punishment and the omnipresent gaze of the state compel self-regulation, embedding limitations on freedom into daily life. In contrast, *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* highlights resistance as a collective effort within a patriarchal framework, where women, despite being over-surveilled and repressed, find strength in unity and shared defiance. The memoir shows that even within the most stifling institutions, resistance can flourish when people come together. Together, these texts provide detailed insights into the mechanisms of surveillance and control across different societies, demonstrating both the psychological cost of authoritarian dominance and potential avenues for resistance. These comparative insights not only deepen our understanding of the mechanisms of oppression but also contribute new perspectives on authoritarianism and human rights, affirming the resilience of the human spirit in enduring systemic repression.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the dynamics of power, surveillance, and resistance in *Hell's Gate* by Hussein Hamid Hussein and *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* by Nawal El Saadawi through Michel Foucault's Panopticon. Both texts vividly illustrate the oppressive nature of state surveillance within authoritarian regimes, revealing the profound psychological impacts on individuals who are constantly under watch. In *Hell's Gate*, the internalization of fear and the erosion of personal agency under Saddam Hussein's regime exemplify the insidious ways in which surveillance is used to maintain absolute control. The narrative underscores the suffocating atmosphere where even the most personal aspects of life are subject to scrutiny, aligning closely with Foucault's concept of disciplinary power. In contrast, *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* shifts the focus to collective resistance within a politically and patriarchally repressive environment. El Saadawi's portrayal of women prisoners who, despite constant surveillance, find strength in solidarity and shared defiance, emphasizes the resilience of cultural identity under oppression.

This comparative analysis highlights the varying manifestations of resistance in different cultural contexts, demonstrating that while surveillance seeks to suppress individuality and autonomy, it can also inadvertently foster resilience and solidarity. *Hell's Gate* and *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* together offer a nuanced understanding of how literature can expose and critique the mechanisms of power in authoritarian societies. The paper argues that surveillance, though designed to control and oppress, can also create conditions for resistance and cultural reassertion. Ultimately, this research contributes to the broader discourse on the role of literature in

exploring power dynamics, affirming the enduring human capacity for resistance and cultural resilience even in the most repressive circumstances. Future research could extend this analysis to other texts and contexts, further exploring the complex interplay between surveillance, power, and resistance in different sociopolitical environments.

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