

DEPICTION OF PANOPTIC SURVEILLANCE: A FOUCAULDEAN ANALYSIS OF MANJULAPADMANABHAN'S *HARVEST*

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Abstract

In the play *Harvest*, ManjulaPadmanabhan dramatizes the contemporary phases of colonization through establishment of panoptic surveillance which is the aggressive technology of the colonizer. *Harvest* is a Foucauldean play, which deals with the centralized panoptic surveillance system. Jeremy Bentham's invention of the panopticon represents a major episode in the history of technologies and architecture. The paper is an attempt to explore and analyze how the Foucauldean concept of panoptic surveillance is perceptible in the play. The play effectively conceptualizes and justifies the role of panoptic surveillance in dominating and subordinating the people. The inmates in the play constantly have been observed through the panoptic surveillance. They never know whether they are being looked at any one moment; but they must be sure that they may always be so. The contact module is similar to the tower at the centre of the panopticon; the supervisor is out of sight of the inmates. The module can swivel round to face each and every corner of the room and can flicker to life at any moment, getting to the person unawares. It has even spied their words and thoughts. The total deprivation of privacy is the ultimate form of panoptic surveillance. Panoptic surveillance plays a vital role in modern phases of subordination. Visibility is the soul of panoptic observation. Surveillance provides knowledge about the subject (object) which makes administration of power easier.

In the play *Harvest*, Manjula Padmanabhan dramatizes the modern phases of colonization in which general human condition as well as the female social experience is disfigured by the aggressive technology of capitalism. Franz Fanon describes colonialism as a phenomenon that empties the form and content of the brain of the colonial races. *Harvest* demonstrates a tragic Indian situation in which people live a dangerous life emptied of their senses' intellect and emotion. A situation in which the human limbs and organs are harvested is demonstrated in the play. Human

bodies are traded and transported. Seeds are to be sown in the wombs of Indian females for the harvest of hybrid children.

On a deeper analysis, one can find that *Harvest* is a Foucauldian play, which deals with the centralized panoptic surveillance system. Jeremy Bentham's invention of the panopticon represents a major episode in the history of technologies and architecture. It is based on the architectural principle of a ring shaped building with cells grouped around a central tower. The design of the panopticon consists of a tower in the centre surrounded by a ring-shaped building composed of cells. The panopticon allows for the continuous observation of inmates, while simultaneously requiring few supervisory resources. Panopticism is the exemplary technique through which disciplinary power is able to function. It relies on surveillance and the internal training produces to incite states of docility. It need not rely on displays of physical force or violence. Direct force represents merely frustrated or failed forms of discipline.

The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately. It reverses the principle of the dungeon and its three functions- to enclose, to deprive of light, and to hide -it preserves only the first and eliminates the other two. Each individual, in his place, is securely confined to a cell from which he is seen from the front by the supervisor; but the sidewalls prevent him from coming into contact with his companions. This enclosed, segmented space which is observed at every point where the slightest movements are supervised, where power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure- constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism. In this context, the contemporary living room with the television set as its focus can be likened to a panopticon. The various programs are baits, through which our attention is called for, and we are mesmerized. In this sense, the apartment in *Harvest* is under a panoptic surveillance.

The characters in the play are classified into three groups- Donors, Guards and Agents, and Receivers. The classification is a device by which the author nullifies the individual identity of the characters. Donors and Receivers are the major actors in the postcolonial trade that disfigures the human brain and body. The Guards and Agents are humans, yet nonhuman machines of technocracy. They convert the domestic space into technological space.

The characters are classified as donors constitute a family that is dismantled by the forces of technological colonialism. The age of technocracy dismantles the stable system of employment in which the middle class males are recruited as respectable clerks. Om, the head of the family as well as Jeethu, his brother, is victims of unemployment, a situation created by modern technology. Om is a conventional male who takes the burden of the maintenance of his family on his shoulders. He is not able to sell his labour power and this leads him to a horrible situation of selling his body organs. He gets hired by the Inter Planta Services, an agency engaged in the donation of human organs for transplant. They impose discipline in his utterly orderless family, and bring economic order. Their arrival transforms Om's flat. This is a pointer to the radical changes the inmates are about to undergo. The dining room acquires instant sophistication. The kitchen is emptied of old utensils and is disinfected. A contact module is installed at the centre of the room to facilitate communication between the Receiver and the Donor. The deals and contracts in which he fixes his signature signifies his death at the moral, emotional and intellectual level. Om, like the head of a Third World nation, has no idea about the conditions imposed upon them. Finance is sold out by the Westerners and Om receives finance. He realizes with agonizing pain that his life as well as home is monitored by aliens through the electronic module and instructions lying in the kit. According to Foucault "He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication". (*Discipline and Punish*, 200). As the agency insists that the donor must be unmarried, he conceals

his marital status to make him eligible to be slaughtered for money. The contact module is a symbol of hegemonic power enforced by Inter Planta. They cannot even object to the peeping eyes of their new masters. The contact module reminds Om that even the slightest trace of falsehood on his part can be detected. Thus the module induces a feeling of bare happiness in the family each time it flickers to life. Thus, in *Harvest* Om depicts the situation: “The smallest pimple on my chin is more precious to me at this moment than a diamond mine in someone else’s fist! Oh – how could I have done this to myself? What sort of fool am I?” (*Harvest*, 53)

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The total deprivation of privacy is the ultimate form of panoptic surveillance. The newly brought order has caused an inversion of ethical values. Even before the order of Ginni, Om and Ma refuse to accommodate Jeethu in their flat. This is the triumph of panoptic surveillance system. Foucault says that “power should be visible and unverifiable. The inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon. The inmate must never know whether he is being looked at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so. (*Discipline and Punish*, 201)

Ma, captivated before the television, is another version of panoptic surveillance. She is driven by the mad ambitions of a domestic consumer. As the living space is converted into a miracle house of technology, Ma gets horribly fascinated with it. She shuts herself within the video coach which is a self-sufficing, self sufficient compartment separated from the external world. She is the victim of the de-socialization process of technology. Her life within the video coach is a parody of non-attachment and spiritual salvation. The video coach life is exotic and she installs herself within the video coach which, like a space vehicle, encloses her life alienating her from the terrestrial life space. It is a parody of ‘moksha’ sought by people at the end phase of their life. The Super Deluxe Video Coach she orders for herself represents her self-imposed withdrawal. This is the victory of panoptic system. It makes the inmates perpetuate the power system operating on them.

The play highlights this panoptic nightmare of total visibility. To Foucault “Visibility is a trap” (*Discipline and Punish*, 200). The inmates of the Third World are trapped by the unrelenting gaze of the First World. Foucault says that the panopticon functions as a kind of laboratory of power. He says that the panopticon is a royal menagerie; the animal is replaced by man. It is a laboratory; it could be used as a machine to carryout experiments, to alter behaviour, to train or correct individuals; to experiment with medicines and monitor their effect; to tryout different punishments on prisoners, according to their crimes and character, and to seek the most effective one. The panopticon is a privileged place for experiments on men, and for analyzing with complete certainty the transformations that may be obtained from them. Discipline as a technique aims at how to keep someone under surveillance, to control his conduct and aptitude. This is the principle on which contemporary society operates such as in schools, hospitals, prisons, shopping malls and airports. In contemporary times public space is arranged in the principle of panopticon.

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