

The Omnipresent and The Omnipotent – Surveillance and Power: A Critical Analysis Of Suzanne Collins' The Hunger Games

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to trace the derivation of power through imperious surveillance upon the citizens of Panem and the consequent denial of citizen rights. The paper also analyses the nature of people's fear of being watched and how the overbearing surveillance system in action can violate individual privacy. The act of being continuously watched or monitored and the knowledge of being under the control of power, a 'watchful eye', can create a huge impact upon the people under surveillance. In the modern world, people are being watched continuously and closely and are tracked through economic activities and electronic media. The paper aims to

prove that surveillance in any form is a constraining force limiting people from being themselves. The *Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins portray a dystopian post-apocalyptic land of Panem where the Capitol uses surveillance and the people's fear of being watched as tools to assert their power over the citizens. After years of being watched and controlled, the people of Panem have forgotten basic citizen birthrights and the beauty of freedom in their lives. These people lose their real identity in this cage where they are devoid of any individual preferences. If the citizens are not completely aware of the value of privacy which is an inherent human right and much required for individual growth and development, the possibilities of losing the contemporary world to such a dystopian reality are high.

Keywords: Surveillance, Panopticon, Hunger Games, Citizen Rights, Power, Suzanne Collins

The general nature of the surveillance is incompatible with human rights issued by a democratic nation. According to Bruce Schneier, privacy is an inherent human right and a requirement for maintaining the condition with dignity and respect. The ability to surveil posits not only physical threats but also inflicts a psychological and moral deterioration of the citizens dwelling in a modern developed world. Technology has made our life easier and better, but questions the dignity and integrity of each individual in a particular society. Even in a democratic nation, individual struggles and gropes under the grey shadows of invisible panopticons, engineered by powerful authoritarian figures. With the act of surveillance, the notion of a democratic state with its all-encompassing ideologies seems to collapse as basic individual privacy is being violated. Suzanne Collins introduces the post-apocalyptic state of Panem where the people are threatened and controlled by constant surveillance which allows only restricted movement. They are not only punished for violating these 'rules' but also are constantly reminded of their voicelessness and powerlessness through the hunger games themselves. The

hunger games is an annual event, where each of the twelve districts of Panem is forced to send in a teenage boy and a teenage girl as tributes into an arena where they have to fight their way out killing each other for survival. Moreover, these games were originally established as a punishment and a reminder after the rebellion and civil war that rose several years back during which an entire district was wiped out by the Capitol. Through *The Hunger Games*, Suzanne Collins introduces the readers to the land of Panem, the Capitol as well as the districts. She forges the story of Katniss Everdeen and her fight for survival which ultimately ends up kindling a rebellion in many districts in the future.

The surveillance could manipulate the existence of an individual by injecting the so-called hegemony of fear into the human psyche through the violation of natural human citizenship rights acquired by an individual through his/her birth. Surveillance in any form is a constraining force limiting people from being themselves and casting them as fragmented selves devoid of any identity. It is appalling to know that this identity crisis does not just happen to the people being suppressed. The citizens of the Capitol, even the rich and well-affluent people of Panem, are under the clutches of an indistinguishable identity crisis. The Capitol citizen's do not recognize that it is inhuman to enjoy the games, rather they spend the best part of their life watching children forced to fight and kill each other in the arena, enjoying the entire process of it and sometimes even gets bored of it. The main protagonist of the novel, Katniss Everdeen, observes this strange pleasure in them, "the people of the Capitol are going nuts, showering us with flowers, shouting our names, our first names, which they have bothered to find on the program. The pounding music, the cheers, the admiration work their way into my blood". (Collins 69) Katniss at a point ponders over the fact that for the people of Capitol, the games are mere entertainment and if no deaths are happening on screen, then the day for them, is boring.

“Things have been too quiet today. No deaths, perhaps no fights at all. The audience in the Capitol will be getting bored, claiming that these Games are verging on dullness. This is the one thing the Games must not do.” (171)

Even now in the modern developed era, individual citizen's lives are under the control of several invisible suspecting eyes and *The Hunger Games* shows the effect of such surveillance. The citizens of Panem live in constant fear and uncertainty. They suffer from alienation and fragmentation within themselves. Throughout the twelve districts, the people are forced to follow the rules set by the Capitol with no individual freedom or even scope to dream of being free. The hunger games remind the people in the districts without fail that there is no way for them to escape or lead a better life than to follow the rules and any attempts at rebellion would lead only to destruction. They are forced to remember that the games are meant to be the punishment for misbehaviour and the pulverized District thirteen stands as a warning for those who even think of raising their voice against the Capitol's totalitarian rule. The effect of surveillance is to undermine the constitutional principles of personal privacy and freedom from constant government monitoring. It is a direct attack on the fundamental rights of free speech and association. Human citizenship can be defined as a status of a person recognized under the law as being a legal member of a nation. Citizenship by birth is the most important criteria of human citizenship right which has been violated by the constant surveillance. The citizens of Panem, both the rich- affluent ones from the Capitol and the poor- toiling people of the twelve districts are facing identity issues in a way or the other and are most often unaware of it. The citizens of the Capitol continue to enjoy the cold-blooded murder of young kids and their suffering on screen in the name of the hunger games each year, yet they do not recognize the savagery they are displaying and consuming. For them, the games continue to exist as a mere source of

entertainment and nothing more. While the people from the districts have been under the Capitol's authority they are least bothered about individual rights or freedom. Only a few from the present generation like Katniss, Peeta or Gale have seen the Panem as a real cage but have not known the real taste of freedom ever in their life. Being just fifteen or sixteen these children have lived all these years with the fear of being reaped and sent off as a tribute in the Hunger Games. This becomes a tremendous problem as this identity crisis becomes a deeper existential dilemma as years go by, again reducing these human beings to mere robots to perform the Capitol's bidding.

The *Hunger Games* addresses the power hegemony prevailing in the authoritarian totalitarian state of Panem in many dimensions throughout the novel. The people of Panem are not only constantly reminded of the atrocities the Capitol is capable of through the hunger games but also demonstrates the true colour of Capitol's authoritarian regime through punishments like public whippings that happen from time to time. The Capitol mutes and silences the sprouting revolutionaries. Those who revolt against the Capitol end up becoming Avox like the one Katniss recognizes at the training center in the novel. She seems to be puzzled at the initial meeting with an Avox, "What's an Avox?" I ask stupidly. "Someone who committed a crime. They cut her tongue so she can't speak," says Hay Mitch. "She's probably a traitor of some sort. Not likely you'd know her." (76) These barbaric acts are enough to instill fear in people and the moment they are aware of the constant surveillance they are under; this fear only escalates. Along with this, the Capitol also plunders all the necessary materials from the different districts. Though each of the districts produces products of necessity, none of the products is left in the districts for them to use – everything goes to the Capitol. The district survives with the mere

rations provided to them by the Capitol. All these factors come together to actualize the power hegemony in the state.

The social control mechanism that would become a comprehensive symbol for modern authority and discipline is first introduced by Jeremy Bentham by introducing a prison system called the panopticon. Later, Michel Foucault expanded the idea of the panopticon into a symbol of social control that extends into everyday life for all citizens. He argues that social citizens always internalize authority, which is one source of power for prevailing norms and institutions. According to Michel Foucault,

The enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individual is inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all the events are recorded, in which an uninterrupted work of writing links the center and periphery, in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead- all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism. (Foucault 197)

The panopticon lays down for each individual his place, his body, his disease, his death, his well-being, through an omnipresent and omniscient power that subdivides itself in a regular, uninterrupted way even to the ultimate domination of the individual, of what characterizes him, of what belongs to him, of what happens to him. In a way some of the decisions taken by Katniss in the arena was also centered around the audience's preference yet she was haunted by the knowledge that she can't have a moment of privacy anytime, anywhere in the arena even when she wants to keep a moment as her detail. She thinks during a moment in the cave - "I wish I

could pull the shutters closed, blocking out this moment from the prying eyes of Panem. Even if it means losing food. Whatever I'm feeling, it's no one's business but mine.” (Collins 292)

Just like Bentham's idea of a panopticon, the hunger games conducted by the Capitol and its arena continuously keep the tributes under watch. The game-makers have the ultimate power in the arena and they continuously observe these tributes throughout the game. None of the tributes can see the game-makers, the viewers or not even the other tributes if they hide, but all the events of the games are televised and broadcasted for the whole Panem to watch by the Capitol. The brutal killing of young kids by the other kids who don't the role of mere tributes in the arena are televised and watched by the citizens of Panem even without flinching. All they care about are the pomp and splendor of the games and the victors. The simple fact that the tributes are young kids in their teens increase the impact of the games. None of the Capitol people realizes it to be inhumane and instead, they enjoy and celebrate the games. It is all just a source of entertainment for the people of Capital in the scene and this key idea can be located in a place where Katniss watches the highlights of the games, “Once we're in the arena, there's detailed coverage of the bloodbath and then the filmmakers alternate between shots of tributes dying and shots of us...I can hear the audience hushing one another, not wanting to miss anything.” (355)

Surveillance seems to be the penetration of regulation into even the smallest details of everyday life through the meditation of the complete hierarchy that assured the capillary functioning of power. Surveillance has called for multiple separations, individualizing distributions and control, and intensification and ramification of power. The whole of Panem is constantly under surveillance. Everyone in each of the twelve districts is aware of this and yet are unable to do anything against it. They live in constant fear as any move on their part to upset

the Capitol would result in serious punishment. Even then Katniss is forced to break these rules and sneak out to hunt. District twelve being one of the poorest of the lot is ever facing the threat of starving themselves to death, so illegal hunting and trade is the only way to survive there. Katniss uses her talent in shooting arrows to hunt game and earn for her family. She goes out of the seam and crosses over to the woods where entry is restricted by the Capitol, even though she is scared of being watched, to make ends meet. It is evident when she comments “even here, even in the middle of nowhere, you worry someone might overhear you”. (6)

Human citizenship is undermined through the two ways of exercising power over citizens, either by controlling their relations or by separating their dangerous mixtures. The great confinement of individuals and the correct training imparted to them are the basic functions of surveillance. Even in a democratic country, all the authorities exercising individual control function according to a double mode; that of binary division and branding and that of coercive assignment and of differential distribution like who he is; where he must be; how he is to be characterized; how he is to be recognized; how constant surveillance is to be exercised over him in an individual way etc. In a country where citizenship is violated, the crowd, a compact mass, a locus of multiple exchanges, individualities merging, a collective effect is abolished and replaced by a collection of separated individualities. In the state of Panem, this is being established through the district system. Each of the districts is in charge of an industry that helps in sustaining the smooth functioning of the Capitol and are usually not allowed to mingle with each other. Each district is surrounded by an electrified fence to keep the people from wandering away from the watch of the Capitol. The sparse interaction between people of different districts takes place during the training and the hunger games. During the hunger games the tributes interact

with each other but as only one of them survive the games, the point of the interaction is also lost. The people are also not allowed to gather around in any of the districts for any reason at all.

The major effect of the panopticon is to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. Thus, surveillance is permanent in its effect even if it is discontinuous in its action. It is regarded as an apparatus for creating and sustaining power relations in a society. Due to the constant surveillance, citizens are eventually caught up in a power situation of which they are the bearers. The authority figures, here the Capitol take pleasure in punishing and spying, and undoubtedly in conducting the hunger games. During her time in the arena, Katniss thinks about the game makers' way of conducting the games to make it most interesting for the viewers. She thinks,

The real sport of the Hunger Games is watching the tributes kill one another. Every so often, they do kill a tribute just to remind the players they can. But mostly, they manipulate us into confronting one another face-to-face. This means, if I am no longer being fired at, there is at least one other tribute close at hand.

(175)

The pleasure the citizens of Capitol gain from watching the tributes on-screen is limitless. This not only shocks a reader but also disappoints them as none of them is aware of the seriousness of the mental state they are in. After seventy-four years of continuously watching the games taken place, the generation of Capitol crowd does not realize the cruelty of the games and their broadcasting. They are so self-centered that none of the others matters to them and they fail to realize this happening to themselves. Everything is right and natural in their eyes. A tired and disturbed Katniss at the end of the novel comments about this. She says "... it's all about where

they were or what they were doing or how they felt ... everything is about them, not the dying boys and girls in the arena” (354)

The more numerous those anonymous and temporary observers are, the greater his anxious awareness of being observed. A panopticon is a marvellous machine that produces homogeneous effects of power. It makes it possible to observe performances, to map aptitudes, to assess characters, to draw up rigorous classifications. Panopticon could be used as a machine to carry out experiments, alter behaviour, to train or correct individuals. A panopticon is a privileged place for experiments on men and for analyzing with complete certainty the transformations that may be obtained from them. The panopticon must be understood as a generalizable model of functioning; a way of defining power relations in terms of the everyday life of the men. The increase of power created by the panopticon machine may degenerate into tyranny that disturbs the fundamental rights of every citizen belonging to a particular country. This panopticon is subtly arranged so that an observer may observe and also enables everyone to come and observe any of the observers. It has become a transparent building in which the exercise of power may be supervised by society as a whole.

These people from the districts, though much more in number, are unable to raise their voice against the injustice they suffer. They are constantly reminded by the Capitol about the consequences of resisting their rule, and these constant reminders fill the people up with fear for themselves and the people they love. Thus, the immense number of people from all the twelve districts become powerless and weak in front of the few power yielding Capitol rulers. The government thus tactfully uses fear as a manipulative tool to control the whole country and make them passively obey them without much trouble. It is this power that Peeta and Katniss threaten at the end of the games with their stunt with the berries. It is for the first time in many years that

the players try to gain control over their death and this scares the government which results in the historical decision to let two tributes come out of the arena alive. This also makes Katniss a threat in the eyes of President Snow. Amidst the dark shadows of power, Peeta and Katniss break away from the overwhelming fear when they decide to stand against the Capitol only to be in grave danger of their lives.

When the present scenario in the contemporary world is reaching troublesome heights, the novel is of great significance. With almost every person connected to the internet and the various social media platforms, a lot of personal data ends up online. Moreover, most governments also maintain a very detailed database of their citizens. If the citizens are turning a blind eye towards their inherent human rights and privileges just like the generations of Panem, the possibilities of losing the world to such a dystopian reality are deemed high. Even though security systems and cameras around the world ensure the safety of the people to an extent and ensures a lot of unruly acts are prevented the privacy of a majority of the people is jeopardized. Privacy is not the need but it is the necessity for the survival of each individual. With the overbearing surveillance system in action, basic individual privacy is being violated. *The Hunger Games* serves as a successful endeavour to unmask the shades of surveillance and its consequences.

The theoretical world has moved from Bentham's and Foucault's theory of panopticon. It has started to test the waters of post-panopticon theories, where a significant change takes place. Post-Panopticon theorists like Deleuze take the power relations to be much more fluid in contrast to the conscious power exercised in Panem, they talk about a 'flowing of power not confining the subjects from outside but passing through the spaces and subjects.' (Basturk 2). The surveillance in post-panopticon also does not require a confined space like in Bentham's theory as it can

process without space. This new dimension of panopticon takes surveillance through digital codes or informational process in computer-based technologies. So, surveillance interprets these data and collects them to predict the future events and after prediction, it becomes a specific technique to control the contingency. A major difference with Foucault's panopticon is that this post-panopticon styled surveillance takes place in ways that are often invisible for the subjects or citizens. But still, Foucault's and Bentham's original theory of Panopticon and power play stays much more applicable to Panem and the hunger games.

Dave Eggers' *The Circle* has been taken as an example in point to show how the future society will be accepting the concept of transparency and intrusion of privacy into their daily existence. The novel tells the story of a powerful internet firm that creates new and innovative technology that adopts the philosophy of transparency. Being sucked up into the cult of the Circle, everyone is tying themselves to the leash of the oppressive forces, both consciously and unconsciously. The heroine of the novel, Mae Holland, considers it a blessing to be a faithful employee in the Circle. The invention of See Change cameras, the millions of lollipops sized cheap cameras, make citizen life translucent and thereby allow the public to see the private life of individuals. They readily accept the technological boom without any resistance, as it has become an unavoidable part of their conscious reality. In the novel, the characters Mae and Eamon Bailey use three phrases in a scheduled presentation to convince the employees in the Circle about the importance of being watched, "secrets are lies," "sharing is caring" and "privacy is theft" (Eggers 305). The lollipop cameras can access the action of the people anywhere at any time. They build up a false impression of the upliftment of the society through the paranoia created by their constantly poisonous gaze. Even though the citizens are aware of being continuously watched, "we will become all-seeing, all-knowing" (69), they are not afraid of the

totalitarian regime, instead, they try to improve and nurture themselves by consciously permitting the surveillance. What is even more shocking is that people are willing to be transparent and employ self-surveillance as a part of their living reality. The Circle gains authority and power by controlling the citizen's will by transforming surveillance into a cultural tool. People are welcoming the change and are living with surveillance. Unlike Katniss, Mae believes that surveillance is a part of the refinement of society and not a curse. Thus, proving that the Circle and Panem are two ideologically conflicting entities. The Post-Panopticon theory does go off at a tangent, but this paper tries to limit its study to Bentham's and Foucault's theory of surveillance as a foundation to work upon Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*.

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