

**Surveillance as a Disciplinary Mechanism in Manjula
Padmanabhan's *The Island of Lost Girls***

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Abstract

The Island of Lost Girls is a dystopian novel by the Indian English writer Manjula Padmanabhan. The novel features an apocalyptic world of environmental degradation and sexual violence. It can be also categorised as science fiction. The novel, a sequel of Padmanabhan's earlier *Escape* is about the continuation of the story of Youngest and Meiji. Youngest's attempts to unite with Meiji forms the crux of the story. Youngest escapes from the Forbidden Country in *Escape* by making a deal with General. The General uses surveillance a disciplinary mechanism to control Youngest while on his mission. In *Discipline and Punish* Michel Foucault adapts the idea of panopticon from Jeremy Bentham to show the power of disciplinary gaze. The paper intends to study the panoptic surveillance mechanism used in the novel and its efficacy/ inefficacy in disciplining individuals.

Keywords- *Panopticon, Surveillance, Discipline, Dystopia*

Introduction

Manjula Padmanabhan is an Indian English writer who has authored various novels, short stories and plays. She is also an illustrator and a cartoonist and has created Suki cartoons. Her famed work is *Harvest* an Onassis award winning play. She has authored two novels *Escape* and its sequel *The Island of Lost Girls*. Both of these are dystopian novels which project a bleak dystopian future. The problem of declining sex ratio, female infanticide and violence

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towards women were the pressing issues which affected the author and arguably her inspiration to write the novel *Escape*. In her interview to the blog *Jabberwock* she says:

In the case of *Escape*, the idea presented itself originally as a newspaper "middle", which would take the form of a page from the diary of the last Indian woman left alive. It was just the fingerprint of an idea I had around the turn of the millennium, when there was talk of the Year – or Decade – of the Woman and I kept thinking that despite all the positive stuff going on, it seemed more likely that women – Indian women anyway – appeared to be on the decline.

She uses the dystopian genre to comment on various contemporary issues. According to the author in her interview to Kanishka Ramchandani she says, "What most people around the globe are experiencing right now is a dystopia, in the present". *The Island of Lost Girls*, its sequel is a continuation of the theme of violence towards women and rampant misogyny.

The Island of Lost Girls, the sequel to *Escape* is set in a dystopian world. *The Glossary of Literary Terms* defines dystopia as "an unpleasant imaginary world in which ominous tendencies of our present social, political and technological order are projected into a disastrous future culmination" (416). The world portrayed in the novel is dystopian as it projects rampant misogyny, violence, environmental degradation and apocalypse- a bleak future showing the consequences of the excesses of humanity. The events of the novel are set twenty two years after the formation of the Brotherland or the Forbidden Country in *Escape*. In the new world order, certain countries have disintegrated while certain others have formed alliances to form enclaves. At the centre of this new order is Zone- an arena of endless games of violence fought by teams representing different enclaves who are rewarded with money, power and prestige. Padmanabhan manages to create a world of brutal men, abused girls and violent games in the zone. According to her the violence towards women is nothing new, in her interview to Parshathy J. Nath she says:

...the gender-violence that we're experiencing all over the world is beginning to look like a type of horrific battlefield. It used to be that women were treated with special care, because child-bearing was considered a sacred task. Today however, overpopulation in some parts of the world has created enormous problems. In that sense, the functions that women were traditionally associated with — child-bearing and rearing — are no longer crucial for survival. They may even be something to be feared. I have often wondered whether this is at the root of all the violence we see against women: an unconscious desire to destroy the source of surplus lives.

The plight of women and girls is the worst in the new social order as they are sold off as booties, trophies, goods with no value to their dignity. The lack of female representation in

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team leads to the shameless exploitation of women, as one of the mentors of the Island explains: “Once it was clear that there would only ever be all-men’s teams, the whole shameful exploitation of women who live in the Zone — as booty, as trophies, as entertainment, whatever — became the established norm” (Padmanabhan, *The Island of Lost Girls* 312). The island, an underwater facility is a haven for females who have faced abuse at some point of time. *The Asian Age* review of the novel explains so about the title, “The Island, in the novel, is formed in the first place to protect the “lost girls”.” The girls who come to this island have faced the worst kind of physical and sexual abuse which the mentors in the island try to repair and heal as mentor Vane explains, “...the majority of them come here like rag dolls with their stuffing torn out of them. They spend days and sometimes weeks in the regenerative solution, just to get their bodies working again. The surgical scars, the piercings and tattoos from their previous lives remain on their bodies as evidence of that life” (Padmanabhan, *The Island of Lost Girls* 270). Pankaj Kumar in his “An Eco-anarchism analysis of Manjula Padmanabhan’s *The Island of Lost Girls*” explains so about the purpose of the mentors in the island,

The Mentor of the Island was conditioning the minds and physical structures of females’ bodies. In this female zone, women are able to discard the social code and patriarchal rules from the mind of those females who unfortunately spent their time in misogynistic zone. The Island is scientifically so advanced that it has capability to make female bodies stronger both physically and mentally (530).

The novel in addition to depicting the politics of Zone is also a continuation of the story of Youngest and Meiji. At the core of the story is Youngest’s attempts to unite with Meiji, his daughter who is now in the island. Youngest secures his and Meiji’s safe exit from the Brotherland by making a deal with the General which makes him infiltrate the island. In the novel the General uses surveillance to control Youngest while in the island.

Bentham’s Panopticon

Foucault defines discipline so, “Discipline” may be identified neither with an institution nor with an apparatus; it is a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a “physics” or an “anatomy” of power, a technology” (*The Foucault Reader* 206). Panoptic surveillance is a disciplinary mechanism which disciplines using the gaze. It is a technique of disciplining and producing docile bodies. Foucault uses an adaptation of Jeremy Bentham’s idea of the panopticon to demonstrate the impact that constant surveillance has not only on an individual in an institution such as prison, but also on society as a whole. In the “Eye of Power” Foucault explains about Bentham’s panopticon, an architectural structure meant for surveillance;

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The principle was this. A perimeter building in the form of a ring. At the centre of this, a tower, pierced by large windows opening on to the inner face of the ring. The outer building is divided into cells each of which traverses the whole thickness of the building. These cells have two windows, one opening on to the inside, facing the windows of the central tower, the other, outer one allowing daylight to pass through the whole cell. All that is then needed is to put an overseer in the tower and place in each of the cells a lunatic, a patient, a convict, a worker or a schoolboy. The back lighting enables one to pick out from the central tower the little captive silhouettes in the ring of cells. In short, the principle of the dungeon is reversed; daylight and the overseer's gaze capture the inmate more effectively than darkness, which afforded after all a sort of protection. (147)

The point of the panopticon is that control is achieved through what Foucault calls 'disciplinary power', a form of power that is constant, unnoticeable and internalised. It operates through invisibility;

Disciplinary power, on the other hand, is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility. In discipline, it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of the power that is exercised over them. It is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 187).

As inmates are not sure whether they are being watched at any one time, they must always act in accordance to the rules. Control is thus achieved through self-surveillance as the fear of being caught breaking the rules keeps them in line with expectations. Foucault saw panopticism as present in many institutions, not just the prison system. Institutions such as asylums, schools, military and secret services also adopt a panoptic way of disciplining, with constant surveillance acting to maintain control of those within them.

Surveillance Mechanisms in *The Island of Lost Girls*

The General's grand plan involves infiltrating the island, seen as a harbour for girls and women. In order to infiltrate the island the General makes a bargain with Youngest. He forces Youngest to undergo a sex reassignment surgery which transforms him into a woman. He also forces him to sell Meiji to the mentors in the island. The General and his clone brothers unsatisfied with their dominion in Brotherland seek to establish their domination over the world beyond. Youngest bargain was to ensure the secure exit of him and Meiji from Brotherland in exchange of the spy work which Youngest was assigned to do by the General.

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Youngest is assigned the duty of infiltrating the island by the General to know the secrets of the island. He is asked to sell his daughter Meiji to the mentors in the island. The General attaches surveillance devices on Youngest's body so as to keep track of him. The General's electronic devices of surveillance operate on the same principle as Bentham's Panopticon- that of the disciplinary and all seeing gaze. The emergence and proliferation of modern day electronic surveillance devices have led to the expansion and inclusion of new definitions of the panopticon; "Recently, Bentham's Panopticon has become a catchphrase for all sorts of electronic surveillance, from video coverage of city streets to "total information awareness" of library checkouts and credit-card" (Dobson and Fisher 309). Fisher and Dobson have conceptualised a new model called as Panopticon III which includes electronic devices used for surveillance such as radio-frequency identification tags, GPS receiver, and two-way radio transmission. These devices are meant for surveillance even though control may or may not be intended through these devices.

The constant fear of being watched by the General makes Youngest follow his orders. The surveillance devices ensure that every movement and conversation of Youngest is conveyed to General. In this way, the General's ever pervading gaze operates through the devices. Youngest has surveillance devices like radio link, satellite locators and a pain radio attached on him by the General. The satellite locators or sat locs as they are called have poison sacs inside them. If Youngest is found transgressing from his mission, the sat loc is once initiated which can lead to instant death. As the General explains to Youngest, "because of our little electronic friends the satellite locators. Because of what they'll release into you-you and your vermin brat- should you happen to disobey. You'd not forgotten, had you, that I can cause catastrophic death of neurotoxin any time I want" (Padmanabhan, *The Island of Lost Girls* 89). A similar satellite locator is embedded in Meiji's body. Meiji is the ultimate leash for Youngest. The fear of any harm befalling Meiji is a sufficient inspiration for Youngest to stay on his mission. A pain radio connecting to the nerves in his teeth is instantly activated by the General when Youngest fails or delays to respond to General's orders. The pain radio affixed to Youngest ensures that every transgression major or minor is punished by the General by activating the radio which sends an electronic shock to Youngest. The radio link affixed on General serves the function of recording every conversation of Youngest. The General's orders often resonates in Youngest's mind; "find the island. Do-your-duty in-the-name-of-all-true-men sell-the-girl" (Padmanabhan, *The Island of Lost Girls* 9). Youngest cannot escape the General's ever pervading gaze. The surveillance devices act as General's eyes and ears. They function to keep track of Youngest's every movement. These devices ensure Youngest's complete submission and obedience to General. As a means of surveillance youngest "had a recorded voice whispering in his ears. He had three electronic leashes tying him to the voice that forced him to remain on the path he had created. The twin

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satellite locator, one on the wrist, one over his heart and the pain radio in his teeth” (Padmanabhan, *The Island of Lost Girls* 14). The effect of such surveillance is palpable on Youngest. The constant recording played by the radio transmitter acts as a leash on Youngest as he explains to Aila, “ it plays inside my head all the time. I’m out of range of this radio transmitter right now. But when iam in range then I hear not just this recording but his living voice as well. Inside my head. All the time. And he can hear mine” (Padmanabhan, *The Island of Lost Girls* 68).

Discipline and the Individual in *The Island of Lost Girls*

The objective of surveillance as a disciplinary mechanism is to make individuals disciplined. Youngest follows General's orders till the time he infiltrates the island and while in the island but disobeys him once the threat to Meiji's life is over. While in the island Youngest tries to follow the General's orders due to the fear of losing Meiji. The punishment of transgressing General's order is death. Youngest follows General's orders which often end in disastrous consequences. While imprisoned in the room with the guard Bella, the General constantly nags Youngest to open the port, “make it show you how to move outside the room”. Prodded by the General's orders Youngest forces upon the portal much against the advice of Bella resulting in the collapse and flooding of the room. The ever pervading gaze of General makes Youngest communicate even in the presence of mentor Vane in spite of the fear of being caught in the act.

The feeling of being watched always even when there is no surveillance keeps the surveilled subjects disciplined. The General's surveillance devices fail to discipline Youngest. The inefficiency of surveillance mechanisms make Youngest transgress from the duties assigned to him by the General. The surveillance devices are not really compatible or much effective in the island- an underwater facility which has its own camouflaging techniques to block all signals and types of communications emitted towards it. The General himself realizes that the island has a cloaking device which can block all devices of communication. When Youngest is ushered into a room in the island the satellite locator goes out of range thereby prompting Youngest to question the effectiveness of General's surveillance mechanisms. Youngest also realizes that the General was bluffing about the poison sac fixed on him as the General did not activate the poison sac even after the locator went dead. The surveillance mechanisms ensure that not only Youngest follow General's orders but also guarantees the safe existence of Youngest and Meiji since failure to report to General through these devices can result in death. Hence the primary motivation of Youngest to obey the General is the threat of life to Meiji in the event of transgression of General's order. The inefficacy of surveillance devices and the realization that there is no poison sac removes the fear from Youngest's mind about Meiji's life which leads him to betray the General to Mentor Vane. Mentor Vane disables the radio worn by Youngest when she finds out about its

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existence through Youngest's admission which at once releases Youngest from General's control. Thereafter Younger sides with the mentors of the island and conspires against the General.

Conclusion

The proliferations of electronic devices have led to novel and effective means of surveillance. In the novel, the General uses electronic devices for surveillance. The principle and point of surveillance is based on Bentham's concept of panopticon even though the means of surveillance has changed. Surveillance as a disciplinary mechanism remains a failure in the novel. Youngest does not complete the General's mission to unearth the secrets of the island even though he manages to infiltrate the island. The feeling of always being watched is what makes an individual a docile body. The breakdown of surveillance devices removes the fear of being watched by the General. Moreover, the threat to Meiji's life is also revealed as a bluff which leads Youngest to transgress General's orders.

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