

## The Writer and the Panoptic Surveillance in Annie Zaidi's *Untitled 1*

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### Abstract

Situating within the theoretical context of Panoptic surveillance, the paper brings forth the representation of the totalitarian potential of surveillance on a writer in the award winning play text *Untitled 1* by Annie Zaidi, a contemporary Indian woman playwright. The paper focuses on the dystopic ubiquity of surveillance that paradoxically is no more futuristic and highlights the significance of such representations in literature.

**Keywords** : Compliance; Creativity; Freedom; Panoptic surveillance; Privacy; Resistance; Writer.

Authoritarian regimes, dictators, despots...their methods include surveillance, censorship, arrest, even slaughter of those writers... who are unsettling, calling into question...can disturb the social oppression that functions like a coma on the population, a coma despots call peace.... Certain kinds of trauma... are so deep, so cruel, that ... only writers can translate such trauma and turn sorrow into meaning, sharpening the moral imagination. A writer's life and work are not a gift to mankind; they are its necessity.

Toni Morrison

...writers have been silenced.... Yet, anyone who has read history must be aware that these stories and fears are not new. Power does what it has always done, and storytellers do what they must do.

Annie Zaidi

Art and literature give imperative visibility to the gnawing concerns of the society and the writer shoulders the responsibility to roil the equilibrium by lucidly foregrounding the reality. P.B. Shelley in *A Defence of Poetry* (1821) claimed that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world " and that the poet "not only beholds intensely the present as it is,...but he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and

the fruit of the latest time." Evidently, poets/writers are endowed with thoughts/ideas that impact people and consequently, they are considered as the "feared others" (Kevorkian 181). It is precisely this that renders them vulnerable and subjects them to regulatory forces and strict surveillance that function within the matrix of the censoring gaze, normalization through everydayness, compliance/ resistance and punishment.

With reference to the representation of surveillance in literature, Kammerer points out that the number of the people with hands on experience in surveillance is very limited and that the majority of the people learn about how surveillance "works" through its representation in popular literature (99). The artistic imaginary of surveillance is significant as it "can bring... the big picture and push conventional boundaries of thought and image" (Marx 390). The narratives of surveillance construct possible dystopic futures through metaphors and images (Kammerer 99). They also bridge the hiatus between the academic surveillance studies and the non-academic engagements with it as the masses prefer to read Orwell to Foucault (104). Literary narratives of surveillance, besides positing the mechanics of surveillance, are primarily concerned with its psychological impact and give an insight into the interiority and resilience of the individual. A classic example is that of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four* in which the menacing totalitarianism is personified in 'Big Brother'. Marks states that "...texts have an inbuilt counter narrative that can inspire us to question and resist the negative trends while critically assessing any changes presented as positive" (236). Thus, such texts, as cultural expressions, produce significant discourses on surveillance.

The dramatic idiom is a very powerful medium to raise awareness, bring about an attitudinal shift and to change perceptions. Annie Zaidi, a contemporary Indian woman playwright who won the Hindu Playwright Award 2018 for *Untitled 1*, brings forth a dystopian world where the state, through a ubiquitous surveillance system, contains individual's freedom of expression, creativity, choice, and privacy. However, in the light of the contemporary dynamics of surveillance, in an interview given to *The Hindu*, Zaidi aptly points out that it is no longer a dystopian future but a reality. The paper seeks to critique Annie Zaidi's play text *Untitled 1* through a twofold structure: an explication of panoptic surveillance, and mapping the rhetoric of surveillance as surfaced in the play text.

Surveillance studies have grown rapidly in recent decades by way of theoretical inputs in the light of new technologies and intensified governance. 'Pan', a prefix from the Greek meaning 'all' and 'opticon' meaning 'vision', Panopticon, as proposed by Bentham, was a hypothetical architectural construct meant for prisoners. They were kept in circular tiers

of cells surrounding a central tower wherefrom the Inspector/Overseer kept constant surveillance on them. While they were always visible to the Inspector, the latter was not visible to the inmates from any angle and this rendered the Inspector dispensable. The consciousness of being under constant panoptic gaze, would make the prisoners internalize surveillance for the fear of punishment. Consequently, they would maintain self-discipline and gradually transform from within. Thus the shift in penal mode was from punishment to reform. Kailey Giordano points out that the " Panopticon then embodied these penal developments, coalescing two seemingly incongruent ideals in one mechanism of discipline and reform: surveillance at once private and transparent, sequestered and omniscient".

The concept of the Panopticon, the prison structure as visualized by Jeremy Bentham, has been a constant in surveillance studies. Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975) added a new dimension to the understanding of surveillance where he talks about Panopticism. "Panopticism is the theorization of surveillance society"(Ernst 2). In fact, the Panopticon has acquired a metaphorical significance though it has been suggested "that as an analytical tool it might no longer be well suited for understanding the complexity and totality of contemporary surveillance dynamics" (Haggerty 38). In an extensive explication, Ernst talks about plural Panopticons that contain features that can be identified with reference to contemporary society. She points out that there are four ways in which the Panopticon is used by surveillance studies – "appropriation and application, rejection, qualified acceptance based on empirical limitations; and critical reinterpretation" (191). Thus, Panopticon continues to be pivotal and relevant as a "contemporary icon" (185) in the present context because of its inherent multiple facets. With the technological advancement in surveillance, the contemporary operative dynamics tend to be progressively diversified, and rhetorically mutated, yet they fall under the rubric of the concept of Panopticon, and "Panoptic, as a nominalized adjective, can be construed as connected with the root idea of the Panopticon"(187).

Zaidi's *Untitled 1* vividly portrays the altered rhetoric of panoptic surveillance that is cloaked under the benign face but is, nevertheless, equally menacing, demeaning and stifling. The totalitarian potential of surveillance remains a constant while notions like creativity, truth, self and privacy have no place. Vishwas, a middle aged writer, is enveloped with fear and sinister uncertainty. The slight sound outside makes him suspicious and makes him apprehensive of his furtive writings. The conversation between Vishwas and his wife, Dina, signals the suffocating, insecure atmosphere suffused with fear:

Dina: Keep your voice down.

Vishwas: Keep your voice down. Keep your voice down.

Them. You. Down. Down. (*Untitled Act I Scene I*)<sup>1</sup>

And when Dina is about to go, Vishwas tries to stop her from going out for a walk:

Vishwas: What if they show up while you are gone?

Dina: Then it's over. I will come visit you in jail. Probably.

( Act I Scene I)

Vishwas is under systematic confinement and the visibility instrument is the gaze of Tina, Dina's sister, who is employed to keep a watch over him. Surveillance has inherent rhetoric of the binary of the strategies adopted by the dominating order and the tactics adopted by the surveillance subject to contest and negotiate space for themselves in environments defined by strategies (Kevorkian 19). Satyajit B, the Communications Inspector, who happens to be the one-time friend of Vishwas, visits him in his office as per the protocol. The process begins subtly in a casual manner with the surveillance agent communicating with Vishwas in a friendly manner. However, "strategic surveillance involves a conscious strategy often in an adversarial and inquisitorial context to gather information" (Marx xxv). He enquires about the party Vishwas had hosted in which their friend Kamal had also come:

Satyajit: You had quite a meeting on Friday.

Vishwas: It wasn't a meeting. A group of friends.

Satyajit: All writers?

Vishwas: Most of us.

Satyajit: You were hosting this meeting?

Vishwas: The get together? Yes.

Satyajit: It must have been quite a party.

Vishwas: About twelve people. That's not a party.

Satyajit: Uh-huh? Twelve writers? (*Untitled 1 Act I Scene III*)

Topographies of fear are created in an ordinary, routine, everyday manner through the apparently gentle conversation, queries, phrases, acts like drinking water meticulously, pouring from above, and inactions. When Vishwas enquires whether their party was of any interest to him, Satyajit responds :

Satyajit: We notice unusual things. ...Kamal. Our friend .Who showed up unexpectedly at your little party. ...He didn't tell you what he's been doing? ...Well, he retired and went off the grid.(Act I Scene III)

The panoptic surveillance further becomes evident when under the garb of citizen outreach, he indicates that Vishwas is not being sufficiently visible on social media:

Satyajit: Well my Department has noticed that you have not been communicating much.

Vishwas: I talk. I mean, when I need to talk. I'm a writer. When there is something to talk about, I write. I post now and then on the social media.

Satyajit: Don't be defensive. Let me show your graph.

*He flips open a digital file and turns a page.*

Satyajit: Here's your usage. Voice, across three apps...Data use is slipping. Downward trend for two years. Only, a small spike in voice calls made the old fashioned way. Once or twice a month. You just had two conversations with your wife last week.( Act I Scene III)

Evidently, privacy is eroded and fear gains ground in Vishwas who immediately makes a call to his wife and continues to talk unnecessarily simply to increase the graph. With a determined mind, Satyajit resorts to the strategy of persuasion through deliberative rhetoric and tries to convince Dina when she is out for a walk. He asks her to support Vishwas and usher him towards the "right sort of people":

Satyajit: Talk to him. ...It will help if you can talk him into pushing his ideas in the right direction of progress. Interpret him, clarify him.( Act I Scene IV)

He also deliberately tries to impact Dina's psychology by underlining the fact that they are under constant surveillance and that their withdrawn and somewhat haughty behavior is unpalatable:

Satyajit: ...You know our philosophy. Move your tongue to move the world.

Dina: My tongue is inside my head. You don't see it move. It moves a lot.

Satyajit: Precisely. This is the thing. The department is a bit concerned about tongues that move only inside people's heads. Its called the invisible tongue. Internally, we call it

the frantic tongue. ...it is not a cool, considered, peaceful tongue. The tongue that works inside the head is not a civilized one. But let it out and it is forced to exercise a measure of restraint. ( Act I Scene IV)

The above is an example of ruthless social engineering to make resistant voices compliant. It is strongly reminiscent of 'Newspeak' in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four* that limits the freedom of thought, self-expression, and free will that might threaten the ideology of the regime of 'Big Brother' and the Party.

However, to counter the strategies adopted by the repressive authority, the subjects of surveillance resort to tactics to evade, negotiate and forge a space for themselves within the constricting environment designed for them.

Vishwas and Dina are living in an atmosphere of mistrust where people are mandated to be on the "grid", the advanced technological monitoring system. Their social engagements are mapped, the record of social interaction through social media is evaluated, their visibility is assessed and in case of non-compliance, they are given the flags as warnings. The fact that Vishwas and Dina have not installed television screen and cameras in their house, along with their almost negligible social mobility, makes them suspect. The couple is fully aware that the disciplining power is exerting a nuanced kind of authority to control them by creating knowledge about them. Correspondingly, Vishwas and Dina evolve protean ways to elude and defy the ubiquitous surveillance system. They create an impression of socializing by placing recorders on different sofas with the recorded voices of Vishwas and Kamal to fool the authorities vis-à-vis the actual meeting being conducted elsewhere. When Dina's phone rings, she answers:

Dina: Hi... Yes , I'm back from work. Nono, his friends are here, that's why... Fine. His usual self... Bhajiya and zeera biscuits. He doesn't like butter biscuits. ...How's your media engagement graph? Twelve percent? I am at twenty-five percent. Moderate. Why don't you like that wedding album?...Tina! Communication means ,express something. ...Why don't you put one like and one comment? ...It will bring your graph up...Wait...( Act I Scene VI)

And when the recorder stops playing due to some technical problem, she rushes to the sofa and speaks loudly:

Dina: Where have you guys gone? Are you upstairs? More tea? Vishwas? I have only two hands...Hello, Tina? Can we talk later? Oh, I suppose, they 're just talking about the good old days...I'll tell you all about it later. Okay? ( Act I Scene VI)

However, they do not succeed in this. Later, when Dina goes out for a walk, she defiantly looks up into the street camera, stares hard into it and says:

Dina: You must be bored? Or do you feel like the almighty?...You think you're the only one watching? I'm watching you too. The difference between you and me is that I can go away. ...You think you've trapped me? No, you've just trapped yourself. ... Watch me. ...I'm well within my rights to do this.(Act II Scene II)

And this brings two uniformed women rushing to her. Her subversive rage and resistance find overt expression here. Similarly, a resistant tone pervades throughout Vishwas' writing by way of a sustained metaphor of poison that begins with Socrates :

The trouble with writers is that they rarely get to write about their death. ...The great philosopher Socrates... words were his tools. ...He was in the habit of asking questions that made people uncomfortable. ...And so... he chose to drink that cup of poison. ( Act I, Scene II)

... There are some poisons that neither kill nor cure. ...You might feel as if you can't breathe. ...The toxins cause infertility. You fail to produce. Or the seed growing within you gets damaged. Sometimes your vision of the future is stillborn. (Act I, Scene VII)

There are some poisons that don't kill. They just take away your capacity to think and reason. Dhatura...The person who takes it loses ...a sense of proportion...right or wrong. He obeys . And because he feels less pain, he wants to go on obeying, go on taking this poison. Go on surrendering his truth. ( Act II, Scene IX)

Through such references in his narrative, Vishwas, the surveillance subject, creates a discursive space suffused with allegories of resistance that could emanate only from an informed, motivated, and committed writer.

The strategy of invasive surveillance, corrosive of individual privacy and dignity, is adopted by Satyajit and he leads a search operation along with his team in Dina's bedroom in the absence of Vishwas. He euphemistically describes the whole exercise as routine and everyday matter. Dina is caught off guard and is anxious. He tries to normalize the whole process by engaging Dina in mundane conversation. However, when Dina is not pacified, he categorically states that Vishwas has been writing off the grid and that he has an old machine somewhere. She is at once defiant and defensive. Satyajit rationalizes:

Satyajit: You should not take it personally. Rules are rules. Everyone has to write on the grid. And why not? After all, writing is meant to be shared. ...It's not like they are prevented from writing whatever they want to write. ...As long as it ... not... disturbs the peace. Or breaks any of the laws. We just like to see what's going on. It's like maintaining basic discipline... (Act I Scene X)

The decisive move imminently follows when the two uniformed women come out of the bedroom with the record player and cassettes and Vishwas is taken for trial. He is charged with writing off the grid and not sharing his work with any public agency, of having used the software Infinite Monkey and having covered the camera with glue, having conducted meetings and deliberately misleading the department by pre-recorded conversations, having published off grid material in handwritten format, anonymously printed and circulated his book *Untitled 1* without specifying the genre, digitally uploading the book, the content being deliberately obscure and designed to create public disorder and question the validity of the state. Vishwas strongly refutes the charges and instead poses a question as to whether the proceedings of the court are also transparently being recorded – on the grid- thereby exposing the double standards as they are not recorded. He defends himself through counter arguments but ultimately lands up in prison.

Later Satyajit meets Vishwas in the prison while the trial is still in progress and offers a deal:

Satyajit: Give us Kamal... you are both accused of conspiring to cause disaffection. Treason...

and says that post redemption, charges will be softened on Vishwas but he will not be able to write and publish. Vishwas poses his condition:

Vishwas: I want to publicly acknowledge that I am the author of *Untitled 1*. (Act II Scene III)

And he is denied this and instead Satyajit, within the matrix of fear and coercion, exploits Dina's emotional insecurity. He is unwavering in his drive and taps Dina in the vulnerable state to become compliant. He reads from the file:

Satyajit: Dina Vishwas spent seven minutes looking at a post that reads: I never understand why women don't do what is done to them. Why do they not rip out someone's insides? Why do they not endanger men's lives and make them bleed to death?... You do read everything, as per the file. That is good, Engagement is intense. But an instigation



to violence? That's a clear red flag. ... Allow me to help you, Dina ... All you have to do is to help the department. The red flags are cancelled out. ... All you have to tell us where the book was printed. Kamal knows our ways. He knows how to hide a printer. If you could get us some material evidence... (Act II Scene IV)

Later she gives evidence before the jury that Vishwas is mentally derailed:

Dina: He has begun to lose control over his thoughts. He thinks he is being silenced through being offered ..the fellowship in the state. ... He thinks that the new rules make writing an act of stenography. That the unwritten, unspoken word is God. (Act II Scene V)

But Vishwas insists that he wants to stand by his book and defends his friend Kamal but to no avail. In the end, both Vishwas and Dina become complacent and compliant:

Vishwas: Should we have had children... . I would have written more compliant books. ... Nobody will remember us. Or this. My little moment of... Nobody will tell the story as it was.

Dina: That I betrayed you?

Vishwas: That you loved me more than you loved my writing. ... (Act II Scene VI)

Thus, the totalitarian potential of panoptic surveillance becomes evident through singular drive of Satyajit who can be called the Inspector in the context of the Panopticon. Repression, non-resistance, and compliance are the goals to be achieved through the rhetoric of surveillance. However, unlike the Inspector of the Panopticon who is not visible to the inmates, the surveillance agent here is menacing who interacts, monitors, persuades, connives, warns, and manipulates to achieve the goal and has dataveillance at hand. The penal mode in Bentham's Panopticon was from punishment to reform - 'soul training' but the panoptic surveillance as surfaced in the play lacks this spirit - it is compliance or punishment. The soul is left parched, the individual dispirited, the writer without a pen, and a notebook. Cultural expressions like *Untitled 1* project the dystopic vision which paradoxically is no more futuristic.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The text of the play *Untitled 1* referred to in the paper is a kindle edition that has no pagination.

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