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## FROM THE WATCHTOWER TO THE DIGITAL PANOPTICON: EROSION OF PRIVACY AND PREDICTIVE ANALYSIS IN DAVE EGGERS' *THE CIRCLE*

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**Abstract:** This paper intends to examine Dave Eggers' novel, *The Circle*, through the lens of Michel Foucault's concept of Panopticism, highlighting how the novel explores the erosion of privacy in a highly digitalized world. Contrary to the traditional surveillance mechanisms, the novel forecasts the mechanisms of Big Data, algorithms, and predictive analytics, which transform individuals into data points and exert control over the lives of the individuals. The mechanisms that are introduced in the novel such as TruYou, SeeChange, and LuvLuv exemplify the amalgamation of personal information, enabling algorithmic profiling, behavioural ranking, and predictive modelling that dictate human action which can be seen in parallel to the contemporary electronic and social media surveillance. Eggers provides a critique on how the ideology of "complete transparency" masks corporate manipulation and reshapes subjectivity, by blurring the boundary between public and private life. By reading the Circle's digital surveillance practices in the context of data-driven capitalism of the contemporary world, the paper argues that Eggers' novel reveals the birth of a predictive panopticon- a system in which visibility and transparency has become part of an individual's daily life which tracks and monitors their everyday activities. This reading underlines the psychological and social implications of Big Data surveillance: fragmented identity, controlled autonomy, and the normalization of the control exerted through algorithms. Ultimately, the novel cautions the readers about the dangers of the unchecked power of data-driven technologies and poses a question about whether there is any turning back from a world governed by prediction, transparency, and the exploitation of human life.

**Keywords:** *Algorithmic Control, Digital Panopticon, Identity Fragmentation, Michel Foucault, Surveillance, Privacy Erosion, Transparency*

From the grand amphitheatre of the ancient Roman Colosseum to the digital world of today, the gaze of surveillance has evolved. Think of yourself, standing in the Colosseum and witnessing the gladiator's crashes echoing off the stone walls. But are you just watching it- what if you are also being watched? Fast-forward to the 18th century, Jeremy Bentham introduced his concept of a hypothetical prison called Panopticon, where all the inmates are being watched by a single watchman. This notion of continuous monitoring has been metamorphosed into a new kind- digital Panopticism. As humans stepped into a highly digitalized world, they began to live their lives online, blurring the boundaries between private and public spheres, raising potential questions about the impact of

surveillance on individual autonomy and surveillance. The concept 'Big Brother is watching you', is no longer constricted to the pages of a dystopian fiction, but has become a horrifying reality. Jeremy Bentham, an 18th century philosopher, has originally put forward the concept of Panopticon in his work, *Panopticon; Or the Inspection- House*. Bentham's Preface to *Panopticon* opens with a list of the benefits to be obtained from his 'inspection-house': "Moral reformed - health preserved – industry invigorated - instruction diffused - public burthens lightened – Economy seated, as it were, upon a rock - the gordian knot of the Poor-Laws not cut, but untied - all by a simple idea in architecture!" (Bentham 39). His Panopticon design and philosophy came together in a circular structure where prison cells surrounded a central hub. The concept allows all the inmates of the institution to be watched by a single corrections officer, and the inmates wouldn't know whether they are being watched or not. This system creates a psychological effect, leading the inmates to regulate their behaviour because of the constant surveillance. The major aim of the Panopticon was to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. Through his notion of Panopticon, what Bentham attempted was to create a transparent society.

Michel Foucault, in his seminal work, *Discipline and Punish*, developed Bentham's architectural design of Panopticon, to explore the mechanisms of power and discipline. Foucault attempted to extend the idea beyond the physical prison, arguing that Panopticism became a pervading form of surveillance and control in different organizations like hospitals, asylums, schools and even in workplaces. Individuals who are put under the watchful gaze tend to regulate their behaviors. Foucault has observed in his work, *Discipline and Punish* that:

The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately. In short, it reverses the principle of the dungeon; or rather of its three functions - to enclose, to deprive of light and to hide - it preserves only the first and eliminates the other two. Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap. (Foucault 200)

The constant visibility becomes a means of control. The transparency and control results in the exercising of power, making the individuals controllable. Visibility is indeed a trap. 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" (Foucault 201). This permanent visibility results in the internalization of the power of the watchful gaze and individuals begin to self- regulate their actions and behaviours. This showcases the subtle operation of power which results in the shaping of behaviours that is enabled through the constant surveillance rather than direct enforcement. The mechanism of power and surveillance operates efficiently making it a powerful tool for discipline and control.

The more numerous those anonymous and temporary observers are, the greater the risk for the inmate of being surprised and the greater his anxious awareness of being observed. The Panopticon is a marvellous machine which, whatever use one may wish to put it to, produces homogeneous effects of power. (Foucault 202)

Foucault argues that when an individual is aware that they are under surveillance, they start to internalize “constraints of power” and start to regulate their behaviours and thereby becomes “the principle of his own subjection” (Foucault 203). Foucault asks a potential question here: “Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?” (Foucault 227). Aren’t we all the inmates of this prison of surveillance?

Building on the concept of Panopticism, it becomes evident that its relevance extends beyond the constraints of 19th century architectural prison design. The theoretical framework provides a powerful lens for analysing the themes of surveillance and control in the contemporary highly monitored society. It helps to identify the power dynamics, surveillance mechanisms, self- regulation and control. The relevance of Panopticism extends beyond the horizons of certain literary works. It is highly relevant in the modern world of digital Panopticism where there is an extensive proliferation of digital surveillance through platforms like social media, digital gadgets, online data collection etc. This widespread collection of and commodification of personal data by corporations is termed as ‘Surveillance Capitalism’. The terminology was popularised by the Harvard Professor Shoshana Zuboff. Zuboff on a talk about her book, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, has remarked that, “I realised then the process of computerisation would be the next industrial revolution, and it would change everything – including how we think, and feel and how we create meaning. I had a notebook, and I started writing. This has been the agenda for my intellectual life since then”. This remark of Zuboff is indeed relevant in the contemporary scenario. The global tech companies like Google, Facebook, Twitter etc. has manipulated the people into giving up their privacy. The personal data that has been collected is not only used to predict behaviour but also to influence and regulate it. This is “Surveillance Capitalism”, and Zuboff defines it as a “new economic order”. And this collection and commodification of data is a kind of Panopticism. The cell phones that humans consider as their bosom friend have assumed the role of a Panopticon.

"I do not want to live in a world where everything I do and say is recorded. That is not something I am willing to support or live under" – Edward Snowden. This statement highlights the potential dangers of surveillance and it raises a critical question: Has man reached the Orwellian world of surveillance? This question is particularly pertinent in the novel *The Circle*, written by the American writer, Dave Eggers. The novel offers a thought-provoking exploration about the potential dangers of unchecked surveillance and the erosion of privacy that comes with it. The novel portrays the life of Mae Holland as she navigated a world dominated by a tech company ‘The Circle’, which proclaims

complete transparency, raising questions about the invasion of technology and about the erosion of privacy that is caused by this proliferation of technologies in the human lives. *The Circle's* continuous pursuit of transparency and its influence on the protagonist's life create a sense of unease and it foreshadows a dystopian future, raising awareness about the lurking dangers caused by the technological advancement which cages the individuals in the prison created by constant surveillance. The novel has been praised for its visionary commentary on the internet age and its exploration of the downsides of technological advancement.

*The Circle* was a response to the growth of the tech industry in the United States of America in the early 21st century, particularly in California. The world that the protagonist Mae lives in the novel is a panoptic world. The novel depicts a world of transparency where everything is virtually being monitored. The novel mainly discusses the societal consequences of complete transparency. This clearly echoes the principles of Panopticism, the concept developed by Michel Foucault. Foucault's Panopticism expands beyond the physical structures to describe a system of normalised surveillance which exerts power and control over individuals to ensure discipline. On an analysis of the novel, it could be understood how Dave Eggers critiques the modern surveillance techniques and the ways in which power operates through this monitoring in the digitally connected world. The tech company, The Circle is the centre of the novel, which embodies the principles of Panopticism. The continuous surveillance is the omnipresent feature of the novel that seeks to make all information accessible and visible. Digital Panopticism is embodied throughout the novel. The Circle is an internet company specialized in social media. The employees at the company are too much addicted to social media and all the Circlers are given an account where they share about where they are and what they are doing. And a participation rank for this is also given, because of which the employees are too much attached to social media. Initially, Mae feels difficulty to adapt into this but eventually she finds her way in. One of the surveillance techniques introduced by the company is 'TruYou', founded by Ty Gospodinov, one of the Three Wise Men, which intends to connect each person with an online account. Eggers describes about TruYou:

Instead, he put all of it, all of every user's needs and tools, into one pot and invented TruYou—one account, one identity, one password, one payment system, per person. There were no more passwords, no multiple identities. Your devices knew who you were, and your one identity—the TruYou, unbendable and unmaskable—was the person paying, signing up, responding, viewing and reviewing, seeing and being seen. You had to use your real name, and this was tied to your credit cards, your bank, and thus paying for anything was simple. One button for the rest of your life online. (Eggers 21)

This description highlights the Circle's quest to create an ideal online platform through the creation of a single identity. On the surface, it may appear as an innovative idea that aims to simplify the user's online interaction. But on a deeper level, this simplified innovation

may cause the erosion of privacy, anonymity and the creation of a surveillance state which clearly echoes the principles of Panopticism. This consolidation of all user's data into a single, unified profile enables the company to track the online activities, preferences and behaviours making the user's life completely transparent. These innovations held the individuals to be transparent and accountable to the digital gaze. Another example that demonstrates the company's goals is LuvLuv, developed by Gus Khazeni, an employee at The Circle. This software, currently in testing, enables users to find detailed information about their dates by analysing their online activity, including posts, likes, and mentions. This innovative idea is used through social media because every information about an individual is available in the social media platforms.

The structure of the Circle's headquarters is arranged in such a way that, "offices everywhere above, four floors high on either side, every wall made of glass. Briefly dizzy, she looked downward, and in the immaculate glossy floor, she saw her own face reflected" (Eggers 7). This description showcases the visibility and transparency that emerges as a major theme of the novel. Mae is faced with glass in every direction, allowing her to see everything, at the same time, being the object that is seen. The walls of the office are made up of glass and this creates a pervasive sense of surveillance, where the employees are constantly monitored so they are being forced to regulate their every action. And the glossy floor where Mae can see her own reflection can metaphorically suggest the ways in which the company demands for complete transparency which leads to the blurring of boundaries between personal and private spheres. And the dizziness that Mae feels upon looking downward could be a suggestion to the loss of autonomy in an increasingly monitored world. This underscores the growing tension between the advantages of transparency and erosion of privacy and individuality.

The philosophy of Translucence by Eamon Bailey, one of the Three Wise Men who runs the Circle is the disguised face of the totalitarian system. However, the novel explores how this translucence and monitoring can influence human behavior and human freedom. The constant surveillance destructs individual behavior because it forces them to act according to what their observers want instead living the life they want without considering what others will think. When people go transparent and talk to millions of people online, they are not speaking what they want but instead are trying to cater the interest of the audience. The company is functioning on the principle of transparency and aims to monitor its employees and the people around the world. Another innovative technique developed by the company is the SeeChange camera which enables visual access to any place at any time. By installing these all-seeing cameras worldwide, people can observe every event that is happening. In a way, it promotes social justice by exposing the crimes that happen. Bailey claims that, "who would commit a crime knowing they might be watched anytime, anywhere?" (Eggers 57) However it has its own disadvantages. The main goal of the SeeChange technology is to monitor the whole world which directly implies the principles of Panopticism developed by Michel Foucault. Foucault explains that the power of the

panopticon lies in the mere possibility of being watched, even if no one is actually watching. The notion of being watched is what ensures the discipline of the individuals and this idea of Foucault aligns with the principles of the see change camera introduced by Bailey. The constant visibility enforces self-regulation.

Mae's decision to go completely transparent for her job, also leads to the destruction of her friendship with Annie Allerton. When Mae allowed herself to be monitored at her own will, it led to the deprivation of her freedom. She even loses her ability to think wisely and falls victim to the desires of the company. Eggers is trying to warn the readers about how these types of monitoring organizations can become a potential danger because they can monitor everyone in the world. And the organization manipulates the employees into the surveillance techniques and this can be seen in Mae's description about how she was manipulated:

“Okay. Can you drink this?” The doctor handed Mae the dense green liquid she'd been preparing. “It's a smoothie.” Mae drank it down. It was viscous and cold. “Okay, you just ingested the sensor that will connect to your wrist monitor. It was in that glass.” The doctor punched Mae's shoulder playfully. “I love doing that.” “I already swallowed it?” Mae said. “It's the best way. If I put it in your hand, you'd hem and haw. But the sensor is so small, and it's organic of course, so you drink it, you don't notice, and it's over.” “So, the sensor is already in me?” “It is. And now,” the doctor said, tapping Mae's wrist monitor, “now it's active. It'll collect data on your heart rate, blood pressure, cholesterol, heat flux, caloric intake, sleep duration, sleep quality, digestive efficiency, on and on. A nice thing for the Circlers, especially those like you who might have occasionally stressful jobs, is that it measures galvanic skin response, which allows you to know when you're amped or anxious. (Eggers 126)

This scene highlights the ways in which the organization ensures visibility and transparency and as well as the subtle ways through which the organization manipulates its employees. The sensor's ability to track even the bodily functions of Mae, creates a sense of pervasive surveillance, where every move of the employees is monitored and evaluated. And the doctor describes this invasion of Mae's bodily privacy in a playful manner that throws light on how the Circle normalizes the erosion of privacy. Mae does not even realize that her privacy is being taken away from her. Thus, Mae falls prey into the digital panopticon world created by the Circle. Mae becomes a mere object that is being watched every time leading to the deprivation of her freedom.

The company's primary objective is to achieve complete transparency, pushing individuals to live openly. Mae chooses to kayak to a secluded island, but upon returning to shore, she is met by police alerted by an anonymous tip and a See Change camera monitoring the beach. Following her confrontation with Eamon Bailey about the trip, Mae agrees to embrace transparency by wearing a camera. Bailey argues that life should have no secrets,

stating, “What if we acted as though we were always being watched? It would encourage ethical behavior. Who would engage in wrongdoing if they knew they were under observation?” (Eggers 233). His belief in the power of surveillance aligns with Foucault’s theories. Bailey insists that constant monitoring fosters compliance, discouraging immoral or unlawful actions. And with the decision of Mae going completely transparent, Mae together with Bailey put forth a slogan, “SECRETS ARE LIES. SHARING IS CARING, PRIVACY IS THEFT” (Eggers 244). But this slogan surely raises concerns about the privacy of individuals. In a digital landscape where personal data is aggressively harvested, stored, and monetized, and where surveillance capitalism has become the norm, what safeguards can be implemented to protect the fundamental human right to privacy, and how can individuals reclaim control over their digital identities and personal information?

A panopticon-like system is established in *The Circle*. The SeeChange camera assumes the role of a panopticon and Mae is compelled to regulate her behavior and every day actions because of this constant surveillance. She is not able to speak to her friend Annie and the only place she can talk to her is in the bathroom. This directly implies the fact that the proliferation of digital technologies and the constant surveillance that came with it has led to the erosion of the privacy of the individuals. The constant surveillance started to create a distance between Mae and her parents and her friends. Mercer Medeiros, Mae’s ex-boyfriend shows his opposition to this monitoring policy of the company in his letter to Mae:

If things continue this way, there will be two societies—or at least I hope there will be two—the one you’re helping create, and an alternative to it. You and your ilk will live, willingly, joyfully, under constant surveillance, watching each other always, commenting on each other, voting and liking and disliking each other, smiling and frowning, and otherwise doing nothing much else. (Eggers 292)

Mercer, here is mocking the contemporary digital world that has fallen a prey in the hands of the hands of the social media platforms, where everything is appreciated just on the basis of the number of likes, shares and comments. Mercer feels that the excess use of the digital media leaves him “hollow and diminished”. He feels that he has “entered... some mirror world where the dorkiest shit is completely dominant”, that “the world has dorkified itself” (Eggers 109). However, the all- seeing technology that Mae embraces eventually led to the death of Mercer. Mercer stood against these surveillance policies and his death was the result of his opposition. And as for Mae, she just became the obedient puppy of the organization without her knowledge. The company manipulated Mae into accepting the idea of surveillance and transparency. Mae perceived this transparency as something justifiable as it helps to track the wrongdoings that are happening in the world. But at the core, the company really aimed at tracking everyday lives of people and thus to control them. And Mae becomes a victim of this control:

The extra layer of the CircleSurveys helped distract Mae from thinking about Kalden, who had yet to contact her, and who had not once answered his phone. She'd stopped calling after two days, and had chosen not to mention him at all to Annie or anyone else. Her thoughts about him followed a similar path as they had after their first encounter, at the circus. First, she found his unavailability intriguing, even novel. But after three days, it seemed willful and adolescent. By the fourth day, she was tired of the game. Anyone who disappeared like that was not a serious person. (Eggers 190)

This excerpt from the novel highlights how much Mae is manipulated and brainwashed by the ideologies of the organization. She has become an obedient slave of the Circle. The company manipulated her to be more passionate about social media, internet and other electronic devices which has led to her decline of interests in her relationships. Throughout the novel, Eggers presents a horrifying vision of the dangers of Panopticism in the digital age, where the watchful gaze penetrates the lives of the individuals which leads to the erosion of privacy and individual autonomy. Mae is an individual who is living in a world of digital Panopticism. And she begins to value herself on the basis of the number of likes and shares she gets in the Zing account. She becomes too much engrossed in the principles of the Circle:

By ten o'clock, just when she was tiring, and when she'd gotten as high as 2,188, she had the revelation that she was young, and she was strong, and if she worked through the night, one night without sleep, she could crack the T2K while everyone else was unconscious. She fortified herself with an energy drink and gummy worms, and when the caffeine and sugar kicked in, she felt invincible. The third screen's Inner Circle wasn't enough. She turned on her Outer Circle feed, and was handling that without difficulty. She pushed forward, signing up for a few hundred more Zing feeds, starting with a comment on each. She was soon at 2,012, and now she was really getting resistance. She posted 33 comments on a product-test site and rose to 2,009. She looked at her left wrist to see how her body was responding, and thrilled at the sight of her pulse-rate increasing. (Eggers 157)

This excerpt highlights the extent to which Mae gets engrossed in the virtual world created by the organization.

The Digital Panopticon along with the power dynamics regulates the actions of the people, leading to a fractured sense of identity disintegration as shown in the character transformation of Mae Holland in the novel. The more Mae becomes immersed into the policies of the company; her individuality gets shattered under the constant surveillance and she is forced to be obliged to maintain her online presence. The growing technology becomes a threat to the individuality of people. The Digital Panopticon of the organization not only regulates the external behaviour of Mae but also shatters her internal self. She is perpetually at odds with herself, caught between her real desires and the pressures of her

surveillance existence. This shattered identity is epitomized by her growing estrangement from her own past. For instance, at first, she found solace in kayaking, valuing the freedom and introspection it afforded her. Yet, as the Circle's principles consume her, her private contemplative spaces erode, replaced by an escalating need for societal validation—an online validation. Her psychological turmoil culminates in a rare introspective pause—a fleeting hesitation where she confronts the conflict between the organization's principles and her shattering autonomy. However, this hesitation was fleeting and she eventually succumbs to the demands of the organization. This showcases the contemporary social trends where individuals are becoming a slave to the growing technological trends. Thus, the novel reimagines Michel Foucault's concept of Panopticism, highlighting how it evolves from the traditional disciplinary gaze to something that can be called digital or predictive Panopticism. Eggers interchanges this concept of being constantly watched into the era of Big Data, where surveillance no longer relies on physical observation, rather has become an invisible yet omnipresent mechanism of data collection, algorithmic tracking and predictive analysis.

The novel depicts a dystopian world where digital surveillance has become an omnipresent entity that blurs the boundaries between private and public spheres. The surveillance that is depicted in the novel is reminiscent of the contemporary data collection of the tech giants such as Google and Facebook which collects vast amounts of personal data from its users, sometimes with their consent and sometimes without. Once the consent is given, it is nearly impossible to escape from the clutches of these tech companies. Edward Snowden has remarked that, "Under observation, we act less free, which means we effectively are less free". This observation made by Snowden has become relevant in the contemporary scenario, where the constant monitoring has limited individual freedom. The novel portrays the horrific reality of how the organizations use digital surveillance to manipulate and control the individuals. The protagonist Mae stands as a metaphor for all the present-day individuals who prioritizes their online life rather than real life, just like what Mae does in the novel. The novel serves as a reminder for how digital technologies and surveillance can destroy the very fabric of human relationships, with a shallow online connection. *The Circle* can be seen in parallel to contemporary digital surveillance. The novel is a powerful warning about the unchecked corporate power and the deprivation of individual autonomy in the digital age. The construction of the company, the Circle can be seen in parallel to the tech company Google. The surveillance employed by Google, especially with its AI and data-gathering practices, has raised a lot of controversy and concern, with some calling for more transparency and control over the use of data. Google gathers user's personal information using its different services, such as search, maps, and apps, and raises fears of misuse and privacy infringement. In the novel, the company's algorithms regulate the user's behavior. Similarly, Google advertisements use data-driven ads to influence user behavior.

The panoptic structure of surveillance in the novel mirrors the digital surveillance of the contemporary digital landscape. The fictional world of Mae can be seen in parallel to the present-day digital landscape. While looking into the contemporary digitally evasive world, it could be inferred that the mobile phones that humans use in their everyday life itself is a surveillance device. Not only do we use mobile phones to text our friends and send e-mails, but also, we save our passwords and bank information in it too. And is it safe to store too much of our information in this surveillance device? Aren't we becoming slaves to this virtual panopticon? With the arrival of various social media platforms, people tend to showcase their everyday life on these platforms and this mirrors William Shakespeare's opening soliloquy in the play *As You Like It*, "All the world's a stage". This statement remains true in the contemporary digital scenario. In this digital landscape, humans are never free psychologically, just like Bentham's Panopticon in which everything is "being made constantly visible impacts on us psychologically". We are always under the watchful gaze of the online predators. For instance, if we search for a certain product, then the next time, several ads with the same product appear on our Instagram and Facebook. This is all part of the online surveillance. And eventually this power of surveillance starts to control and manipulate our lives.

*The Circle* is a strong critique of the social and psychological consequences of the surveillance employed by various AI technologies. The digital panopticon, a modern manifestation of surveillance rooted in Jeremy Bentham's panopticon and expanded by Michel Foucault's theories on disciplinary societies, profoundly impacts identity, human relationships, and individuality. People tend to present their idealized version on social media. Over time, this could lead to a fragmented and inauthentic sense of self. Social media platforms encourage performative interactions rather than genuine connections. Platforms like Tik Tok and Instagram use algorithms that promote popular trends and content, leading people to mimic those trends and adopt similar opinions. Constant surveillance can lead to anxiety and paranoia and people might feel pressured to maintain a certain image, leading to identity crisis. Egger's novel depicts the present issues of how these growing technologies can affect personal relationships and privacy. The study reflects the modern realities, illustrating how social media is directing society toward a dystopian future driven by AI-powered surveillance. The commodification of personal identity, the normalization of surveillance by technology firms, and the erosion of privacy are no longer abstract concepts but concrete realities shaping the contemporary world. As we continue our journey through the digital realm, it raises a haunting question: What is the ultimate goal of this Digital Panopticon? And will there be a turning back from this surveillance state?

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