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**Surveillance, Discipline, and Survival in *Never Fall Down*:
A Foucauldian Reading of Panoptic Power**

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Abstract: Jeremy Bentham and Michel Foucault's idea of the Panopticon is used in this research to study *Never Fall Down*, a story of an eleven-year-old boy, written by Patricia McCormick. This article argues that *Never Fall Down* represents the Khmer Rouge regime as a 'literary panopticon', where surveillance is internalised through child informants, linguistic control, and compulsory performance, producing self-regulating subjects. The Panopticon is a form of prison design where the prisoners are watched all the time by the guards. The narrative shows how prolonged surveillance and the imposition of power of authority can impact behaviours, thoughts and feelings. The Khmer Rouge snatched the identities of the people. They made them dress in the same clothes, forget their real names, and follow strict routines. Arn learns to internalise the rules, changing the way he behaves and talks to survive. Over time, he becomes what Foucault calls a 'docile body,' shaped by fear and discipline. The novel also highlights moments where this control is not complete. Obedience is not the only factor that Arn develops to survive. He learns to hold on to small memories, feelings, and connections with others. Arn's character arc reminds us that resistance is possible even in extreme control.

Keywords: *Panopticon, Surveillance, Internalisation, Docile body, Power, Self-regulation*

Introduction

N*ever Fall Down* is a novel written by American journalist-turned-writer, Patricia McCormick, in 2012. The story revolves around the survival of the protagonist, Arn Chorn-Pond, during the Cambodian genocide. The holding of the Cambodian village people as captives by the Khmer Rouge is the primary setting of the novel. This reign is marked by the systematic dismantling of social institutions, displacements, and re-education of individuals to destroy their identities (Kiernan 150). The psychological strategies used by authoritarian regimes to impose control and power over innocent people are the narrative's primary setting. They showed power not just through physical violence but through endless surveillance and the internalization of fear. Arn is transformed from a music-loving boy into a tool of the regime, monitored at every turn and trained to monitor himself. This novel becomes ideal for exploration through the lens of Foucault as it serves as a good aid that focuses on the shift from mere violence to the mechanisms of internalised control.

This article argues that *Never Fall Down* represents the Khmer Rouge regime as a 'literary panopticon', where surveillance is internalised through child informants, linguistic control, and compulsory performance, producing self-regulating subjects (Bentham and Božovič). Michel Foucault made an attempt to reconceptualise the prison design put forth by Jeremy Bentham in his seminal work *Discipline and Punish* (Rajchman). The Panopticon serves as a metaphor for how modern institutions impose subtle, omnipresent control and power (Foucault and Sheridan). Foucault considered the Panopticon as an ideal metaphor to be included in the modern systems of control, like schools, the army, factories, etc (Brunon-Ernst 12). Adopting this framework, the research argues that McCormick's portrayal of Khmer Rouge Cambodia is a literary Panopticon in which survival depends on the internalisation of surveillance, and Arn's development reflects the creation of a submissive, self-policing subject (Weitz and Bartky).

Further tracing of the Foucauldian surveillance theory by exploring how *Never Fall Down* represents a child-centred panopticism, in which children serve both as the surveilled subjects and active agents of surveillance. By emphasising child informants and peer monitoring, the novel explicits a horizontal panoptic structure that surpass Bentham's original model and complicates Foucault's emphasis on institutional authority. At the same time, the novel highlights the thin possibilities of resistance through memory, human connection, and storytelling. While existing criticism on *Never Fall Down* has emphasised trauma, resilience, and survival, this article intervenes by reading the novel through surveillance theory. In particular, it highlights how child-centred surveillance, linguistic fragmentation, and compulsory performance operate as panoptic mechanisms that produce self-

regulating subjects. By doing so, the article expands Foucauldian analysis into the terrain of child narration and genocide literature.

Although critical studies on *Never Fall Down* primarily emphasise trauma, survival, and resilience, relatively little attention has been given on how mechanisms of surveillance and disciplinary power structure the narrative and shape Arn's transformation into a self-regulating subject. While the analysis is primarily grounded in Foucault's theory of panopticism, insights from Deleuze and Lyon are used to extend the discussion of surveillance beyond institutional discipline into broader social networks.

The Panopticon: From Prison Design to Psychological Regime

The Panopticon, a concept of Jeremy Bentham, was intended as a circular prison in which prisoners, located in individual cells, are monitored by a central watchman. Panopticon's real power lies not in the presence of guards but in the possibility of being monitored. This serves as a possibility so ubiquitous that it incites prisoners to develop self-discipline. The actual aim was to generate "a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault and Sheridan). In contemporary analysis, this concept can be seen in educational institutions where the authorities inject a sense of fear of being noticed in the students, which ignites the act of self-regulation. This applies in the army as well because for the fact that it expects utmost discipline from the soldiers. Foucault is clear in asserting the Panopticon not as a supernatural element that frightens individuals, but as a conscious and everlasting sight that results in the spontaneous operation of power. "Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault and Sheridan 201). Even though the act of surveillance is discontinued, the power has its eternal effect on the individuals so that the act of self-regulation is not hindered. "So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary..." (Foucault and Sheridan 201).

Foucault broadened Bentham's model to criticise contemporary disciplinary institutions such as schools, hospitals, factories, and armies, where surveillance becomes a tool of regularisation. This system does not aim for pertained violence but shapes individuals to adhere (Weitz and Bartky). The individual is transformed into a productive, obedient, and self-surveilling subject, what Foucault calls a 'docile body'. "A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (Foucault and Sheridan 136). In *Never Fall Down*, this theoretical structure is depicted through the Khmer Rouge regime, which adopts the mechanisms of panoptic surveillance. They impose uniformity, constant surveillance, suspicion, and fear to inure the innocent people of the Cambodian village.

While Foucault's model of panopticism emphasises disciplinary institutions, Gilles Deleuze argues that contemporary power operates through "societies of control," where monitoring becomes spread and continuous rather than limited to specific institutions. Similarly, David Lyon describes the emergence of a "surveillance culture" in which individuals internalise observation and regulate their behaviour accordingly. The surveillance depicted in *Never Fall Down* reflects both developments. The Khmer Rouge regime establishes a system in which monitoring is dispersed through networks of child informants and villagers, while individuals such as Arn learn to anticipate observation and regulate their own actions. Surveillance thus functions not only through visible authority but also through social relations and internalised discipline.

From Panopticism to Contemporary Surveillance

The surveillance theory has expanded beyond Bentham and Foucault. Contemporary theorists Gilles Deleuze and David Lyon extended the classic Foucauldian concept of surveillance and proposed how surveillance operates through dispersed networks and routine social practices. Michel Foucault's analysis of the Panopticon describes how disciplinary power operates through constant visibility, producing subjects who internalise surveillance and regulate their own behaviour. Later theorists have extended this framework to explain how surveillance functions beyond enclosed institutions. Gilles Deleuze argues that modern societies increasingly resemble "societies of control," where monitoring becomes continuous and dispersed rather than confined to prisons, schools, or factories. Similarly, David Lyon emphasises the emergence of a "surveillance culture" in which observation becomes embedded in everyday social relations. These theoretical developments help illuminate the dynamics of surveillance in *Never Fall Down*, where monitoring extends beyond the authority of Khmer Rouge soldiers and spreads through networks of villagers and child informants. Arn's gradual internalisation of surveillance demonstrates how disciplinary power evolves into a broader system of social control.

The Khmer Rouge as Panoptic Apparatus

The labour camp functioned by the Khmer Rouge soldiers in the novel serves as a panoptic space. Arn and other children, along with the adults, are subjected to uniform dress, removal of personal names, and rigorous collectivist routines immediately after the capture by the Khmer Rouge soldiers. "They hand out black pajama for everyone and say get back to work. We go back to the camp and see all women, all the girls, now also in black pajama. A thousand people all the same" (30).

The pseudonymity and homogeneity nullify individuality, comprehending the requirement for panoptic discipline. The regime's monitoring becomes omnipresent, moulding behavior even when authority is absent. The most panoptic dimension is the use of spies, not the Khmer Rouge soldiers, not

any adults in the village, but the children. The Khmer Rouge appointed children as spies to monitor their own villagers, creating a network of surveillance so intimate that privacy becomes impossible. Arn says: “Even in the grass behind the kitchen, sometime they put a little kid to spy. He catch you, you beg him not to tell; you say, “You can have my food.” He eat your food. Then he tell on you anyway”(64).

This demonstrates Bentham’s ideal prison: visibility without verifiability. The safest premise is that one is continually being monitored because of the fact that no one ever knows when they are being monitored. The Khmer Rouge did exactly what the concept of the Panopticon intended to mean. They do not want the captives to enjoy peacefulness, and so they started using a trick on them. “Another trick by the Khmer Rouge: to always keep us afraid and also confuse,...” (71). The trick is to keep the captives in constant confusion and fear. This falls in alignment with both Bentham’s and Foucault’s concepts of the Panopticon. The surveillance structure in *Never Fall Down* can be understood as a form of ‘child-centred panopticism’, where children occupy a dual position as both the watched and the watchers. By recruiting young informants to monitor villagers and peers, the Khmer Rouge disperses surveillance horizontally across the community, intensifying fear and ensuring the internalisation of disciplinary power.

The Khmer Rouge also executed beatings and executions publicly in front of innocent villagers to instill fear in them. Foucault interprets such rituals as “the visible presence of the invisible authority” (Foucault and Sheridan). When Arn witnesses the murder of a boy who tried to mention his past, he concludes: “Every day, the Khmer Rouge tell us we have to forget the past... You must be like the ox, they say, no thoughts, only love for Angka” (43-44). In this context, surveillance is temporal, looking over memory and identity, and not just physical.

Arn’s Transformation into a Self-Policing Subject

To sustain in the race of survival, Arn needs something more than just being obedient. Internalising the gaze of the Khmer Rouge soldiers became the demand for Arn’s survival. Initially, Arn grieves for his lost family and the ruthless activities done by the Khmer Rouge, which shows his empathetic nature. During the forging of iron, the constant hits bring shape; likewise, by being a constant witness to all the cruel activities of the Khmer Rouge, Arn is reshaped and starts to adapt and adopt the situation. He learns what behaviour creates suspicion in the minds of the Khmer Rouge and what gives him favour. “I will smile very big at him, in front of Frog Face, and tell him thank you for helping me see my poor character” (47). These behaviors are not taught explicitly but are absorbed through observation and fear.

This process goes in equivalence with ‘Foucault’s panoptic subject’, who “assumes responsibility for the constraints of power... \[and] becomes the principle of his own subjection” (Foucault and Sheridan). Arn is not simply obeying the commands of the Khmer Rouge; he is intercepting them. He starts neglecting the need for any external enforcement to keep him off suspicion because the threat of surveillance has entered his psyche deeply. Arn’s early confusion takes a turn towards making calculated compliance, thereby aligning with Foucault’s statement that the body becomes a site of discipline not just by power, but through timely routines (Rosen 228).

Arn’s role as a musician in the propaganda band escalates this process. Playing music saves his life, but it also projects loyalty, making him a noticeable participant in the regime’s ideological machinery. In a violent scene, Arn continues to play the flute while the villagers are led to execution. “Only playing, not even hearing” (60). Music becomes both an escape and a tool for survival (Rousseau et al. 342). Contrary to readings that frame music as purely redemptive, this article demonstrates how musical performance in *Never Fall Down* functions as a panoptic technology, producing visibility, loyalty, and emotional detachment while simultaneously enabling survival. This scene synthesises performance, surveillance, and complicity, the consequent outcome of panoptic training.

Moreover, Arn becomes benumbed. This detachment is not an act of weakness but a survival mechanism under panoptic power. By suppressing emotion and desire, Arn becomes what Foucault calls the ‘docile body’ that is capable, efficient, but hollowed of will. Arn’s body can be compared to Foucault’s prison examples in which he argues the body becomes both the object and instrument of power.

Now they drag this guy under the tamarind tree.....

This guy, he look right at me. Eyes open. But dead. Already dead.

I think maybe I gonna feel sad or maybe scare. But no feeling in me. No crying. I don’t care about anything. Death is just my daily life now. (45)

Gilles Deleuze’s concept of “societies of control” further expands the Foucauldian framework of surveillance evident in *Never Fall Down*. While Foucault describes disciplinary systems organised around enclosed institutions such as prisons or schools, Deleuze argues that modern power operates through dispersed and continuous forms of monitoring. As he observes, “control societies are taking over from disciplinary societies.” The Khmer Rouge regime depicted in the novel reflects this shift, where surveillance extends beyond formal authority and spreads through networks of informants, particularly children. Arn’s constant self-monitoring and calculated behaviour illustrate how control

functions through internalised observation, demonstrating that power operates not only through visible authority but also through pervasive social relations.

David Lyon's concept of "surveillance culture" further illuminates the dynamics of power represented in *Never Fall Down*. Lyon argues that surveillance is no longer confined to institutions but becomes embedded in everyday social relations, encouraging individuals to anticipate observation and regulate their own behaviour. Within the Khmer Rouge regime, surveillance operates not only through soldiers but also through networks of villagers and child informants, creating an atmosphere where constant monitoring is assumed. Arn gradually learns to control his speech, emotions, and actions in order to avoid suspicion. His self-discipline reflects Lyon's argument that surveillance works most effectively when individuals internalise the gaze of authority and become participants in their own regulation.

Language, Silence, and the Ethics of Survival

McCormick's stylistic choices strengthen the themes of psychological control. Arn's narration is in broken English, impersonating his thought patterns and trauma. "Long time I been on my own, but now really I'm alone. I survive the killing, the starving, all the hate of the Khmer Rouge, but I think maybe now I will die of this, of broken heart" (140-141). This fragmented syntax functions both as an indicator of realism and as a literary technique that mirrors the disintegration of the self. In a panoptic society, where speech can be fatal, language itself becomes dangerous. The erosion of identity is highlighted with the loss of pronouns (*Silverstein 102*). The Panopticon not only controls actions, but it reshapes consciousness, memory, and even grammar. Silence is not just oppression but adaptation. Panoptic power in *Never Fall Down* extends beyond bodily discipline to linguistic regulation, where fractured syntax and silence become adaptive responses to surveillance.

However, this linguistic self-neutralisation raises intense ethical questions. Is Arn associated with the system he survives? When he hides information from new captives or when he helps move dead bodies, is he protecting the system? No easy answers are given by McCormick. She spotlights the moral ambiguity of survival under authoritarian regimes. In such a system, resistance and involvement often blur.

Cracks in the Panopticon: Memory, Affection, and Testimony

While the surveillance regime depicted in *Never Fall Down* appears totalising, the novel reveals that panoptic power is never entirely closed or absolute. As Foucault himself notes, power inevitably generates the possibility of resistance, not as an external opposition but as something immanent to its operation. Within the Khmer Rouge's system of constant observation and discipline, moments of

rupture emerge, subtle yet significant, through which subjectivity and ethical awareness persist. “So quiet now in this snow, like pillow on the world, and every step I think of Mek...” (197). One such rupture is produced through memory. Panoptic surveillance functions by fixing individuals within a regulated present, erasing personal history and emotional attachment in order to enforce ideological conformity. Arn’s memories of his family, music, and pre-war life interrupt this temporal confinement. These recollections preserve an interior world that remains inaccessible to the surveilling gaze, allowing Arn to sustain a sense of identity even as the regime seeks to render him an anonymous, obedient body. Memory thus becomes a quiet form of resistance, maintaining continuity of self within a system designed to fragment it.

A further crack in the panoptic structure emerges through narration itself. Although Arn is subjected to constant monitoring within the camps, the retrospective act of storytelling reverses the direction of visibility. By narrating his experiences, the protagonist exposes the mechanisms of surveillance, forced labour, ideological indoctrination, and child informants, that once controlled him. Narration functions here as a form of counter-surveillance, transforming the invisible operations of power into objects of scrutiny. In doing so, the novel challenges the panoptic ideal of omniscience by demonstrating that surveillance can be remembered, narrated, and judged.

The regime’s disciplinary apparatus also fails to fully regulate affect. While emotional numbing is encouraged as a survival strategy, moments of compassion, shared suffering, and unspoken solidarity persist among prisoners. These affective residues exceed the reach of surveillance, revealing the limits of ideological control. Although bodies may be disciplined and movements regulated, emotions and ethical responses resist complete colonisation, exposing vulnerabilities within the panoptic system.

Importantly, these cracks should not be romanticised as forms of liberation or overt rebellion. The resistance depicted in *Never Fall Down* is fragile and precarious, enabling survival rather than emancipation. Arn’s endurance does not dismantle the surveillance regime; instead, it illustrates how life continues within it. The novel thus presents resistance not as heroic defiance but as a series of minimal, often invisible strategies that coexist with domination.

Through memory, narration, and affective endurance, *Never Fall Down* exposes the inherent instability of panoptic power. These fractures complicate Foucauldian notions of discipline by demonstrating that even under extreme surveillance, spaces, however limited, remain for subjectivity, survival, and ethical witnessing.

Conclusion

Never Fall Down is not simply a story of survival written by Patricia McCormick; it is an intense examination of how power functions through surveillance, internalisation, and psychological discipline. Using the Panopticon of Jeremy Bentham and its extension by Foucault, this research has shed light on how the Khmer Rouge regime built a panoptic prison without walls, where control is perpetuated through fear, suspicion, and the ever-present nature of the watcher. The epitome of building a self-regulating subject is Arn's transformation from a child to a survivor. His body, language, and ethics are moulded by the surveillance of the regime. *Never Fall Down* did not fail to identify the agents of resistance, memory, and empathy in spite of its authoritarian structure. These ruptures in the panoptic system remind us that power, however omnipresent, is never complete, and according to Foucault, where there is power, there lies resistance as well. By revealing how surveillance infiltrates childhood, language, and performance, *Never Fall Down* expands Foucauldian panopticism into genocide literature, demonstrating how power reshapes identity, memory, and ethical survival.

This study contributes to existing scholarship on *Never Fall Down* by shifting the critical focus from trauma and survival to the mechanisms of surveillance and disciplinary power that shape the protagonist's transformation. By applying Foucauldian panopticism and engaging insights from Deleuze and Lyon, the article demonstrates how the novel portrays a system of dispersed surveillance in which individuals internalise authority and regulate their own behaviour. In doing so, it highlights how literary narratives of genocide can illuminate the subtle operations of power, control, and resistance.

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