

**The Panopticon's Shadow: Techno-Dystopian Visions in Lalami's  
*The Dream Hotel* and Eggers's *The Circle***

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Paper Received on 16-02-2026, Accepted on 17-03-2026

Published on 18-03-26; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2026.11.01.670

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**Abstract:**

The proliferation of surveillance technologies in contemporary dystopian fiction reflects a growing anxiety about the erosion of privacy and civil liberties in our increasingly interconnected world. Works like Orwell's *1984*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, and more recent novels like *The Circle*, *A School for Good Mothers*, *The Maze Runner*, *The Dream Hotel*, exemplify the genre's preoccupation with the darker aspects of technological advancement.

This research paper aims to examine the representation of surveillance technologies in contemporary dystopian fiction, drawing parallels with Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon concept. The study argues that *The Circle* by Dave Eggers and *The Dream Hotel* by Laila Lalami exemplifies the dystopian genre's critique of techno-surveillance capitalism, where transparency is enforced and individual autonomy is compromised. In *The Circle*, surveillance and technology blend to create a dystopian world, where transparency is mandated, and individual privacy is erased by a powerful tech corporation which tracks citizens' thoughts and actions. In Lalami's *The Dream Hotel*, the AI powered system records and analyses citizen's subconscious thoughts, and also assesses individual's potential threats to society.

The paper attempts to explore how authors depict the interplay between power, control and individual freedom in societies dominated by pervasive surveillance. Analyzing selected works, this paper aims to reveal how dystopian narratives serve as cautionary tales, critiquing current trends in surveillance and highlighting the tensions between security and civil liberties.

**Keywords-** Surveillance, Dystopian, Technology, Transparency.

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## **Introduction**

Michel Foucault delineates panopticism as a paradigmatic mechanism of modern literary power, evolving from Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon- a circular prison architecture wherein a central watchtower enables unseen overseers to render inmates perpetually visible, thereby engendering self-regulation without overt coercion. This 'visibility is a trap' transmutes external surveillance into internalized discipline, where subjects assume "responsibility for the constraints of power", extending beyond carceral spaces to permeate schools, factories, hospitals, and societies at large. Many dystopian novels dramatize this capillary power, depicting regimes where omnipresent gazes induce anticipatory conformity and thus illuminate Foucault's prescience regarding the psychological architecture of control. This research article attempts to explore panopticism's theoretical contours and its literary manifestations with special reference to Lalami's *The Dream Hotel* and Dave Eggers's *The Circle*, and reveal how such narratives critique the insidious normalization of surveillance in contemporary life.

The literary exploration of panopticism provokes the readers to question whether the obligation to conform to societal norms due to power structures is a choice or an imposed condition woven into the fabric of digital life. By dramatizing capillary power, dystopian novels expose how modern institutions can inherit the panopticon's logic by shaping behavior through anticipated scrutiny.

### **Surveillance and Subjection: Panopticism in Dystopian Literature**

**a) *The Dream Hotel* by Laila Lalami-** This novel depicts a dystopian regime that evokes Michel Foucault's conceptualization of the panopticon, manifesting as an insidious 'shadow' permeating subjective consciousness and social control. The detention of Sara Hussein, the protagonist, precipitated by algorithm parsing of her dreams- exemplifies panoptic discipline, where internalized visibility compels preemptive self-regulation (Foucault 1975). The Dream Hotel facility operationalizes this through neutral interfaces that commodify subconscious data, rendering the psyche a site of perpetual audit and preempting dissent via probabilistic inference. This refracts Bentham's architectural prototype into a biotechnological apparatus, amplifying asymmetries of power along racial and migratory axes.

The confinement of Sara exposes the authoritarian grip of a dystopian society and its utter disregard for individuals' basic rights. She gets detained at airport without any clear cause, and the authorities raise the legal bar so high that she loses the capability to tell her own story. She is only informed that she has been identified

as a potential offender and is at risk of committing serious crime. This event of the novel also highlights the convergence of lines between civil liberties and securities. The thoughts of Sara vividly model internalized surveillance and how she tries to adjust herself and her actions accordingly:

A crime isn't the same as a moral transgression. The law delineates the former, never the latter. I have done nothing wrong... It's only that the line of legality has moved, and now I'm on the wrong side of it. (Lalami 3)

Sara's awareness of being surveilled, reflects Foucault's ideas on disciplinary power. This mirrors the panopticon concept where people self-regulate due to the perceived presence of oversight. The following lines aptly captures the essence of living in such a society where actions are overly judged and how it ultimately influences behaviour and self-perception:

To be a woman was to watch yourself not just through your own eyes but through the eyes of others, to be aware of how you looked, how you sounded, how you moved, to be aware of how you were perceived. (Lalami 128)

This work of fiction by Lalami examines a world where technology enables widespread surveillance which goes beyond physical structures like Bentham's original panopticon. This means that surveillance can invade even our innermost thoughts and desires, making everything clearly visible to power structures. The novel's central idea connects to modern Brain-computer interfaces which can predict and control behaviour. The writer thus intervenes in surveillance studies by cautioning against the ethical void of dream-datafication amid escalating AI-mediated subjectivation.

**b) *The Circle* by Dave Eggers-** This work of fiction by Eggers depict a techno-dystopian world where pervasive surveillance evokes Foucault's panopticon, recast as a digital "shadow" that enforces constant visibility and self-policing. Eggers critiques how technology blurs the line between voluntary transparency and coercive control, leading to dehumanization.

The protagonist- Mae Holland faces escalating challenges that expose the perils of unchecked technological surveillance and forced transparency in a techno-dystopian world. Mae starts eagerly at the powerful tech firm 'The Circle', but quickly grapples with intense performance metrics which includes social media engagement scores and constant online posting demands. These metrics erode her autonomy, turning her role into a relentless popularity contest where privacy vanishes under the company's 'secrets are lies' mantra. Her rapid rise, including 'going

transparent' by wearing a live camera, amplifies this, as every action fuel corporate expansion while stifling personal boundaries.

The protagonist's family ties fray amid the company's intrusion. She enrolls her parents in a health plan of her company which installs home cameras that expose their multiple sclerosis struggles and private life to millions. The surveillance-enabled help paradoxically amplifies her helplessness, as technology blurs boundaries between work, family and privacy. The following lines are reflection of Mae on the divide between those under surveillance and those who aren't:

I expect this is some second great schism, where two humanities will live, apart but parallel. There will be those who live under the surveillance dome you're helping to create, and those who live, or try to live, apart from it. And within The Circle itself, there will be gradations, hierarchies, and those who know more and see more will be the new elite. (Eggers, 2013, p- 436-437)

The writer of this fiction reimagines Jeremy Bentham's panopticon prison, where inmates self-regulate under an unseen watcher's gaze as a digital extension. The novel envisions a tech-monopoly dominating through algorithms and data, thereby turning utopian promises into dystopian tyranny. Executives promote 'transparency' as moral progress, yet it homogenizes interactions and erodes privacy and fosters addiction to visibility. The Circle's glass walled campus and tiny 'SeeChange' cameras replace the tower, creating constant visibility where employees monitor their actions for peer's judgement.

### **Conclusion:**

Conclusively, the panopticon's shadow looms large across the above discussed novels, recasting these dystopian narratives as cautionary tales of surveillance's dehumanizing reach. Both novels expose technology's false utopias. Lalami unmask this through dream-infused digital entrapment that blurs psyche and oversight. Dave Eggers reveal this via relentless transparency that enforces self-policing, highlighting how panoptic mechanisms erode autonomy under the guise of connection.

The above-mentioned novels update Foucault's disciplinary gaze for the digital age. In *The Dream Hotel*, dreams become data-mined prisons; in *The Circle*, life itself is a broadcast panopticon, where privacy's death breeds conformity and despondency. By weaving psychological intimacy with societal critique, both these works of fiction challenge readers to confront the fragility of identity in an era of digital omnipresence. This interplay invites us beyond passive observation, urging a

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re-evaluation of how stories can dismantle dehumanizing structures and foster empathy amid existential threats. Both the writers compel its readers to interrogate our own digital panopticons, urging vigilance to reclaim agency in an era where surveillance masquerades as progress.

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#### **How to Cite this article?**

**Jha, Jaishree.** "The Panopticon's Shadow: Techno-Dystopian Visions in Lalami's *The Dream Hotel* and Eggers's *The Circle*." *Research Journal of English (RJOE)*, vol. 11, no. 1, Jan.–Mar. 2026, Oray's Publications, <https://doi.org/10.36993/RJOE.2026.11.01.670>.