RESEARCH JOURNAL OF ENGLISH (RJOE)
www.rjoe.org.in | **Oray's Publications** | ISSN: **2456-2696**
An International Approved Peer-Reviewed and Refereed English Journal
Impact Factor: *8.576 (SJIF)* | **Vol. 11, Issue 4 (Oct, Nov & Dec;2026)**

Who Controls Visibility? Surveillance, Institutional Power, and Resistance in Naomi Alderman's *The Power* and Paul Lynch's *Prophet Song*

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Paper Received on 23-09-2026, Accepted on 25-10-2026
Published on 2 6 -10-2026; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2026.11.285

Abstract

Surveillance does not always lead to control. Its effects depend partly on who gathers information and what power they have to use it. Naomi Alderman's *The Power* (2016) and Paul Lynch's *Prophet Song* (2023) explore this relationship in different political settings. In *The Power*, mobile phones, videos and public exposure make violence and changing gender relations increasingly visible. Yet recording an event does not necessarily give the observer control over its consequences. In *Prophet Song*, surveillance becomes increasingly threatening. The government gains the authority to question, detain and punish suspected opponents. This paper compares the novels through the idea of consequential visibility. The concept concerns the power to turn information about others into actions that affect their lives. It examines how surveillance supports institutional authority, how unequal power shapes its consequences and how public exposure can sometimes help resistance. The comparison shows that surveillance becomes a stronger instrument of control when information is supported by political, legal or physical power. Neither novel, however, presents observation as a guarantee of complete control.

Keywords: Surveillance, Consequential Visibility, Institutional Power, Resistance, Naomi Alderman, Paul Lynch, Dystopian Fiction

Introduction

Governments, institutions and individuals observe others and collect information for different purposes. Yet observation does not always produce control. A person may record an incident without having the power to prevent it, while an

institution may use limited information to punish someone. The difference lies partly in who possesses the authority to act upon what is known.

Naomi Alderman's *The Power* (2016) and Paul Lynch's *Prophet Song* (2023) present contrasting situations in which visibility and authority shape people's lives. In *The Power*, women develop the ability to produce electrical energy through their bodies, disturbing established gender hierarchies. Videos and news reports spread evidence of this change across the world. As new centres of authority emerge, the power to observe and expose others becomes connected with struggles over political and social control.

In *Prophet Song*, Ireland gradually falls under authoritarian rule. The Garda National Services Bureau monitors suspected political opponents, while emergency laws and detention give the government increasing control over ordinary citizens. Eilish Stack and her family experience the consequences as political suspicion enters their private lives. The authorities do not need to know everything about them to make their lives insecure.

The two novels raise a common question: who has the power to make visibility consequential? This paper examines how institutional authority turns observation into an instrument of control. Recording and public exposure, however, can sometimes challenge powerful institutions. The comparison seeks to explain why visibility may support resistance in one situation and become a source of danger in another.

3. Review of Literature

Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975) provides an important starting point for understanding surveillance and control. His discussion of the Panopticon shows how the possibility of being watched can influence behaviour. In *The Electronic Eye: The Rise of Surveillance Society* (1994), David Lyon examines how institutions gather information about people and use it for different purposes. Their works help explain the relationship between observation, discipline and institutional authority.

Studies of Naomi Alderman's *The Power* have explored the novel's treatment of gender and social change. Melodie Roschman, in "Gender, Bodies, and American Christian Nationalism in Naomi Alderman's *The Power*" (2021), examines gender,

bodies and religious-political authority. Tuhin Shuvra Sen's "Naomi Alderman's *The Power*: A Speculative Feminist Dystopian Fiction Mirroring the Here and Now" (2022) considers the reversal of gender hierarchies and its wider implications.

Paul Lynch's *Prophet Song* has also received critical attention for its portrayal of authoritarianism. Wit Pietrzak, in "Living Through the State of Exception: Paul Lynch's *Prophet Song*" (2026), examines the weakening of legal protections and the expansion of state authority. Zohlupuii Royte and Gowher Ahmad Naik, in "Echoes of Oppression" (2024), discuss the novel's totalitarian and dystopian elements, including surveillance and restrictions on freedom.

These studies provide useful perspectives on power in the two novels. The present paper brings them into comparison through a more specific question: why does visibility lead to punishment or control in some situations, while in others it helps people expose injustice or challenge authority? Particular attention is given to the institutions and individuals who possess the power to act upon information.

4. Discourse

4.1 Visibility, Information and the Power to Act

In Naomi Alderman's *The Power*, Tunde Edo's mobile phone becomes an important means of witnessing a sudden change in the world. At a supermarket in Nigeria, he records a young woman using her newly developed electrical ability against a man. The video spreads widely, attracting the attention of international news organisations (Alderman 17–18). Tunde has captured something extraordinary. Yet recording the incident does not give him control over the people involved or the consequences of their actions.

The video reaches a large audience, but its effects are uncertain. Some viewers may be frightened by what they see, while others may feel encouraged by the women's growing power. Governments may investigate. Journalists may seek further evidence.The same recording can serve different purposes depending on who receives it. Tunde can make an event visible without possessing the authority to determine what happens next.

In Paul Lynch's *Prophet Song*, the situation is different. Two officers of the Garda National Services Bureau arrive at Eilish Stack's home looking for her husband, Larry, a trade union official. Their visit appears relatively ordinary, but Eilish senses

danger. After they leave, she feels that "something of that darkness has come into the house" (Lynch 4). Nobody has been arrested. The officers have merely asked questions. Nevertheless, their connection with a powerful security organisation makes the visit threatening.

Larry explains that the officers "gather information" and may be "building a case against a teacher" (Lynch 5). His words reveal the importance of the institution behind the investigation. The GNSB operates within a government increasingly willing to use emergency powers against suspected opponents. Information gathered about political activity may therefore become the basis for questioning, intimidation or detention.

The difference between Tunde and the GNSB officers is significant. Tunde records an event and circulates evidence, but his ability to act upon it remains limited. The officers represent an institution that can turn suspicion into official action. They do not need complete knowledge of Larry's activities to place him under pressure.
This distinction helps explain the idea of *consequential visibility*. The term refers to situations in which information about a person can be used to affect that person's freedom, safety or position in society. Visibility becomes especially threatening when those who observe others possess the authority to punish, exclude or control them.
The difference is not absolute. Tunde's recordings may influence public opinion and attract the attention of powerful institutions. Similarly, the GNSB's authority depends on the political system supporting it. What matters is the relationship between the observer, the person observed and those who can act upon what becomes known.

Alderman and Lynch thus present different ways in which visibility acquires significance. In *The Power*, information often travels through mobile phones, journalism and public networks before reaching institutions of authority. In *Prophet Song*, surveillance is connected with an expanding security apparatus from the beginning. Both novels show that the consequences of being seen depend on more than observation itself.

4.2 Institutional Surveillance and the Unequal Power to Control

At NorthStar, women with electrical abilities are not simply taught how to use their power. They are also assessed and supervised by instructors. Their physical abilities become matters of institutional concern. In *The Power*, an extraordinary bodily change gradually comes under organised supervision.

The women possess an ability that many men cannot resist physically, but this does not make every woman equally powerful. Some acquire authority through training, employment and military organisations. NorthStar turns individual strength into a resource that can be managed for institutional purposes (Alderman 65, 149). The ability to produce electricity belongs to the women themselves, yet decisions about its acceptable use increasingly depend on those who control the organisation.

Such regulation requires observation. Trainers assess the women's abilities and determine how they should behave. Foucault's account of disciplinary power helps explain this relationship. Observation becomes effective when it is connected with examination, judgement and the authority to correct behaviour. Being watched matters because the institution can act upon what it discovers.

A more severe form of control appears in Bessapara, where the reversal of gender hierarchies leads to restrictions on men's freedom. Men can no longer move or act freely. They must follow rules concerning permission and guardianship, leaving them dependent on those who possess the authority to decide where they may go and what they may do. The authorities can identify those who violate these restrictions and impose punishment. Physical strength supports the system, but administrative rules help maintain it.

Alderman does not present this arrangement as a simple victory for women. Those who once occupied weaker positions may acquire the ability to regulate others. The important issue is not merely who can observe whom, but who can make rules and enforce them.

In *Prophet Song*, institutional power develops through organisations already familiar to ordinary citizens. Larry Stack believes that his position in the Teachers' Union is protected by the constitution. When questioned at Kevin Street Garda Station, he insists that he is "exercising my right under the constitution" (Lynch 11). The authorities, however, increasingly treat political opposition as a security concern. Emergency legislation allows the government to restrict activities that would previously have been lawful.

Larry's confidence in the law proves tragically misplaced. His detention and disappearance reveal what happens when political suspicion leads to punishment and

the law no longer protects those accused of opposing the government.The authorities possess the means to question suspected opponents, detain them and withhold information about their whereabouts. Eilish receives no answers. The institution controls his freedom. It also determines what his family is allowed to know.

The consequences extend beyond those directly detained. At Eilish's workplace, Rohit Singh is arrested, while Alice Dealy is placed on indefinite leave (Lynch 114–15). Political suspicion has entered professional life. Employees become aware that their associations and conversations may affect their positions. When Colm silently points towards an open window, warning Eilish that someone might overhear them, ordinary conversation becomes a source of danger (Lynch 115). The officers need not be physically present for this fear to influence behaviour. The possibility of observation encourages caution.

The two novels portray different forms of institutional control. NorthStar and the authorities in Bessapara organise power around changing gender relations. Lynch's government uses established institutions and emergency laws to suppress opposition. Yet both depend on organisations capable of enforcing decisions.

Neither novel suggests that surveillance provides unlimited knowledge. Authorities may misunderstand people or act on suspicion. Complete knowledge is unnecessary when they already possess the power to impose consequences. A person may suffer punishment because of what an institution believes or claims to know.

Surveillance thus becomes especially threatening when it is supported by institutional authority. The risks are unequal. Those who make and enforce the rules can act upon information about others, while the people they investigate have fewer means of challenging their decisions.

4.3 Public Exposure, Resistance and the Limits of Surveillance

Tunde Edo begins his journey as a journalist almost by accident. His recording of a young woman using electrical power in a Nigerian supermarket soon attracts attention around the world (Alderman 17–18).He later travels to places where the changing balance of power between men and women has produced unrest and mutual struggle. His camera allows him to record events that people elsewhere might never witness.

In Saudi Arabia, women challenge restrictions that have long governed their lives. Public demonstrations and confrontations become visible beyond the country.

Tunde's reporting brings these events to international attention. The authorities possess weapons and control public institutions, but they cannot always prevent images of resistance from circulating. Here, visibility works against established power.

A camera cannot guarantee freedom for those being filmed. It may expose violence without preventing it. Nevertheless, public recording can make it harder for powerful institutions to conceal their actions. Tunde's work shows how individuals can use recording technologies to document abuses and question authority.

Alderman also reveals the limitations of this form of resistance. Tunde's reporting gives him recognition, but it cannot protect him from every danger. Eventually, Nina takes possession of his photographs and writing, presenting his work as her own. The person who witnessed and documented events loses authority over the record he created. His experience shows that the power to record an event and the power to control its public account may belong to different people.

Religious and political movements also use public visibility for their own purposes. Recordings and public appearances bring Mother Eve widespread attention. As recordings of her activities circulate online and more people become aware of her, Mother Eve gains followers and strengthens her position as a religious leader. Public visibility may therefore challenge established institutions while also supporting the emergence of new ones.

In *Prophet Song*, opportunities for public resistance are much more restricted. The government increasingly treats organised opposition as a threat. Larry Stack believes that trade union members have the right to protest, but emergency powers allow the authorities to suppress their activities. His insistence that he is "exercising my right under the constitution" (Lynch 11) becomes painfully inadequate when the institutions responsible for protecting those rights begin to undermine them.

The disappearance of Jim Sexton reveals the danger. Eilish struggles to understand how someone can be detained without ordinary legal protections. She protests that "there are rules about these things" (Lynch 16). Her words express a belief in public accountability that the government is steadily destroying. Knowing that an injustice has occurred does not mean that citizens can compel the authorities to correct it.

Information also becomes difficult to share safely. After a telephone conversation with Larry, Eilish imagines hearing her own voice "as though she were listening to herself in another room" (Lynch 14). Nothing confirms that the call has been intercepted. Still, the possibility makes her uneasy. Even speaking about political events may expose her family to danger.

Tunde and Eilish therefore respond to visibility in opposite ways. Tunde seeks to make events publicly known, hoping that exposure will challenge abuses of power. Eilish increasingly tries to protect private information from the authorities. Their different responses reflect the risks created by their political circumstances.
The comparison reveals an important limit of resistance through visibility. In *The Power*, recordings can circulate widely, but influential people may appropriate or exploit them. In *Prophet Song*, citizens confront institutions capable of punishing opposition while concealing their own actions. Neither novel suggests that revealing the truth is sufficient to defeat authority.

4.4 Consequential Visibility: A Comparative Understanding of Surveillance and Power

Tunde's camera and the GNSB's investigations show two different uses of information. Tunde records events and brings them before the public. The GNSB gathers information about individuals who may become targets of official action. The difference lies not simply in what they observe, but in what they can do with the information.

In *The Power*, visibility moves through mobile phones, journalism and online networks. Tunde's recordings can expose violence and encourage resistance. Yet his experience also shows that the person who records an event may not control its public account. Religious and political leaders can use the same channels to strengthen their authority. Public exposure may therefore challenge existing power or help establish new forms of it.

In *Prophet Song*, the government has greater control over the consequences of surveillance. The authorities can investigate opponents, detain them and refuse to tell their families where they are being held or what has happened to them. Eilish cannot obtain reliable answers about Larry's disappearance. Ordinary citizens have no comparable power.

These differences help explain the idea of *consequential visibility*. Being observed does not necessarily mean being controlled. Visibility becomes consequential when someone can use information to affect another person's freedom, safety or position in society. Such consequences depend on the authority and resources available to those who possess the information.

Neither novel suggests that surveillance requires complete knowledge to be effective. Suspicion and the possibility of observation may be enough to influence behaviour when supported by institutional power. At the same time, surveillance should not be confused with every form of domination. Violence, restrictive laws and religious authority can also control individuals without depending directly on observation.

The comparison therefore shows that visibility has no single political effect. It can expose injustice and support resistance, but it can also place vulnerable people at greater risk. What matters is who can act upon what becomes known.

5. Conclusion

Naomi Alderman's *The Power* and Paul Lynch's *Prophet Song* show that surveillance and control are closely connected, but they are not identical. Observation provides information. Its consequences depend largely on who possesses that information and what power they have to use it.

In *The Power*, mobile phones, journalism and online networks allow individuals to record events and expose abuses of authority. Tunde's experiences demonstrate both the possibilities and the limitations of public visibility. His recordings bring important events before a wider audience, but they cannot guarantee his safety or protect his work from appropriation. The novel also shows how institutions use rules, training and physical force to regulate others.

Prophet Song presents a different situation. As the Irish government becomes increasingly authoritarian, information about political opponents can lead to questioning, detention and punishment. Eilish's experiences reveal how even the possibility of surveillance can influence private behaviour. The authorities do not require complete knowledge to exercise control.

The comparison supports the idea of *consequential visibility*: being seen becomes particularly significant when someone has the authority or means to act upon what is known. Yet visibility can also expose injustice and support resistance. Its consequences are not fixed.

Both novels therefore suggest that understanding surveillance requires attention not only to who watches, but also to who can use information, enforce decisions and determine the consequences for others.

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