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Aparna Thomas

PG Student, MA English Language and Literature,

Vimala College, University of Calicut,

Thrissur, Kerala, India.

Email Id:aparnathomasnjarakkat@gmail.com

**Plaintive Survival under Panoptical Surveillance: A Reading of Rituparno Ghosh's
The Last Lear.**

Abstract: This paper is an attempt to explore how the powerful gaze of the panoptical power relation through the technological aids of this neocolonial era which forms the 'Self,' distorts the identity, privacy and liberty of the lives under this surveillance who becomes the 'other'. The study is based on the reading of Rituparno Ghosh's 2007 English-language film *The Last Lear*. The film which won the National Award of India for the best feature film in English in 2007 is based on a 1985 Bengali play, *Ajker Shajahan* (Today's Shakespeare) written by Utpala Dutt. The film unfolds the story of an aging Shakespearean actor persuaded by a young ambitious director to take up acting again. But the retired actor is unwilling to adjust the new world of cinema and its complex technical tricks. The film also expose how the powerful camera gaze and mobile phones turn as the new colonizer who distorts truth and induce fears in the minds of the people under surveillance. This study is carried out based on the Post-Panoptical theories of Surveillance.

In the present era, there is an ever growing presence of 'watching and being watched'. Knowingly or unknowingly we are being the targets of this ever increasing surveillance. Networked cameras and communication systems which form the neocolonial 'Self,' conquer, control, and distort the identity, privacy and liberty of the lives under this surveillance who

becomes the 'other'. The panoptical has become the key metaphor for the power of surveillance in the contemporary society. This paper is a study based on the reading of Rituparno Ghosh's 2007 English-language film *The Last Lear* to explore how the powerful gaze of the panoptical power relation through the technological aids induce a culture of fear and an invisible dominance. To understand this trend the study focus on the surveillance theories which has shifted from Foucauldian influenced panoptic surveillance towards post-panoptic approaches.

Surveillance has turned into an inevitable and integral part of the social world. It has now become a topic for wide discussions and scholarship due to its growing significance. It was Jeremy Bentham, an English philosopher in the 18th century, originally conceived the architectural idea of the panopticon. It is a prison structured as a circular building divided into cells which are all simultaneously visible from a central tower. The inspector who inhabits the tower is rendered invisible to the cells by Venetian blinds and by a complex system of architectural tricks, so that the prisoners have no way of knowing whether or not they are being watched at any given moment. In this way, although the inspector cannot possibly look everywhere at the same time, the illusion of continual observation is created by removing the source of the gaze from view. Without the need of coercion, postulated Bentham, the prisoners would follow the rules of the prisons for the simple fear of being caught in the act of breaking them; and in time their behaviour would become automatic, as if they had voluntarily grown to abide by those rules. Bentham saw applications of this design to schools, hospitals, asylums, factories; in other words, to every situation in which a large number of individuals had to be controlled and indoctrinated at the same time. Despite the fact that no such building was ever actually built, the Panoptical survived as an organisational principle with a powerful imaginary appeal, and was taken up by Michel Foucault as the model for the development of contemporary disciplinary societies. He says, "Our society is not of spectacle, but of surveillance [...]. We are neither in the amphitheatre, nor on the stage, but in the panoptic

machine, invested by its effects of power, which we bring to ourselves since we are part of that mechanism.”(Foucault).

Foucault was amongst the first to note the role of technology in the development of surveillance. Eventhough he referred the advent of technology in panoptical surveillance, he had failed to explain the current advancement of these technologies. Post panoptic theories have sought to fill this gap. These theories conceptualize surveillance in the modern society. Today the tremendous developments of information and communication technologies have added new dimensions in the range and scope of panoptical surveillance. The powerful camera gaze of the CCTV, haunting network connectivity of mobile phones and the deceiving fakery of these technologies open new arenas of thoughts regarding the privacy and its inspired feelings of fear of those under this surveillance. The motivation for this study lies in the fact that eventhough there are several theories for this panoptical surveillance, all of them focus on the analysis of the broader social and technical trends, ignoring the individual perspective and the subjective experiences and feelings. This paper particularly focuses on the terror in the air and the diverse feelings in the minds of the people suffocating under the mysterious constraints of the modern technologies which keep a haunting eye over the lives of individuals.

Rituparno Ghosh is a versatile Bengali film maker. He has won twelve National Film Awards in India and several awards in international film festivals abroad. He began directing in advertising. In 1992, he made a low-key film debut with a children’s feature titled *Hirer Angti* (The Diamond Ring). He often made films in Bengali language. Rituparno not only broadened the horizons of Bengali cinema but has given the entire fulcrum of regional cinema a whole new dynamics. Ghosh’s 2007 English-Language film *The Last Lear* is a remarkable bollywood adaptation of Shakespeare’s most challenging play *King Lear*. The film won the National Award of India for the best feature film in English in 2007. The film is based on a 1985 Bengali play, *Ajker Shajahan* (Today’s Shakespeare) written by Utpala Dutt. It reveals

the story of Harry (Harish Mishra) – a prehistoric creature caught in a time warp, a magnificent theatre personality trapped within the manipulative frames of the cinema. Inside the garb of a plot that expose the conflict between modern celluloid and the fading theatrical art, Ghosh's film "is a product of modernist nostalgia for a "pure art "untouched by the plebian, the philistine, and the corrupting influence of technology" (Chakravarti).

The plot surrounds around an aging veteran Shakespeare actor Harish Mishra who is persuaded by a young ambitious director Siddharth to take up acting not in theatre but in the cinema. But Harish who is also called as Harry dislikes film medium and its methods. Later on he agrees to do the film which finally turns out into a great tragedy. When first we meet veteran thespian Harish Mishra (Bachchan), he is gravely ill. The punishments of a film shoot have left the old man in a coma. His co-star, Shabnam (Preity Zinta), is wracked with worry, but their director, Siddharth (Arjun Rampal), keeps strangely distant and refuses to visit his ailing star. In flashbacks, their story emerges. Siddharth first had to woo Harish from the comforts of his retirement, and the interaction between the two yields some of the film's most delightful scenes. The impatient young auteur attempts to win the trust and collaboration of the aged performer, who sits raging against the modern world from the sanctuary of his study. Sporting a silver mane, Bachan is irresistible here - vain, forceful and impetuous. He trumpets the superiority of Shakespeare over anything cinema can create. And yet, the movies hold out a new challenge. Once he agrees to act in the film, *The Last Lear* becomes a captivating reflection on the comparative artifices of stagecraft and cinema. As the outsider in the cast, Harish is hilarious in dismissing movie fakery.

Apart from its general appreciation for the Shakespearean aura and its attempts to understand cinema in the context of its complex literary legacies, allegiances, borrowings, and residues, at the same time using *Lear's* story to articulate a tale of thwarted paternities, surrogate fatherhood, rejected patrimonies, and competing patriarchies of literary authorship, theatrical

performance, and cinematic auteurship, *The Last Lear* also effectively conceptualize the haunting nature and the corrupting influence of technologies ; the panoptical surveillance.

The movie subtly shows the two fundamental regimes through which power is operated through the modern technological surveillance systems mainly through the visualization of the cameras. They are the regime of order and regime of shame.

In the film, there are several scenes that show how both this regimes of control can influence the actions of the people under the surveillance. One amongst them is the scene in which Harry tries to get rid of a man who pees on his wall outside. Even when all the shouts and scolding's of Harry went vain without creating any effect to the man , the very sight of Siddhartha 's camera lens made him to run away in a fraction of second. This shows the tactful creation of the regime of shame. The regime of shame keeps people meek and obedient as efficiently as any control coming from outside. Rejecting it, is unacceptable and immodest. It also creates a culture of fear. This gives us the profound understanding on how the camera gaze and technology can influence the feelings and states of mind of the people.

Later on the establishment of a CCTV camera to watch the people who pee on the wall shows how the regime of order is built in order to regulate individuals with 'judgmental gaze'. "The CCTV that Siddhartha, the film director, installs in Harry's room gives the latter a sense of the powerful gaze of the camera. The grainy images of the surveillance camera bring the wider world into the interiority of Harry's room, a marked, ritual space almost like the stage."(Chakravarti).Both the veteran actor and the young director watch and make conclusions about the life and profession of the people walking around the road under their surveillance without their knowledge. Even though this surveillance does not create any noticeable harm to those being watched, it highlights the panoptical nightmare of total visibility which according to Foucault is a great trap. It also points out the fact that our lives are always under the gaze of powerful cameras and we are becoming the subject of interpretation even without our

knowledge in this era of datafication. This also shows how the surveillance technologies that act as the “self” ensures the submissiveness of those under its surveillance (the other) by inducing fear and shame.

Mobile phones have been discussed in relation to the multiple new forms of control. They are claimed to constitute “a notorious security risk” since it is possible to locate the geographical position of the users. Therefore, by using their mobiles individuals “constantly participate in their own surveillance” (Lyon). The inescapable eye mobile phone as a form surveillance can be understood through the conversations and the depiction of the frustrated lives of the two women characters Shabnam, the film star and Ivy, the home nurse. We see that both of them are haunted and traced by the frequent mobile phone calls from their male partners. We find both the women suffering due to the humiliating queries of their partners which they find irresistible. Apart from the general interpretation of this episodes as finely drawn depiction of the patriarchal authority, it also shows how even the communication systems of the era act as tools of surveillance that cause total deprivation of privacy which can be considered as the ultimate form of subordination.

The undoubted belief in the authenticity of the visual images captured through camera lens which is at the base of the new systems of panoptical surveillance is mocked in this film. It was by exposing the camera tricks and fakery in the making of the film (Mask) within the film. The sly connivance of the young director who decides to replace the real actor Harry with a stuntman to perform the climax scene and the fakery and cheap tricks of the cinema which only focuses on the commercialism rather than authenticity act as the dominating superior ‘self’. On the other hand the veteran theatre actor, Harry who appears unhappy with the film medium and its methods- the long shots, the pairing down of dialogues, the dependence of illusion exemplified by stuntman instead of actors becomes the real ‘other’. It

also points out how the advancements of the technologies can corrupt, mislead and distort the truth.

The real life-story of Harry with his mixed attitude of contentment and resentment towards the modern visual art; cinema and that of Maqbool - a disfigured clown who turned as a mismatch in his changing society- performed by Harry in the film within the film serves as Ghosh's brilliant metaphor of the modern human being's dilemma and distorted identities under the panoptical surveillance. Despite Harry and Maqbool, the other characters like Shabnam, Ivy and the rest represent the tension, fear, and suffocation of the desperate 'others' in the society whose sufferings are beyond all the theoretical explanations. Thus the film portrays the flesh and blood experience and feelings of the lives under the technological panoptical surveillance in the modern society.

Today as we are under ever growing surveillance, there has emerged counter surveillance through exhibitionism and other methods. This provides a new perspective where surveillance is no more a threat. By throwing everything into public arenas, 'visibility becomes a tool of power that can be used to rebel against the shame associated with not being private about certain things. Thus, exhibitionism is liberating, because it represents a refusal to be humble' (Koskela). Most discussion on surveillance has dealt with it in relation to dominating power, which equates with control (over someone). There is no doubt that this is of great importance. However, people also should try to imagine the ways in which resisting power might connect with surveillance and other forms of visual representation. Eventually, the boundless representations may work as a more effective form of resistance than the efforts to avoid the technological gaze(s).

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