

Exploring the Traces of Panoptic Surveillance in Ismail Kadare's *A Girl in Exile*

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Abstract:

The present study endeavours at carrying out a textual analysis of Ismail Kadare's *A Girl in Exile* in the light of Michel Foucault's disciplinary modal of power termed as Panopticism, put forth by him in his widely acclaimed book *Discipline and Punish*. In this context, the study lays emphasis on exploring certain traces of panoptic surveillance having negative effects on individual psyche and behaviour. It further tries to unveil the functioning of a totalitarian system that works on the principles of strict discipline, surveillance and subjugation. In addition, the study aims at highlighting negative implications of a totalitarian regime on the artist as well as his art.

Keywords: Internment, Discipline, Panopticism, Power, Surveillance, Totalitarianism.

The concept of the omnipresence and omnipotence of power is one of the key concepts put forth and advocated by Michel Foucault. For him, the implications of power are found to be present in each and every aspect of a society; thus, affecting the behaviour of an individual as well the institutional practices as a whole. In his book, *Discipline and Punish* Foucault comes up with the idea of a regulatory paradigm of a power structure called panopticism which is actually based upon the design of a large-scale prison that was given by Jeremy Bentham during the mid-nineteenth century. According to Moya K. Mason, this panopticism offers "a powerful and sophisticated internalized coercion, which was achieved through the constant observation of prisoners, each separated from the other, allowing no interaction, no communication" (Mason). Foucault uses this metaphor of panopticon to trace the relationship between the power structure and its subjects which are subjected to a social control by means of strict discipline and surveillance.

By the end of the World War II, Albania in 1945 came under the rule of communism which continued up to 1991. The regime was started with an aim of reshaping the country while improving its economic, political and social structure. However, with due course of time, it turned out to be a regime whose main aim was focused on the maintenance of its power base while neglecting the state of its subjects. M.V. Gayathri while commenting on the condition of Communist Albania labels it as "quintessentially dystopian, a bleak of xenophobia, a cacophony of bitter polemics with real and fantasized enemies that the outside world barely took time to notice" (2). Strict actions were taken against those who tried to resist the authority and policies were made to eradicate roots of such institutions that could possibly give rise to dissidence. Religious bodies were banned and families who were previously a part of Bourgeoisie class were subjected to internal exile. Keeping in view the impact of these policies on the

individuals and the society, as a whole, Ismail Kadare reverts back to the authority in his novel, *A Girl in Exile*. The narrative can be considered as somewhat historical and somewhat autobiographical in nature. Robert Elsie describes him as “the best example of creativity and originality in Albanian letters” (259). Kadare is widely regarded as a writer whose literary works have played a significant role in opposing the totalitarianism of Enver Hoxha, either in an overt or in a covert manner. Peter Morgan in one of his articles maintains that Kadare makes use of “‘Aesopian’ modes in order to criticize all aspects of the dictatorship” (8).

Consequently, the setting of Kadare’s *A Girl in Exile* is modelled on Albanian life as experienced under the devoted follower of Stalinist guidelines, Enver Hoxha. Kadare creates a setting that is fictitious as well as real depicting the intricate realities about the lives of people who are either living in their homelands or have been exiled far away from their homes. Through its different characters, among which the representative ones are Rudian Stefa, Linda B. and Migena, the narrative depicts the lives of people who are unable to breathe in a free air despite being a part of different social circles. Everyone happens to be living under the shadow and surveillance of a Foucauldian panopticon wherein the idea of being observed renders one imbecile and destitute.

Using the character of a playwright named Rudian Stefa, Ismail Kadare projects his own experience as an artist who is continuously under the observation and scrutiny of a Stalinist rule. According to Foucault, “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” (201). The narrative while highlighting this consciousness delves deep into the psyche of Rudian who has been portrayed as a character who suffers from anxiety and depression because of his inability to express himself through his art, freely. The narrator describes Rudian as “the playwright with one premiere temporarily postponed and another play waiting approval” (25). Time and again he has to attend “the bloody board meeting” where his plays are read between the lines, scrutinized for any suggestive dissidence and then altered (98). For him the governing body has left no scope of exercising his free will and he has been turned into a puppet whose strings are in the hands of the members of the “Artistic Board” (33). One of his plays has been disapproved of because of the presence of a ghost because “Socialist realism didn’t allow ghost” (33). He is not able to reconcile to the fact that he as an artist is liable to take an approval of the Board for something, they hardly do know the significance of. “He could not tell from where he had to seek permission, if permission were necessary for every discovery or innovation in art” (78). Thus, Ismail Kadare highlights the darker side of a Socialist country where there is hardly any scope of art or expression of one’s own self.

The life of Rudian takes a new turn when he is summoned by the Party Committee because his signed copy, of one of his plays, has been found in possession of an intern, a young girl named Linda B. Linda B., along with her family has been put on an internal exile and Rudian gets to know that the girl has committed suicide lately. The narrative gives a chilling portrayal of the paranoia of the regime when Rudian gets involved in the mysterious case. For Rudian, the land where he lives is repulsive because there are “Snares, treachery everywhere” (13). Even drinking coffee in a particular restaurant is thought to be suspicious. It is not even safe to talk freely in a restaurant. “All Tirana knew that the phones in the Dajti were tapped” (29) and “the Flora came second after the Dajti for microphones under the tables” (32). It is impossible for an individual to trust his fellow. “In after-dinner conversations, it was often said that in any group of four people one was a spy. Some believe it and others considered it an invention of the Security Service itself, intended to spread fear” (45). Every second of an individual’s upcoming life is unpredictable. Nobody knows what fatality awaits him in the coming moment. Even “arrests happened in the most incredible places. In the cinema, for example: the man sitting next to you laughing in the most simple-minded way at the film. . . this man suddenly slides handcuffs from his pocket and there is the steel round around your right wrist” (55). This goes in accordance with the

Panopticon principle put forth by Foucault that “power should be visible and unverifiable” (201) so that it prevents the actions of subjects that could take place out of their will.

Foucault while explaining the concept of panopticism, goes back to the seventeenth century when stern steps were taken in order to control the fast-spreading plague. It included “a strict spatial partitioning: the closing of the town and its outlying districts, a prohibition to leave the town on pain of death, the killing of all stray animals; the division of the town into distinct quarters, each governed by an intendant. Each street is placed under the authority of a syndic, who keeps it under surveillance; if he leaves the street, he will be condemned to death” (195). Foucault further explains that “Underlying disciplinary projects the image of the plague stands for all forms of confusion and disorder; just as the image of the leper, cut off from all human contact, underlies projects of exclusion” (199). The modern states in order to keep their nation free of any impurity which might be hazardous to their power structure, exclude such elements. Complying with the same notion, Kadare projects the character of a teenager named Linda B. whose life is subjected to an internment which gets extended by a directive that arrives after every five years. She has been described as a person who is “different in every way” but has been left crippled due to her inability to carry out her desires of living a free life because of her being an internal exile (28). The routine of her life is predetermined by the rules set by the “dictatorship of the proletariat” (138). “Linda had to report to the police at a certain time every afternoon. There were sanctions for absconding: a statutory punishment for visiting a nearby town; double for cities further away; and much more for the capital city - life imprisonment or execution” (92). Then, she comes across Rudian Stefa on a television show, who fills the void in her heart caused by her yearning for Tirana. Not only does she admire Rudian but also does she fall for him. It is followed by arrival of the signed copy of one of Rudian's plays that Migena offers to her as a present that increases her longing for Rudian as well for Tirana.

The narrative turns out to be extremely chilling when Linda wishes for getting diagnosed with breast cancer because only in that condition, she is entitled to visit the Oncological Hospital that lies in Tirana. The narrator, ironically criticizes the unjust regime of Communism by arguing that, “Here at the end of the twentieth century, was a young girl who'd thought of an unfavourable breast scan as her last chance, almost her salvation. A good result was bad news, an end to all her hopes. Even at the price of death, she'd wanted to buy a few days, a few hours of normal life. But her offer had been rejected” (120). However, her hopes get dashed once again when the results come out to be favourable for her body but unfavourable for her soul. In an ironic way, she praises the regime that she is subjected by thanking the dictatorship: “Thank you, dictatorship of the proletariat, I know that you are a good thing, just and infallible, as we learned at school, but I'm tired . . . I've had enough of this life” (138). Not able to withstand the pain and anguish, Linda eventually gives up and commits suicide. In this way, she yields to the political will and mechanism that desires her perdition.

Hence, Kadare through his narrative successfully portrays how the life under the obsessive surveillance and strict discipline is robbed of any possible freedom. The main characters of the novel are subjugated and oppressed throughout their life. The mechanism of the power structure is put up in such a way that the characters, knowingly or unknowingly, act according to the set dictates that prove fruitful for the ruling authority. As Foucault puts it, “The Panopticon is a marvellous machine which, whatever use one may wish to put it to, produces homogeneous effects of power” (202). Moreover, the narrative highlights the negative implications of such an anti-individualistic structure wherein expression of one's self through art is hardly possible.

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