

# Power Politics in Internment: A Benthamite Perspective

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## Abstract

Bentham an English scholar and philosopher having had a vibrant influence over philosophers of his time. Bentham's Panopticon is an architectural design. It is a circular building with many rooms. Each room contains an inmate who cannot communicate with each other as they are separated by walls. There is a watching tower in the middle of the building, thereby allowing a watcher from the central tower to view all the activities of the inmates. This continuous surveillance prevents any type of untoward activity by inmates. The building is constructed in such a way as to prevent the inmates from looking at the observer. This mechanism can function without an observer. Hence, it is identified as a disindividualizing mechanism which can function independently. The development of the Panopticon was based on the need to enhance democracy, as Bentham strongly believed that it would benefit society. Although he derived this idea from his brother Samuel Bentham, he wanted to apply it in society so that democracy would be vibrant with the presence of surveillance. In turn, this would result in honesty and smooth functioning of democracy. As the Panopticon served as the eye of a society, it would eliminate all untoward activities in the society because it kept on watching all the activities round the clock. This constant watch on society keeps modifying the behaviour of every citizen. The reason behind this regulating activity is that power is operative underlying this panoptic mechanism. Hence, it psychologically affects citizens in such a way that they are under close observation. As a result, they tend to modify their behaviour in accordance with existing norms. Bentham also developed a strong notion that the panoptic mechanism would allow citizens in the lower strata of society to access and regulate the Panopticon to prevent the misuse of power. Hence, Bentham strongly believed that the Panopticon was the right mechanism to enhance democracy. In Internment, the presidential candidate after winning the election exploits the repressive state apparatuses to surveil activities to control American society. Thereby, the president manipulated the constitutional machinery in his favour to hold on to power. Hence, this research paper attempts to portray how power functions behind Bentham's Panopticon in Samira Ahmed's novel, Internment.

**Keywords:** Bentham, Internment, Samira Ahmed, Panopticon, Islamophobia and Power.

## Introduction

Jeremy Bentham (15/2/1748- 6/6/1832) an English philosopher known for his philosophical contribution which is suggestive of the idea that Greater happiness to the greater mass. This implies the importance of democracy. As an ardent champion of his political ideology (democracy), he wanted to enhance its efficiency and introduced a novel mechanism named panopticon. The real intention behind its introduction lies in absolute gaze(panopticon) over democratic functioning so that democracy would be enhanced to the next level. Surveillance is a mechanism through which power operates. Power is defined as the influence of one entity over another. The concept of surveillance is also run by the power mechanism because it tends to influence the behaviour of individuals in society. Similarly, *internment* uses the same mechanism to regulate and control Muslims by confining them to the internment camp. Samira Ahmed depicted the physical and mental turmoil of Muslims in the hands of the President who was a religious fanatic in this novel.

This novel depicts Muslims as the ‘Other’, so they are subjected to a lot of inhumane treatment. The sufferings of the oppressed illustrate how power functions in the novel.

## Review of Literature

One of the vibrant philosophers of the twentieth century, Michel Foucault, modelled his ‘Panopticism’ on Bentham’s ‘Panopticon’ by breathing new vigour into it. Recent researchers have analysed the concept of surveillance from a Foucauldian perspective rather than Bentham’s. In addition, the novel *Internment* is analysed from the Foucauldian perspective of Discourse, Resistance, Islamophobia, Discipline, and power but not from the perspective of Bentham’s Panopticon. The following research papers endorse the above views.

Mohammad Zulfahrezi analysed the novel from the perspective of symbolism of resistance and community in *Internment*.

Sonayana Saeed and Asma Kaleem analysed the *Internment* from a Foucauldian perspective of Discourse and Power. Ayesha Rabbi Khan interpreted the novel from the perspectives of ethnic and national identity of immigrants.

Research scholars like Paramagururaj and Abdul Zahra used Foucauldian Panopticism instead of Bentham’s Panopticon and its underlying Foucauldian power to interpret dystopian novels such as *The Circle*. Recent papers published by Davison-Vecchione and Onur Ekley applied digital surveillance, along with Georg Simmel’s theoretical writings on secrets, social distance, proximity, and the intersection of social circles in Dave Eggers’ novels.

As Foucault’s ‘Panopticism’ is an elaboration on Bentham’s ‘Panopticon’, researchers used to focus on Foucault’s ideas rather than Bentham’s though the dystopian novels contain enough space for applying the latter’s views. In addition, the power functions behind Bentham’s Panopticon are not taken into consideration to interpret the present dystopian novels such as Ahmed’s *Internment*, Eggers’ *The Circle* and *The Every* on account of Foucault, and Pierre Bourdieu’s immense influence over the researchers who pursue their research in cultural studies at present.

Hence, this research paper focuses on how the idea of power behind Bentham’s Panopticon is present in *Internment* only without extending it into the present day society.

## Objective

Reading and understanding Bentham’s Panopticon and applying it to Samira Ahmed’s novel *Internment* only.

## Methodology

Qualitative textual analysis was used in this study. As this novel is dystopian, it contains a lot of room for applying the concept of power. Therefore, textual analysis was performed on this novel.

## Benthamite Architectural Design

A staunch supporter of democracy, Bentham built an imaginary structure called the Panopticon in his essay to apply it in a democratic society to enhance its smooth functioning. This idea was derived from his brother Samuel Bentham. Thomas McMullan says, “The panopticon wasn’t originally Bentham’s idea. It was his brother’s.” (The Guardian, 2015)

However, the application of machinery to democracy is expressive of his goodwill and involvement in the upliftment of society through democracy. This architectural design is built up in a circular shape with a lot of rooms. Each room was attached to two windows on the front and back sides. The entire room is illuminated by the percolation of light from the back window. Therefore, even a minute object in the room is brought into human visibility. All the rooms in the building are ensured to have the presence of inmates. However, communication between these inmates is prevented by the walls on either side. These cells are divided from one another, and the prisoners are secluded from all communication with each other, by partitions in the form of radii issuing from the circumference towards the centre, and extending as many feet as shall be thought necessary to form the largest dimension of the cell (Bentham, 1995, p.5).

Hence, they cannot have the opportunity to look at each other. However, the important feature of this wonderful building is that it has a watch tower at the centre. Therefore, a watcher in the central

tower can closely observe all the inmates present in their respective rooms. This tower is built in such a way as to provide an axial visibility to a watcher so that the watcher can observe all the inmates but the inmates cannot observe the presence of the watcher. Hence, the inmates develop a constant feeling that they are under continuous observation, even in the absence of a watcher in the tower. This is where the quintessential aspect of the functionality of this mechanism lies. This Panoptic structure proves that it is disindividualizing as well as automated as it functions autonomously. Therefore, the inmates in the panoptic cells develop a constant feeling that they are under close watch. This avoids irrelevant behaviours on the part of inmates. This paves the way for maintaining the existing norms suggested by those in power. The dystopian novel written by Samira Ahmed titled *Internment* is highly reflective of this power politics based on the panopticon.

### Power politics in *Internment*

#### Denial of Fundamental Rights

Jon Simons (2015) says that “Power is defined as a model of action upon the actions of others” (p.195).

In other words power is defined as an influence of one entity over another entity. The American Constitution is secular in nature. It never gives any leverage to any religion. All citizens can enjoy the equal rights enshrined in the US Constitution. The American Constitution is known for better implementation of its fundamental rights compared to all other democratic countries. Fundamental rights are basic human rights enshrined in the Constitution. They are designed to protect individual liberty and ensure equality. The state is responsible for ensuring the fundamental rights of all citizens. There are six main categories of Fundamental Rights: Right to Equality, Right to Freedom, Right against Exploitation, Right to Freedom of Religion, and Cultural and Educational Rights. The US Constitution ensures that all citizens, irrespective of their religion, caste, creed, race, place of birth, and sex, are given fundamental rights. These rights legalise freedom of speech, freedom of movement, and freedom to profess any religion. But the newly elected President acted against the fundamental rights by denying all the fundamental rights to the Muslims.

In the novel, the President comes to power by sowing the seeds of Islamophobia among the voters in the United States of America. To justify his stand, he manipulated certain criminal activities done outside the country to project Muslims as a big threat to the US soil. Moreover, during his election campaign, he kept on spreading the ill effects of Islamophobia and how its presence was pernicious to social development. This affects voters. His non-secular policy created a rift among the people. As a result, the entire American society was bifurcated into two groups: Muslims and non-Muslims. The ideology of Islamophobia incited insecurity among non-Muslim communities. Hence, they created the ‘Patriot Alliance’ to protect non-Muslims from Muslims. This alliance used to keep vigil on the other group, and this watch constantly regulated and affected the movement of the other group. Muslims who are aware of this group always look at non-Muslims with suspicion and tend to moderate their behaviour immediately in the presence of these members. Layla Ali, the heroine of this novel, when secretly came out of her house to meet her boy friend David during curfew developed fear over the sight of her classmate who was a member of this alliance.

#### Ultra vires activities of the President

The President promulgated an ordinance by which he reestablished the post of Secretary of War which was possible only during wartime. However, he deliberately did it with ill intentions to check the Muslims’ free presence on American soil. Although the US Constitution treats every religious group equally by holding secularism, he sacked all Muslims from government jobs. Hence, Ali Amin, Layla Ali’s father, a professor by profession, teaching poetry at the university, was immediately terminated from the government service. Since virulent Islamophobia affected the American public, it also affected the Muslim-run business sector. For instance, Layla’s mother, a chiropractor, ran a clinic in her locality, but she closed it down as no one visited her clinic. This was a result of the president’s stringent religious policy. This affected all Muslims in American society at the time.

In addition, the President’s lust for power influenced him to violate the constitutional

machinery. Hence, he imposed a curfew by violating constitutional norms. As it restricted the movement of citizens, he used this as a pretext to arrest all Muslims and bring them to the distantly located internment camp closer to the Californian desert. During their arrest, they were physically assaulted, and all these illegal arrests were made at night to prevent the news from reaching the journalists. All Muslims, irrespective of their age, were implanted with chips under their wrists before they were transported to the camp. On the way to the internment camp, the Muslims were not allowed to rise from their allotted seats in the train. Guards were always vigilant to control their behaviours. These chips can be read using QR codes. This made it easy for officials to surveil Muslims until their last breath. All these unconstitutional activities prove the President's dominance over people.

### **Power at the Internment Camp**

As power politics creates a hierarchy, the camp itself maintained the same. The camp director controlled the entire camp, under whose direction the National Guards and Exclusionary Guards discharged their duties. At the next level were the informers, who assisted the internees to go by established norms, such as not roaming after 9pm. At the lower level were the internees, whose main expectation was complete submission.

This structure was created to control the next level. This is mainly performed for surveillance purposes. Therefore, to avoid untoward incidents, the camp was brought under close observation. In that process, they installed many cameras and allowed the drones to fly in the air. This made round-the-clock observation over the internees so that they could have power over them. Even the use of bathrooms was affected by the fixation of cameras inside. This procedure was deliberately performed to avert any type of conspiracy to maintain the status quo. The soldiers were always on the computer to watch the movement of the internees. In addition, the Director selected some internees to serve him. These selected individuals always served as a liaison and stood by the side of the Director to maintain power. These informers partially performed the duties of security guards. Turning Muslims to act against the

interests of Muslims was done by the camp director's divide-and-rule policy. He divided Muslims based on race and culture to gain control over them. This divisive policy did not affect all Muslims and their unity, but it had little influence on them.

### **Power and Repressive Mechanism**

Power is always intertwined with repression. Whenever there is resistance, those in power handle it with a repressive mechanism. This occurs with all forms of government. For example, in a democracy, the police force is used against protestors. All forms of government establish and utilise this when dissenters deviate from the ruling ideology. The Internet camp itself mirrored the suppression at the inaugural session of the first day, where the pony-tailed Muslim woman raised her voice against the unconstitutional establishment of the camp and its Director. Furious over this arrogant behaviour, the guards kicked the woman and butted her down with their guns when she spitted at them. Influenced by this rebellious behaviour, two Black women in the following days did the same and they also went missing in the later days by the guards. Soheil, obsessed by the free spirit developed strong hatred towards the government's arrogant behaviour and the ill-treatment meted out to the Muslims. This affected his behaviour which was unusual and resulted in cruel treatment at the hands of the guards.

David, the lover boy of Layla, snuck into the camp to see Layla caught up by the guards. Later, he was threatened by the Director, but he let David go as the latter threatened to live telecast the entire conversation via Facebook. This reflects the stark reality that maintaining secrecy regarding the camp was a must because it was established unconstitutionally. After that, the camp director put pressure on security to prevent any leakage from the camp. Hence, security was beefed up to maintain confidentiality.

The National Guards' sworn duty was to protect the nation from both external and internal enemies. Therefore, Captain Reynolds directly received the order from his high command to do the needful as the newly elected President went against the American Constitution. In pursuing his duty, he helped Layla, the rebellious lady under whose leadership almost all

the internees tried to protest against the Director to close down the camp. Captain Reynolds tried not only to protect Layla but also helped her by sneaking out her letter to fall into the hands of the right journalists to go viral on social media. This has received global attention. In the wake of this global reach, Red Cross Members visited the camp. Though the camp director strictly ordered all internees not to disclose anything to the Red Cross Members in a threatened manner. However, Layla and her friends disclosed the real condition by refusing to eat breakfast and protesting against the camp director. As the puncturing of the existing status quo by the internees' protest enrages the camp director, he kicks Soheil in the face without minding the presence of Red Cross Members. The guards on their part attacked the journalists around them and broke their cameras held by them. The Director out of angry told Layla that

You think that these observers will save you. They can't. The Red Cross can monitor and take notes. They cannot interfere with the law of the nation. Mobius and our rules comply with federal law. (Ahmed, 2019, P.269)

Due to this arrogant behaviour of the official, social media was abuzz with the establishment of internment camp through illegal means. Hence, the American public staged a protest at the entrance of the camp. It severely affected the newly elected president's unconstitutional activities. In addition, the National Guard and its High Command regularly watched the ultra vires activities of the government under the new president. Therefore, they also presented a strong report against the President. The High Command directed the National Guards posted at the internment camp to help the protestors under Layla's leadership. As the National Guards took control of the camp and acted against the interests of the incumbent President, the Director of the camp went to a secret place along with his loyal guards. The protest against the Director was intensified, and internees under Layla Amin used some poignant words that punctured the Director's ego. Therefore, the Director fires bullets at Layla. Unfortunately, it killed a National Guard named Corporal Reynolds. After this, internees became very agitated, and the continuous protests by the American public turned the entire scenario upside down. In this way, resistance

was set to work in various ways. The mounting pressure of the American public and international pressure on one side and the state machinery and civil society on the other put the government under heavy pressure. Hence, the internment camp was permanently closed. These surveillance and repressive mechanisms clearly indicate that power is at work behind these repressive measures.

## Conclusion

Bentham, an optimist believed that People under constant surveillance tend to modify their behavior in accordance with the law. He believed that this tendency kept all the government machinery running at its full potential without wasting energy unproductively. Therefore, he strongly affirmed that the purpose of democracy was to reach its full potential by means of this Panoptic machinery. It could be accessible to any citizen due to the ensuing transparency after the establishment of the Panoptic structure. Moreover, democratic principles give leverage to its citizens, so that misuse of it would be unthinkable. However, his follower, Foucault, perceived an underlying defect in the functions of the Panoptic structure. He predicted that in the long run this machinery in the hands of a particular group turned out to be totalitarian in its functions. This would be a degenerative process, as it would de-establish the democratic structure.

In *Internment*, the newly elected President, after assuming office, turns the democratic structure into a totalitarian one. In his attempt to hold the power permanently, he spread Islamophobia and made the Muslims scapegoat by which he troubled water to catch fish. Sacking all Muslims from government jobs and the establishment of internment camps, as well as the Secretary of War, clearly indicated that he acted against the Constitution. Using surveillance mechanisms and the state's repressive apparatus to exert illegal control over the U.S. people. This proves that the mechanism of power functions behind his actions. Thus it can be proved that power politics is present in *Internment*.

## Scope

This novel can be approached from Foucauldian perspectives on Surveillance, Power, Resistance

and Discourse. As Nietzschean perspectives are too present in this novel it can be analysed from the same. Moreover, the novel can be viewed from the Gramscian perspective on hegemony.

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