

Zindagi Tamasha and the Panopticon: A Foucauldian Reading of Surveillance and Moral Policing

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Abstract

This research gives insight into the concept of the Panopticon, which was originally proposed by Jeremy Bentham and later developed by Michel Foucault, within the context of the Pakistani film *Zindagi Tamasha* (Circus of Life), directed by Sarmad Khoosat. The film offers an analytical perspective on societal constructs, revealing how individuals are presumed to conform to be perceived as "normal," and how different social forces discreetly regulate behaviour through moral and cultural stereotypes. The study examines themes of power, control, and normalization, scrutinizing how these forces shape individual behaviour and social interactions. It draws on Bart Simon's model of the Panopticon, applying it to the film's characters as manifestations of societal roles, while also incorporating Thomas Mathiesen's concept of the Synopticon to investigate contemporary mechanisms of modern mass surveillance and public scrutiny, such as viral media and moral policing. By applying these theoretical models, the study underscores the mechanisms of control embedded in society and the significant effect they exert on personal identity, freedom, and social conformity.

Keywords: *Panopticon, Zindagi Tamasha, Surveillance, Moral Policing, Michel Foucault*

1. Introduction:

Jeremy Bentham first introduced the concept of the Panopticon in his book *Panopticon or, The Inspection House* (1791). He describes it as a circular architectural structure designed to assist surveillance, wherein a single observer present in a central tower could monitor all inmates residing in the surrounding cells. Ironically, the inmates would be unable to determine whether they were being watched at any given time. Bentham described this mechanism as a “new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind, in a quantity hitherto without example.” (Bentham, 1791).

This idea was later polished by Michel Foucault in his seminal work *Discipline and Punish* (1977), where he broadened the idea of the Panopticon from a prison structure to a metaphor for modern and postmodern mechanisms of surveillance and control. Foucault's analysis examines the evolution of disciplinary methods over several centuries, emphasizing on how they function to regulate and normalize populations. He asserts that individuals become “bodies” once merged into disciplinary systems, and become more docile and easier to govern. Foucault contends that the Panoptic model, although not materialized in the exact way Bentham conceptualized, has nonetheless become a pervasive social structure. According to Foucault, the Panopticon “must not be understood as a dream building: it is the diagram of a mechanism of power in its ideal form; its functioning, abstracted from any 13 obstacle, resistance or friction, must be represented as a pure architectural and optical system: it is in fact a figure of political technology that may and must be detached from any specific use” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 1977). Foucault's interpretation thus portrays the depth at which surveillance mechanisms infiltrate social systems and shape individual behaviour, offering crucial observations into how societies function and exert control.

1.1 Introduction to *Zindagi Tamasha*

This theoretical framework of the Panopticon is applied in the current analysis of the Pakistani film *Zindagi Tamasha (Circus of Life)*, directed by Sarmad Khoosat. The film centres on the life of a middle-class man, Rahat, who earns respect and reverence in his community through his devotional hymns honouring the Prophet. As a result of this religious devotion, he is widely regarded as pious within his neighbourhood. Key supporting characters include his bedridden wife, Farkhanda, and their daughter, Sadaf. A pivotal moment in the narrative emerges from Rahat's personal interest in classic Pakistani cinema, particularly his admiration for old film heroines and their dance performances.

The story takes a flip during a neighbourhood wedding when Rahat, after insisting, performs a rendition of the song “Zindagi Tamasha Bani” originally sung by Asia Begum in the 1974 film *‘Naukar Wohti Da’*. His dance performance, which includes elements of provocation, bothers the audience and reveals his inclination towards cinematic dance performances, challenging his previously held image of reverent religiosity. The situation escalates when a video recording of his dance performance is uploaded to YouTube, paving the way for his public shaming and condemnation by his family, friends, and community. This sequence of events highlights critical reflections on societal norms and the mechanisms through which conformity and aberrance are regulated.

Foucault's theory of the Panopticon is crucial in analysing the underlying social structures illustrated in the film. His framework depicts a broader concept of a surveillance society, wherein the individual (the subject) is under ongoing observation by an undefined authority (the supervisor), which is society at large. This understanding prompts Bentham's initial idea beyond the walls of prison architecture to a complex sociopolitical system. As Lianos says, "the discussion of Panopticism, so often presented as the ultimate Foucauldian set piece, is predictably a more complicated and nuanced tale than many liberals and even historical readings would seem to suggest" (Lianos, 2003).

This research thus seeks to investigate the societal implications embedded within *Zindagi Tamasha* through a qualitative textual analysis, using the theoretical lens of Foucauldian Panopticism to explore how surveillance, conformity, and public shaming operate within the film's narrative and, by extension, within the society it portrays.

1.2 Research Objectives

- To analyse the representation of surveillance and disciplinary power in *Zindagi Tamasha* using Foucauldian Panopticism.
- To investigate the role of public scrutiny and viral media in extending surveillance beyond the Panopticon, applying Mathiesen's Synopticon.
- To examine how moral policing and surveillance shape notions of respectability and identity within Pakistani society.

1.3 Research Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative textual analysis approach. The primary text under scrutiny is the Pakistani film *Zindagi Tamasha* (2019), directed by Sarmad Khoosat. Textual analysis gives insight into character development, exploration of narrative, and visual representation as reflections of broader social realities.

The analysis is supported by theoretical insights from Michel Foucault's idea of the Panopticon, Bart Simon's model of supervision and subjection, and Thomas Mathiesen's concept of Synopticon. These frameworks act as interpretive tools rather than empirical measurements, empowering the study to examine how surveillance operates both as an implicit force forming individual behaviour and as a collective mechanism of moral policing in different societies.

Secondary sources, which include scholarly literature on surveillance studies and Foucauldian theory, are used to frame and support the textual interpretation. This approach enables the analysis to remain grounded in close reading of the film, while placing its themes within broader academic debates on surveillance and power.

2. Literature Review:

The concept of the Panopticon has remained a central point of academic interest since Jeremy Bentham first proposed it in 1791. Among the many scholars and researchers who have examined this idea, Michel Foucault stands out as one of the most significant.

He approached the concept with a more nuanced perspective, creating diversity in multiple interpretations. Foucault's analysis portrayed the influential role that surveillance plays in shaping societal structures and power dynamics.

William G. Staples, in his book 'The Culture of Surveillance' doesn't confide in the idea of surveillance as 'Big Brother' (Bentham, 1791) but he accedes to the Foucauldian idea of 'micro techniques of discipline that target and treat the body as an object to be watched, assessed and manipulated' (Staples, 1997). 'If at one level surveillance-as-power disables the subject, at another level, according to Norris and Armstrong (Gary Armstrong, 1999) surveillance is a natural activity in human affairs which endows new members of society with competency' (Lyon, 2003).

Research conducted in 2017 provided a categorized literature review of all the theories on panopticon and surveillance and divided them into three different phases;

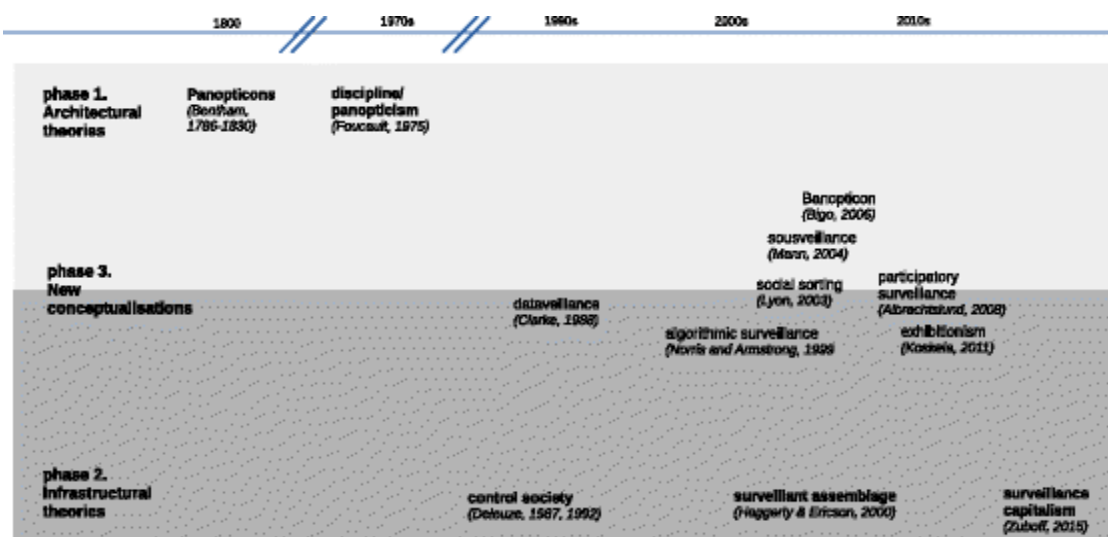


Figure 1 Three phases of surveillance theory

1. Exploring the Panopticon
2. Post-Panoptical Theories and Concepts
3. Contemporary Conceptualizations- the Branching Out of Surveillance Theory,

This research gives a very clear picture of how the theory of surveillance has evolved over time with respect to the variations of political, economic, and social factors.

Phase 1 was more of a simple description of what the panopticon is and what is its origin. The Panopticon is probably Bentham's best-known but also most controversial idea (Schofield, 2009). 'It has become the most widely used metaphor for surveillance, becoming almost its synonym' (Maša Galič, 2016). It connects the idea of panopticon by Bentham with the idea Foucault gave. Being a historian, Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* explains that since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Western societies can be defined by a new form of power that is capillary and affects 'the grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their

discourses, learning processes and everyday lives' (Foucault, *Power/knowledge: selected interviews and other writings*, 1972-1977).

Phase 2 features authors who try to develop alternative theoretical frameworks to the Panopticon as the primary model to conceptualise surveillance in modern Western societies, i.e. Deleuze and Guattari (Gilles Deleuze, 1980). 'Although the Panopticon is not explicitly discussed nor dismissed, these authors diverge from Panoptical thinking by instead proposing a series of new places of power to conclude that the socio-technical landscape has changed. Especially in the short but high-impact piece 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', Deleuze specifically dismisses the idea of discipline as a goal or driving force of 'governing'; rather, it has to be found in forms of control' (Maša Galič, 2016). Apart from them, Haggerty and Ericson contributed to the idea that 'contemporary surveillance fundamentally differs from past surveillance for which the Panopticon was an appropriate metaphor' (Kevin D. Haggerty, 2000). 'In order to provide a new set of analytical tools to capture contemporary surveillance, Haggerty and Ericson proposed the concept of 'surveillant assemblage', for which they drew inspiration from Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'assemblages' and the idea of control societies. The shift in focus from territorial to de-territorialised forms of social control can be described as post Panoptic' (Bogard, 2006). A third and relatively recent strand in theorising surveillance from a post-panoptic perspective is (neo-)Marxist surveillance theory. Connecting the thought of Marx to surveillance is not entirely new (Fuchs, *Political economy and surveillance theory*, 2012). In fact, Marx himself saw surveillance as a fundamental aspect of the capitalist economy and the modern nation state, understanding surveillance as both an economic and a political concept (Fuchs, 2012).

The last sections deal with the evolution of the idea of panopticon according to the latest advancements i.e. Bigo (Bigo, 2006), in an attempt to conceptualise 9/11 and what it did to notions of control, freedom and security, has coined the term BANopticon. Instead of monitoring and tracking individuals or groups to capture misbehaviour, the BANopticon aims at keeping all the bad ones out; it bans all those who do not conform to the rules of entry or access in a particular society. A notable exception is the concept of 'obfuscation', made particularly prominent by Brunton and Nissenbaum (Nissenbaum, 2015). They provide tools and a rationale for evasion, noncompliance, refusal, and even sabotage, particularly aimed at average users who are not in a position to 'opt out' or exert control over their data, but also offering insights to software developers (to keep their user data safe) and policy makers (to gather data without misusing it).

3. Theoretical Framework:

The current paper will utilize the model of Panopticon proposed by Bart Simon in his article 'The Return of Panopticism: Supervision, Subjection and the New Surveillance' (Simon, 2005). The model contains 'two panoptic sorts' around which the whole theory of panopticon revolves. One is 'the inmate' and other is 'the supervisor'. The researchers will use these two prospects to understand the concept of Panopticism in the film 'Zindagi Tamasha' and most importantly, how these prospects help to shape certain stereotypes of society.

3.1 The Inmate:

‘To induce in the inmate a state of consciousness and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power’ (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 1977). The concept of the Inmate is grounded in Foucault’s theory of panopticon. An inmate is a being who is under surveillance. The psychology of an inmate is well put in George Orwell’s novel: ‘There was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment. How often, or on what system, the Thought Police plugged in on any individual wire was guesswork. It was even conceivable that they watched everybody all the time... You had to live – did live, from habit that became instinct – in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every moment scrutinized. (Orwell, 1949) This concept of surveillance makes an inmate unsafe, vulnerable, suspect and the victim of what Foucault called ‘panoptic gaze’ and what is important for Foucault’s version of Bentham’s plan is that the inmate is aware of the gaze of the supervisor through different signs of their presence.

An interesting ethnomethodological aspect of inmates’ agency is their potential to feign conformity (Wieder, 1974). While inmates need to know what counts as an action in conformity with the rules in order for them to conform, the same knowledge allows them to act only ‘as if’ they are in conformity. These inmates may simply perform in a Goffmanian sense for the supervisors that they believe are always watching (Goffman, 2023).

3.2 The Supervisor:

Foucault notices Bentham’s specification that ‘the persons to be inspected should always feel themselves as if under inspection,’ but he almost ignores its supplement: ‘what is also of importance is, that for the greatest proportion of time possible, each man should actually be under inspection’ so that ‘the inspector may have the satisfaction of knowing, that the discipline actually has the effect which it is designed to have’ and so that he can supervise ‘such transient and incidental directions as will require to be given and enforced, at the commencement at least of every course of industry’ (Goodlad, 2003)

One could argue, following Bentham, that the supervisor’s roles as observer and experimenter are simply crucial components for increasing the efficacy of panoptic control. Indeed, the laboratory model of the Panopticon would be an important means of keeping the system dynamic by developing better and more efficient protocols for training inmates to act in accordance with appropriate norms. Certainly, this is one aspect of the machine’s operation but applied science is not what Foucault has in mind. Instead, Foucault sees the Panopticon as a model epistemological device for producing knowledge about the social world (Simon, 2005).

In addition to Panopticism, the framework incorporates Thomas Mathiesen’s Synopticon (1997), which expands Foucault’s model to contemporary media societies, where the many watch the few. In other words, it’s the strategy of surveillance and supervision in which the majority watches the minority in mediatised societies. Those people, who consist of the small minority and are watched by the majority, are generally famous information experts coming from political, sports or show worlds (Bauman, 2006). Media users are always keeping selected icons and famous people of the global media under surveillance and supervision. Not only the selected people but also all the individuals of the mediatic society

do not have a secret life belonging to them. On the other hand, the power of anonymous watcher-mass has turned into an unclear and uncontrollable power.’ (Hüseyin KÖSE, 2010)

4. Textual Analysis:

The Pakistani movie *Zindagi Tamasha* (ZT), winner at the 24th Busan International Film Festival, is directed by Sarmat Khoosat, written by Nirmal Bano and produced by Kanwal Khoosat. The 2019 film was originally set to be released on 18th March 2022, but it was banned by the Pakistan censor board due to its controversial portrayal of sensitive issues and has just now been released on YouTube in 2023.

4.1 The Inmate in *Zindagi Tamasha*:

The primary inmate in the film ‘*Zindagi Tamasha*’ is the protagonist, ‘Rahat’. This part would delineate the scenes in the film where the subjects (the inmates) had been kept under the surveillance of an unseen force called ‘supervisor’ as ‘panopticon has moved beyond prisons and workplaces and now encapsulates society as a whole, it is important to view society through a more panoptic lens’ (Sheridan, 2016).

4.1.1 Rahat; the ‘disciplined subject’:

Rahat, the protagonist, is portrayed throughout the narrative as an inmate subjected to continuous surveillance. According to Michel Foucault’s theory of the *panopticon*, the inmate is an individual placed under constant observation in order to be disciplined. Marcelo Hoffman, in his essay “Disciplinary Power,” provides an accessible summary of Foucault’s model of discipline, noting that it aims to “produc[ing] an organic individuality by 2 exerting control over bodily activities” (Hoffman, 2011). In disciplinary power, Foucault breaks down people to the idea of “bodies”, wherein people are subjected to the modalities of power and become part of the disciplinary system. The ideal for the hierarchical power is to have docile bodies, i.e. bodies that do what they are told in as expedient a manner as possible (Sheridan, 2016).

Rahat's behavior throughout the story exemplifies this internalization of surveillance. He conducts himself in an exceptionally cautious and disciplined manner, indicative of his awareness of being watched. His social reputation stands in stark contrast to his personal desires, which reflects the coercive influence of social surveillance. For example, in the scene at 24:42, he desires to dance but suppresses the impulse, suspecting that his wife might see or learn of it. Similarly, at 36:21, when confronted by strangers about a video of him dancing, Rahat refrains from answering their questions, experiencing humiliation from the knowledge that he has been observed.

Moreover, At 37:40, Rahat provides financial support to members of the queer community in private, a gesture that starkly contrasts with his earlier inaction when he witnessed police mistreating the same group. In that moment, he chose not to intervene, fearing judgment and social reprisal. This scene also reflects a desire to conform with the crowd, as Rahat aligns himself with the general condemnation of the queer community. Foucault explains that a phenomenon closely linked to the disciplinary process is *normation*, wherein the norm becomes both a standard and an ideal. Being regarded as normal is to conform to the norm, hence, to occupy the position of the invisible, i.e.

unmarked by difference construed as abnormality, and putative universal subject (Maša Galič, 2016).

The theme of conformity re-emerges at 43:39, during a pre-wedding ceremony in which Rahat is asked to dance. He declines, stating that “dance is prohibited now,” again highlighting his repression of personal interests out of fear of social scrutiny. At 57:32, another character encourages Rahat to join a group, assuring him it would remain secret. This appeal attempts to liberate him from the gaze of societal judgment, suggesting that, in secrecy, he can reclaim his authentic self.

In conclusion, Rahat serves as the central subject of social surveillance, and his behaviour is shaped by the internalization of disciplinary norms. His initial compliance with societal expectations and his eventual marginalization reflect Foucault’s argument that the function of the *panopticon* is not to enforce constant observation, but to instill discipline so deeply that the need for observation becomes redundant. As Galič observes, ‘Panopticon, was not to create a ‘society of control’ where people would be watched all the time; rather, the idea was that discipline would be internalised and the need for the inspector, the watching itself, would be eventually exhausted’ (Maša Galič, 2016).

4.2 The Supervisor:

In Michel Foucault’s conceptualization of the *panopticon*, the inmate and the supervisor are inherently interconnected such that the presence of one necessitates the existence of the other. The inmate is always aware of the possibility of being watched, yet the identity of the watcher remains uncertain. In the case of this film, the supervisor is not a singular, identifiable figure but rather society itself. Throughout the narrative, Rahat continuously attempts to behave in accordance with societal expectations, feeling the weight of a gaze that seems omnipresent. This gaze, which prompts him to question his own reputation and evokes guilt for his actions, represents the internalized principles and moral codes imposed by society.

However, the dynamics of surveillance become more complex when the observer is also subjected to observation. If the one who is watching is also a human being equally conscious of being watched, it challenges the clarity of the supervisor’s identity. This paradox leads to the concept of *self-disciplining* or *self-policing*. As Simon explains ‘Faced with uncertainty with respect to whether he is being watched, the inmate begins to watch himself. That is, he behaves as if he was being watched and so is careful not to attract the ire of the observer who he imagines is there. The inmate thus tows the line and conforms to the explicit and even implicit rules of the institution; all because he imagines he is being watched (Simon, 2005). Consequently, the individual conforms to both explicit and implicit rules, not due to external enforcement, but because of the internalized fear of surveillance.

Rahat exemplifies this process. He monitors and regulates his own behavior to align with societal norms and expectations, even in the absence of any direct observer. His internalized sense of being watched compels him to embody the ideals of respectability and moral correctness, thereby functioning as both inmate and supervisor of his own actions.

4.2.1 ‘Sadaf’ being the inmate and the supervisor altogether:

Sadaf, in certain cases, is both the inmate and the supervisor. As she questions her father’s inclination for cinema, yet when she sees others doing the same, she doesn’t condemn rather enjoys it sometimes. For instance, at 43:00 at a prewedding ceremony, she is enjoying a girl dancing, but suddenly, when his father is being asked, her expression changed. Also, at 53:44 she is the producer of a TV show in which a man is dancing. This brings out the concept if the inmate being self-disciplining himself/herself. Sadaf also wants to retain to the social image she and her father have and does not want nonconformity as it brings condemnation. So, she has self-disciplined herself and confines herself to a certain ideology which brings; ‘normalization’ and conformity. Yet accepting the dance from other people and not from her own father shows that her problem is not with the dance but with what the dance brings, people’s gaze, which brings their perception, and the social principles that she imagines are continuously watching them.

Additionally, the role of the supervisor is personified through the character of Sadaf, Rahat’s daughter. Her gaze becomes a powerful mechanism of control, as she scrutinizes and judges her father’s actions, particularly his act of dancing at a wedding, which she deems inappropriate. Rahat is visibly conscious of her judgmental gaze, which generates within him a deep sense of guilt. For instance, in the scene at 44:11 during a pre-wedding ceremony, when Rahat is invited to dance, he declines. In response, Sadaf casts a disapproving, humiliating look toward him. Rahat’s reaction, marked by visible guilt and discomfort, suggests that he perceives her gaze as a moral indictment.

Later, in the scene at 48:30, Sadaf directly interrogates Rahat about his dancing, condemning him openly. She is, notably, the only character who explicitly confronts him, further reinforcing her role as an enforcer of moral and social discipline. Toward the end of the film, after the death of Rahat’s wife, the tension between Rahat and his daughter intensifies. At 1:46:21, Sadaf attempts to remove the television from Rahat’s home, blaming it for his inattentiveness to his wife, which she believes contributed to her death. In the subsequent scene at 1:47:31, she confronts her father with the same piercing, interrogative gaze one filled with disgust and suspicion. Unable to endure this judgment, Rahat chooses to leave, highlighting the oppressive power of her surveillance over him.

In summary, Rahat’s psychological and behavioral conformity results from both societal surveillance and internalized discipline. The gaze of society, embodied both abstractly through social norms and concretely through characters like Sadaf, compels him to adopt a self-policing attitude. The film illustrates Foucault’s assertion that the panoptic model does not require constant physical observation; rather, it succeeds through the internalization of surveillance, wherein the subject becomes his own watchman.

4.3 Societies of Control:

In his article, Bart Simon extends the discussion of surveillance beyond Michel Foucault’s panoptic model by referencing Gilles Deleuze’s theory of *Societies of Control*. While Foucault’s disciplinary societies were structured around the logic of *enclosures* such as institutions, schools, prisons, and other fixed environments. Deleuze argues that modern societies operate on a different mechanism: control. According to Simon, Deleuze proposes that following from Foucault what we are dealing with is not discipline but control. Discipline as a mode of power relies primarily on enclosures, be they material, cultural or

psychical. Control, however, encourages mobility in an attempt to manage the wider territory and not just the social space of enclosures' (Simon, 2005). Deleuze further explains this shift by stating: "enclosures are molds, distinct castings, but controls are a modulation, like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other, or like a sieve whose mesh will transmute from point to point" (Deleuze, 1992).

The film under analysis serves as a potent representation of the kind of *control society* Deleuze describes. Unlike the traditional disciplinary model which functions within confined, observable spaces, the control in this narrative is more diffuse, subtle, and internalized. The panoptic structure, while still present, is not fixed within physical institutions but is modulated through social and ideological forces, chief among them, religion. The aim of the panoptic gaze in this context is not simply surveillance, but normalization: the shaping of behavior to fit an idealized moral and social standard.

One of the dominant institutions exerting this form of control in the film is religion. As James Frazer defines it, 'religion is a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to control the course of nature and of human life' (Frazer). The film illustrates this definition vividly, portraying religion not merely as a system of belief but as a powerful socio-cultural mechanism that regulates behavior and reinforces normative standards. It shapes perspectives, determines moral boundaries, and most importantly, fosters a sense of guilt and submission that makes individuals docile and compliant.

This dynamic is especially evident in a key scene at 1:06:12, where Rahat is compelled to record a public apology video as a demonstration of remorse for behavior deemed inappropriate by religious and social standards. The act is less about personal repentance and more about satisfying the demands of a system that requires visible performances of conformity. When Rahat questions this requirement, the religious authority figure (the mullah) harshly responds, "You're not allowed to ask too many questions." This interaction highlights a broader principle: control is maintained not only by suppressing actions but also by silencing inquiry. The suppression of critical thought ensures that individuals remain within the ideological boundaries of the dominant moral order.

In this way, the film reflects Deleuze's notion of control as a fluid, dynamic mechanism that operates beyond physical confinement. It does not require fences or prison walls; instead, it functions through belief systems, cultural expectations, and internalized guilt. Rahat's actions, thoughts, and even emotions are conditioned by this ever-shifting system of control. He does not resist it openly, nor is he confined physically—but his compliance is secured through moral persuasion, social pressure, and religious authority.

In conclusion, the film transitions from illustrating traditional panoptic discipline to portraying the broader, more insidious structures of control described by Deleuze. Through the institutional force of religion and the internalized fear of moral failure, Rahat becomes a subject of modulation—shaped not by visible punishment, but by invisible and ever-present systems of control that demand obedience, silence, and normalization.

4.4 Synopticon:

The concept of the *Synopticon*, a form of postmodern surveillance characterized by many watching the few, particularly through digital platforms has been explored by scholars such as (Hüseyin KÖSE, 2010), who refers to it as “surveillance through the internet” or “postmodern surveillance.” The film under discussion serves as a compelling portrayal of the Synopticon and its profound impact on individual lives, particularly through the pervasive influence of social media.

Rahat’s life undergoes a dramatic transformation when a video of him dancing goes viral on social media. While the act itself dancing at a wedding may have remained inconsequential if confined to private spaces, its dissemination online subjects Rahat to the gaze of countless unknown viewers. This mass exposure leads not only to public humiliation but also to a complete disintegration of his personal and social identity. In the scene at 48:11, when Rahat visits his daughter, she asks, “Why did you have that video made?” This question highlights the core issue: it is not merely the dance, but its digital circulation that triggers the crisis. While she does express disapproval of the act itself, her primary concern lies in the visibility and judgment facilitated by the video’s presence online.

This reflects a defining feature of Synopticon: the degradation, ridicule, and moral condemnation of individuals for entertainment on the internet. At 34:36, Rahat’s daughter is visibly affected by reels and comic edits made from his video. These clips serve as a modern form of digital shaming, where individuals are decontextualized and mocked for public amusement, underscoring a central element of postmodern surveillance: the weaponization of visibility.

The generational divide in perceiving the effects of digital exposure is explored in a critical scene at 52:54, where Rahat confronts Muzammil, the boy who filmed the viral video. When questioned, Muzammil responds, “Why are you angry? It made you famous.” His statement reflects the mindset of a younger generation shaped by a culture of virality, where online recognition is often equated with success, regardless of its moral or emotional consequences. While Rahat’s life is unravelling due to public scrutiny and dishonour, Muzammil views the incident through the lens of internet culture, highlighting the disconnect between different generational understandings of fame, shame, and surveillance.

Another striking example of the Synopticon occurs in a scene at 26:55, involving Sadaf as she prepares a live show. When a guest fails to appear, the host, who had been maintaining a courteous demeanour on camera, abruptly switches to a rude and impudent tone the moment the camera is turned off. This shift captures the duality of behaviour conditioned by visibility: individuals modify their actions based on their awareness of being observed. The moment the surveillance, the camera is absent, the facade of performative politeness collapses. This perfectly encapsulates the essence of Synopticon: millions of unseen viewers wield silent influence over individual conduct, forcing subjects to perform within socially acceptable boundaries if they remain in the public eye.

In conclusion, the film provides a vivid depiction of Synopticon in contemporary society. It illustrates how social media functions not only as a platform for entertainment but also as a mechanism of surveillance and control. Through viral videos, digital ridicule,

and performative behavior under the gaze of a virtual audience, individuals are coerced into conformity or subjected to punishment through mass judgment. The consequences for Rahat are devastating, as the watchful eyes of the internet dismantle his reputation, distort his intentions, and ultimately strip him of agency revealing the brutal reality of postmodern surveillance.

5. Criticism and Conclusion

While Foucault's Panopticon provides a basic framework to understand mechanisms of surveillance, it has been criticized for its overemphasis on hierarchical observation. Critics debate that in contemporary societies, surveillance is no longer confined to the "few watching the many," but has become more networked, decentralized, and participatory.

5.1 Surveillance → Conformity/Normalization

Foucault claims that surveillance disciplines individuals into obedient, normalized bodies, forcing them to conform. In the film, this is visible in Rahat's carefully maintained image of devotion, formed by the constant gaze of his community. His conformity depicts how observation works even without direct force. Yet this view is too deterministic and firm, assuming people always conform. Scholars like Goffman and Wieder said that individuals often "perform" compliance while privately they resist (Rampton B, 2018). Rahat's unseen love for cinema depicts such negotiation, suggesting that surveillance coerces behaviour but cannot entirely remove agency or alternative identities.

5.2 Surveillance → Public Shaming (Synopticon)

Mathiesen's concept of Synopticon transfers attention from the "few watching the many" to the "many watching the few," (Langstrand, 2018) a model that relates strongly in *Zindagi Tamasha*. Rahat's dance at a wedding becomes public, exposing him to condemnation ridicule and moral policing. This demonstrated how surveillance in digital world is participatory, as communities collectively judge and regulate through viral circulation. Unlike Foucault's Panopticon, which suggests a one-way gaze, the Synopticon focuses the horizontal and communal nature of surveillance, illustrating how shaming practices expand control while destroying the boundaries between public and private life.

5.3 Surveillance → Identity Transformation

Identity transformation refers to the way surveillance reforms how individuals reflect themselves and are reflected by others, often disrupting or redefining subjectivity. In Foucauldian concept, surveillance not only creates "docile bodies," but it also constructs different identities through processes of normalization. In the film, Rahat's long-standing image as pious and revered man collapses after his dance video goes online. Under collective examination, he is redefined from respected elder to moral transgressor. This shift demonstrated how surveillance not only imposes conformity but also reconstructs identity, disclosing the precariousness of social roles under constant observation.

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