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All Eyes and Ears: A Surveillance study of Saikat Mazumdar's *The Firebird*

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Abstract

The paper attempts to critically analyze the act of surveillance that is subtly operated in the society in order to make people discipline. It further investigates how the perpetual surveillance at home, voyeuristic gaze of the neighbors and the psychotic persuasion of certain individuals can push someone on the verge of paranoia. The authority manipulates the people in the society by promising that the act of surveillance is carried out for the people but actually it ended up by observing the people. Surveillance helps the authority to exercise power and maintain discipline by suppressing people's voice. Saikat Mazumdar's *The Firebird* has been taken up to inspect how every individual is being watched out in our society by everyone else be it in the family or outside, and the novel bears a testimony that technology is not the only means through which the act of surveillance can be operated.

Keywords- Surveillance, Paranoia, Technology, Discipline, Family, Authority

Surveillance plays an important role as an instrument for the authority to exert power and maintain discipline in the society. Surveillance study started with the concept of panopticon which was put forward by Jeremy Bentham in the 18th Century and later Foucault extended this theory while he was working on discourse and power structure on the course of explaining how the British colonial rule used the apparatus of surveillance to maintain power throughout the hierarchy of the society. Panopticon was a circular jail comprising of individual cells for the prisoners with the watch tower in the middle where the observer would place himself to keep an eye on the subjects. It was built keeping in mind that the prisoners would not be able to see neither the guard nor the inmates, the thought of which decimated the prisoners mentally by making them unsure of whether they are being watched upon or not. Mass surveillance in the modern society is operated by modern technology and various government bodies. Although CCTV cameras and government bodies are primary players they are not the only ones who is perpetrating the act of surveillance as people are always being watched everywhere by everyone in the society. In the modern society mass surveillance is carried out in such a subtle manner with the help of discourse that the people of the society thinks that it watches out for them when ironically it is them who is being

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Aditya Ghosh

watched upon. Connor Sheridan in his “Foucault, Power and the Modern Panopticon” says that, ‘the modern concept of panopticism is more subtle in its operation, dictating the way we behave and forcing us to conform to norms in such a way that we are never aware of the control it has over us’ (Sheridan 3). Post-millennial Indian English writing has explored many new forms, contents and genres, and surveillance study is one among the many which has been taken up as a theme in some of the writings. Joint family system has predominantly been existing in the Indian society and it has imbibed a sense of togetherness among the people which enables to take care and think about other people. As the positive effect of it can be seen in abundance in the society, it has its negative sides too, as some of the people take full advantage of it. Saikat Mazumdar’s *The Firebird* bears a testimony of how surveillance operates subtly throughout the society. Socio-political situation of India enables it to invade the public as well as private life. People are watched out by family members in the family, their each and every movement is tracked down by the neighbors and the organizers of the society are trawling information through their hawks.

Surveillance is not only carried out through CCTV cameras, people are watched out in the family too by other members of the family. Every movement of a member is tracked down- where he goes, what he does, who he is mixing with- by other family members. Saikat Mazumdar’s *The Firebird* revolves around Ori’s family who lives in a north Kolkata suburb. Ori’s mother is at the heart of the story and Saikat Mazumdar has portrayed beautifully how the family and the neighbourhood track down each and every movement of Ori’s mother Garima. Garima works as an actress in a theater house and her profession is not liked by others in north Kolkata suburb as she is expected to do her household works and behave like a typical middle class housewife as her previous generation did, ‘Ori’s grandmother never forgot to cover her head with the end of her sari, pulling it low over her forehead, like a shy newly-wed before a stranger’ (Mazumdar 12). Garima’s profession brought great shame to the family because of which tension hangs in the air always and ‘it created bitterness at home’ (Mazumdar 11). Stereotypical middle class thought pervades the pages of the novel, and the repeated discussion about Garima led Ori to believe that her mother has fallen from everyone’s eye as the writer put Ori’s mind in the novel; ‘His mother acted in plays. He carried that knowledge like a wound’ (Mazumdar 11). The stereotypical thought of the Indian middle class at the thought of Garima’s profession is captured succinctly by Mazumdar one more time; ‘Everybody thought it was wrong of his mother to leave the home every evening, delicately dressed and fragrant’ (Mazumdar 11). Since no one liked her profession and her going out every day, she has become the subject of surveillance. Ori’s grandmother and aunt Rupa does not want to miss single information of her movement. Whenever her mother returned home from work silence loomed large on the family and various questions surfaced, ‘Where did his mother go for the rehearsal? Which part of the city?’ (Mazumdar 14), some of them often asked Ori, ‘Did you see a lot of men there? Were they young like your Baba, or old men with no hair?’ (Mazumdar 14). When no knowledge could be extracted from Ori,

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Rupa and grandmother would ask the neighbors regarding Garima's whereabouts and try to get as much information as they could about the types of play she was working in, whether she was the only female cast in the theater group and what types of role she was enacting on the stage. The neighbor's surveillance on the family could not be missed as Mazumdar notes 'People liked to talk about the house where Ori lived' (Mazumdar 19), and the point he makes with conviction, 'the neighbours couldn't stop talking about the lives contained in their house' (Mazumdar 19).

Keeping track of the children of the family is not a bad thing to do as it is necessary for their wellbeing but it takes a nasty turn when the decision is taken by the compulsion of prejudices and narrow mindedness. It is not a secret that our society is a patriarchal society especially the Indian middle class and they try to reign in every movement of the girls. Shruti's movement is also followed in the family because she is a girl. When Shruti was in class six she wanted to go out during Bijoya Dashami to celebrate with other friends but she was not allowed to. Later when she argued with her grandmother she finally allowed her to go out but not before putting some terms and conditions and one of them was to take Ori with her. Grandmother ordered with darkened face pointing towards Ori, 'Take him with you' (Mazumdar 20). While attending the function out there Ori pissed in his pants without the knowledge of Shruti but still Shruti was not spared from Grandmother scolding and the words uttered by the grandmother were not at all pleasing and demeaning for a girl; "Standing on the streets with a bunch of rotten girls." Mummum's voice fell to a whisper. 'Giggling without a care in the world. Do you know what you look like out there?' (Mazumdar 22)

From the words uttered by the grandmother it is very much apparent that she did not like her to go out on the street, and to laugh loudly out there on the street for a girl is considered to be committing a crime. Shruti is astonished at the thought of it and she contemplates, 'what would happen if she laughed on the streets?' (Mazumdar 22).

In India nothing is apolitical and in the case of surveillance the role of the local party could not be given a miss. The neighborhood makes it easier for the party to invade the private space of the citizen. They can gather all the knowledge of the surrounding thanks to the people's habit of poking their nose into others' business. The local party projects themselves in such a way as if it is their responsibility to keep the locality peaceful and they express it brazenly as one of Trinankur's goons says 'In the end, it is the Party who has to watch out for the para' (Mazumdar 69). Trinankur is the local party leader and his people gathers all the information about everyone in the locality and Ori's family struck their eyes as they seem it is necessary that they intervene in the matter before the locality goes astray. They do not seem fit for Garima to go out and act in a theatre and they think that she has physical relationships with other male actors. When they got fake news regarding Samiran and Garima's relationship they did not care to verify whether the news was true or it was just a rumour. Ori was surprised at the knowledge that the party knew everything about his life when Trinankur asked some questions in the restaurant. He was amazed by their ability to extract information

from the neighborhoods. He was startled by some of Trinankur's questions 'Do you still draw, Oritro?' (Mazumdar63), 'I remember the Vishnu you painted in the children's sit-and-draw contest' (Mazumdar63), 'year before last, right? It was beautiful.' (Mazumdar63), and finally he was astonished at the knowledge of his content of the drawing, 'the chakra, the lotus, everything. And he was probably just eight at the time' (Mazumdar63).

A mother's eye can never betray her offspring's sight and ample examples are available in the novel of the way Garima keep an eye on Ori so that she can protect her. Having acquired the knowledge of what happened at the restaurant Garima was so stunned that she did not want to leave Ori alone. She missed some of the rehearsals and always kept Ori with her. Mazumdar put the perspective very well;

She skipped her rehearsals for the next few evenings. She did not want to let him out of her sight for a second. She rummaged through his school books, the rucksack he carried to school, checked the buttons of his school uniform to find out if any of them needed sewing back on. (Mazumdar76)

She enquired about everything after he came back from school every day;

Who did he sit next to in class? What games did they play at lunch break? What kind of food did his friends bring for lunch? Who came to pick them up after school? (Mazumdar76)

Garima tried everything she could do to keep Ori at her sight. She made sure 'he never went out of her sight' (Mazumdar76). During winter when she had to leave for she had to travel far away from Kolkata to perform in some suburban towns she made sure that she would take Ori along with her and she did not care about what Ori's grandmother and aunt Rupa would say about her plan. She made up her mind, packed Ori's bag and took him along without even informing Ori's father. This dramatic change of stance has been put down by Mazumdar poetically and he writes; 'The rules were changing' (Mazumdar77).

AhinMullick is the owner and director of the theater house where Garima works and AhinMullick's eyes roll always to find actors. He has in his mind the play 'Dusk' which he wants to materialize and two prostitute characters are there in the play. He always watches out for child actors and girls who would fit into those characters. When he sees Ori for the first time he could not take his eyes away from Ori because of Ori's fair complexion. Even though Garima would not allow Ahin to cast Ori he stalks Ori and in the novel it is seen that Ahin reaches Ori's school and tries to convince him to act in the play. Ori's reaction and the thought of Ahin's creepiness and omnipresence are evident in the novel. Ori contemplates;

Ori looked at the man, not knowing what to say. He hated being around this man. He was everywhere. It was hard to be around a rehearsal or a performance in north Calcutta where he didn't show up..... Nobody seemed to notice the man lurking in the wings of the stage or in the corner of a rehearsal room. (Mazumdar144)

Ori was not the only one who was the victim of AhinMullick's surveillance in the search for actors. Towards the end of novel Shruti is seen being tracked down and led to be trapped by

Ahin. He thinks Shruti would be perfectly able to play the role of one of the prostitutes. When Shruti resisted his attempt Shruti is being killed by AhinMullick.

AhinMullick's psychotic persuasion, family's obsessive hatred and party's excessive bully towards her mother, and abnormal surroundings in which Ori grew up led him to suffer from paranoia. He has seen more than what a boy sees of his age and he has experienced catastrophe more than what a boy experiences at that age. The inevitability of that is his adulthood stumbled upon him long before than expected because of his exposure of visceral observation. He always suffers from paranoia and that is why when he sees Trinankur in his school he behaves abnormally. He wanted to vomit as soon as he sees Trinankur and he thinks that the vomit is 'reeked of coca-cola' (Mazumdar118) which actually reminds of that dreadful night in the restaurant where they mixed coca-cola in the alcohol and made him drink. It is very much apparent what an impression it left on a boy's mind. The paranoia of Ori's mind is captured by Mazumdar When Trinankur and Manoj was searching for him;

Ori could get lost in this chaos of dust and shrieks and ravaged water bottles.

They would never find him. But to try to flee was absurd. How could one run away from home? Slowly, Ori stepped past the pillar, took a few steps towards the two men. His legs felt heavy. (Mazumdar119)

Ori's first meeting itself with AhinMullick left a bad impression on Ori when he made Ori to unbutton his shirt and run his fingers on Ori's chest. The bad experiences that Ori had to face at home coupled with Ahin's molestation made Ori to become suspicious of everything. He behaves like a paranoid and it is clearly evident in the way he moves while returning from school;

He walked out of the school gates at the end of the day as quietly as possible so that few people noticed that he went home alone. Other parents sometimes looked at him with curiosity, while he slipped away quickly, warmth creeping behind his ears. He wanted to disappear into a world no one knew about, a world that did not exist for anyone he knew. (Mazumdar143)

Surveillance at home, crooked gaze outside and psychotic persuasion by AhinMullick left Ori mentally ravaged and physically wretched from which he could never recover and emancipated himself. He stepped into the adulthood with tainted experiences. The people around him and the society at large flummoxed him and nipped his innocence in the bud.

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